

On the same path



Veteran political consultants from both sides of the aisle, Republican John Zaher, right, and Democrat Mark J. Grossman, left, find the two parties moving to the center, with elections three weeks away. Excerpts from an e-mail conversation.



town Republican Party as a whole, and hold on to the advantages that incumbents usually have.

Grossman: John is right about the impact of council districts. The more local the elected official, the greater chance that people will feel a connection to them. People might be motivated to elect a Democratic supervisor based on GOP corruption issues, but that might not translate to the town board. With that said, I'm starting to believe that Democrats have a very good chance to gain a majority of seats in Brookhaven. The resounding election of the Democrat Marc Alessi in the 1st District special election for state Assembly — a long shot — can be seen as a bellwether.

What would you say are the characteristics that separate the two parties?

Grossman: This is a tough question, because the characteristics that traditionally have separated the parties on the state and national level (on issues like reproductive rights, gun control and environmental regulations) are absent on the local level. To quote Fiorello LaGuardia, "There's no Democrat or Republican way to pick up the garbage." For every example of how a local Democrat acts like a national Democrat, there are examples of local Republicans acting like national Democrats, and vice versa. I don't think that Democrats are inherently more honest than Republicans. I do think that Democrats, having served as the political underdog for so

long on Long Island, often have an appreciation for the duty and public trust bestowed upon them by victory — more so than some Republicans who have never known what not being in power is like.

Zaher: To paraphrase, "There's no Democrat or Republican way to be politically corrupt." Both parties are just as good at it. The longer one party or official predominates, then political arrogance grows, a belief that you are above the law, and that helps to breed political corruption. A healthy two-party system is an added check and balance against it. Some Democrats have and others may soon forget the appreciation of the public trust that Mark describes. I think what people are looking for locally is someone who will put the people's agenda before their personal agenda, party politics and special interests.

Grossman: John and I agree 100 percent on this.

Do the designations Democrat and Republican mean the same things they did 10 or 20 years ago?

Grossman: To the extent that the two parties locally have a definable "philosophy" like their national counterparts, the answer would be "no." There certainly has been a shift by both parties toward the middle. Democratic County Executives Tom Suozzi and Steve Levy cut government spending and work to make their counties friendlier to business better than any Republican ever did. These used to be issues that used to be the sole domain of the GOP.

On the Republican side,

cleaner. And hopefully, that will lead to a renewed respect for government.

Zaher: Let's first challenge the premise. While there are strong supervisor candidates in both Brookhaven and Hempstead, control of each town may depend on who wins council seats. In Brookhaven, with all six council seats up for grabs, Democrats would have to win the supervisor's race and two additional council seats, and retain their one current seat, to take control of the town. In Hempstead, where there are staggered elections, they would have to win three

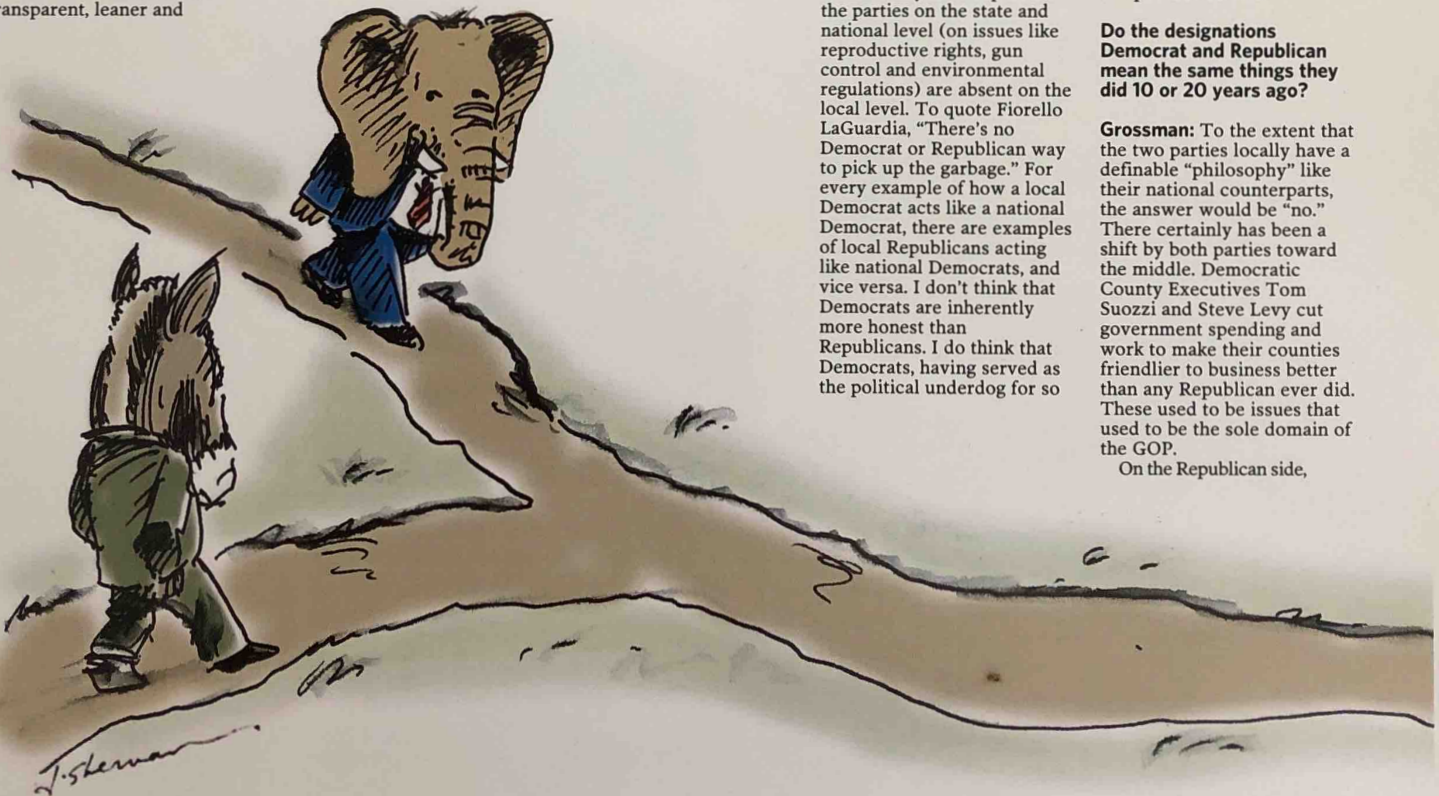
council seats and the supervisor to gain a majority.

Both towns now have council districts, which could give incumbents an advantage. Brookhaven is especially illustrative of this. Three incumbent Republicans, [Tim] Mazzei, [Kevin] McCarrick and [James] Tullo, have been running against corruption in the town and have increased their positive name recognition by attending events, providing constituent services, while raising their own campaign funds. They are able to separate themselves from the corruption that taints the

If Democrats take control in Brookhaven and Hempstead, as some expect, what difference would this make?

Grossman: Well, the garbage will still be picked up three times a week, dog licenses will still be issued every day, and the potholes will still get filled the day after you lose your hubcap to that bump.

What's really important is that victories in these towns will help restore people's faith in public governance. People are tired of seeing officials in school districts and local governments paraded in handcuffs for stealing taxpayer monies. If Brookhaven and Hempstead are led by new, Democratic administrations I expect that government will be more transparent, leaner and



former Suffolk county executive Bob Gaffney served 12 years, largely because of support he received from Democrats. His focus on environmental preservation and human service programs made him an "acceptable" Republican to many Democrats — or, to at least enough Democrats to earn re-election. The same can be said for Republican Hempstead Town Supervisor Kate Murray, or Republican Suffolk County Legislators Paul Tonna and Jay Schneiderman. Strip away their party affiliations, judge them solely by their programmatic and legislative actions, and one would be hard-pressed to identify Republicans vs. Democrats.

Zaher: Levy and Suozzi have certainly helped lead their parties to the center. Tonna and Schneiderman have differentiated themselves as moderates in order to win in areas of Democratic strength. I agree with Mark, with one exception: Steve Levy. Levy is the leader Republicans wish they had. He is redefining locally what it means to be a Democrat. His proactive agenda contrasts with that of Gaffney's 12 years, where he did little to help define his party. Levy's agenda is progressive and perhaps a so-called third way that Bill Clinton at times espoused.

Grossman: I would question the characterization of Levy's agenda as "progressive," if one defines "progressive" as "liberal," as many do. Levy is not "progressive" on the issue of day laborers and their housing, etc.; he has been relatively unsympathetic to their cause. His sometimes strained relationship with public employee unions is uncharacteristic of a progressive politician. His view that government's overall role in society for effecting change is fairly limited is also not particularly progressive.

Zaher: Whether you call it progressive or not, it's been very effective at taking over what used to be Republican ground. When a party is challenged in a strong

two-party system, it is likely to field better candidates. A number of Democrats elected in recent years have been very talented — Levy, Steve Englebright, Ginny Fields, Dave Bishop. They were elected among a sea of Republicans and in many cases had to beat incumbents. When a party doesn't feel it can lose, it chooses candidates out of political loyalty and not necessarily electability.

But if we have two local parties that stand for basically the same policies and values, are we able to have a serious debate about issues in this election?

Zaher: I think you are putting too much emphasis on party and not on the individual candidates. As in presidential campaigns, locally you have candidates and elected officials often fighting for the middle. It's the elected officials with the campaign funds, incumbency advantage and the political base who control the party, not vice versa. It's all about what will it take to get elected or re-elected. That said, I've been watching the News 12 debates and reading Newsday profiles, and I haven't seen any major differences of opinion on the issues.

Grossman: Government accountability and integrity are serious issues. And they are being seriously debated in Brookhaven and Islip. There also are many jurisdictions where substantive debates are taking place. For example, in the Town of Hempstead, Democrat Harvey Levinson [the Nassau County assessor who is running for Hempstead supervisor] is detailing areas where he sees governmental waste — from the proliferation of political appointees — he actually lists them by name on his Web site — to the need for daily garbage pickup. He's challenging more than just what he sees is overspending and mismanagement — he's challenging the robust model of suburban government that Long Islanders have come to expect. That's serious dialogue.