

LONG ISLAND TOPIC

# Competition reigns in two-party system

**What do you make of the election results?**

**Grossman:** I'm intrigued by the decisiveness of this year's voters. Candidates who won did so by significant margins; there were no cliff-hangers, to speak of. Considering how divided the electorate has been over the past decade, the elections of 2005 show a certain "will of the people" to make a change in who governs, or in the case of Tom Suozzi, to keep someone who has been committed to change. Nassau District Attorney-elect Kathleen Rice and Suffolk Sheriff-elect Vincent DeMarco, ages 41 and 37, respectively, each toppled a GOP "living legend" with aggressive, well-organized and well-financed campaigns.

**Zaher:** The bottom line is that you have a truly competitive two-party system in most parts of Suffolk and Nassau. The Republican enrollment edge has decreased; John Kerry won Long Island in 2004. This doesn't mean that voters now have the predisposition to vote Democratic; there remain large numbers of unaffiliated and third-party voters. I always look at the judicial races as an indicator of party loyalty. Here, Republicans won the majority of bi-county Supreme Court positions. Also these elections are local; the minor-party lines can make a difference in a close race. This could be the case in Suffolk, where Alfred Tisch outpolled DeMarco on the Republican and Democratic lines, but DeMarco picked up almost 10 percent on Conservative, Independence and Working Family lines.

**What's the message of Kathleen Rice's win for Nassau district attorney?**

**Grossman:** We don't need term limits. Voters are smart. When an incumbent has been in office too long and his effectiveness or political value has waned, voters do what has to be done. Just ask Al D'Amato, Mario Cuomo and Tom Downey.

**Zaher:** It seems more complicated to me. Denis Dillon's loss in Nassau is more of a reflection of facing his first serious challenge in a number of elections, Rice energizing women voters and Dillon making the classic mistake of underestimating his opponent



Veteran political consultants from both sides of the aisle, Democrat Mark J. Grossman, left, and Republican John Zaher, right, evaluate Tuesday's Long Island elections. Excerpts from an e-mail conversation.



Suffolk Democrats cheer early election results on Nov. 8 in Patchogue.

and staying on one term too long.

**In Islip, two insurgent GOP candidates won seats on the town board, opposing Supervisor Peter McGowan's plan to overturn term limits. Is there a lesson there?**

**Grossman:** It is a message for both parties: that heavy-handed political bossism and cronyism will not be tolerated. And that spirited, thoughtful, independent leadership is valued. The insurgent candidates in Islip — Christopher Bodkin and Steve Flotteron — are just two examples of successful candidates who have bucked their own party's leadership. Remember, Tom Suozzi was not his party's first choice in 1991; he won the nomination in a primary. So did Steve Israel in his first run for Congress. Former Suffolk GOP Presiding Officer Paul Tonna was about as far from a "company man" as it gets. And Steve Levy has spent most of his career as an "outsider" in his own party. So, unlike a generation ago, candidates who come away from their nomination convention as the choice of the party seem to be at a distinct disadvantage in the eyes of the voters.

**Zaher:** Flotteron's and Bodkin's victory is a triumph of democracy over unchecked power. If, as has been alleged, the supervisor tried his best to secure a victory for a Democratic candidate, this was truly Machiavellian and a naked exercise to hold on to his own power at any cost — even at the sacrifice of his own party's credibility. Republicans need to define themselves and their party's principles in the state and in the region. Otherwise they will be defined by the national party, not something they should rely on, going forward. Second, it's time to put the interest of the voters and these Republican principles ahead of personal agendas and power bases. The infighting has contributed to electoral losses.

**In Brookhaven, Democrats took control after decades of Republican domination; in Hempstead, Republicans with connections to the old party machine stayed in power. How would you compare these two towns?**

**Grossman:** The scenarios were very different. In Hempstead, a popular GOP incumbent supervisor was on the ballot; in Brookhaven, the

incumbent supervisor did not seek re-election, and the Republican candidate was a veteran councilman who was in office while all the abuses — alleged and confirmed — took place. So, while Harvey Levinson had some good issues in Hempstead — pointing out waste and mismanagement in Hempstead Town Hall — it looked like parking tickets compared to the offenses of Brookhaven officials, who set a new standard for public greed and cronyism.

**Zaher:** I agree. Democrats in Brookhaven now have their opportunity and have been propelled into office as the result of the scandals. However, two council districts were very close, 51-49. Brian Foley is someone of strong integrity and policy skills. He has a lot of work to do as well to ensure Democratic control of the town for more than a short period of time.

**Can we view the story of these two towns as the story of Long Island politics at the moment?**

**Grossman:** They both represent change, but at different stages. Brookhaven has now

come full circle. From the council districts victory of 2001, to the first crack-in-the-armor in 2003 with the election of Highway Superintendent John Rouse and Councilman Steve Fiore-Rosenfeld, to the big wins and majority Democratic rule in 2005. For Brookhaven Democrats it's been a steady, methodical climb to victory.

In Hempstead, council districts finally brought Democratic representation to the town board, but Republicans have been successful in maintaining their majority. It typically takes a significant event, or series of events, to motivate voters to change their governmental leadership. And Hempstead hasn't reached that critical threshold yet.

The nickname "Crookhaven" has been used for years, and dirty politics in Suffolk's largest town have been among the worst-kept secrets. But when elected and appointed officials photographed in handcuffs were splashed across the news, voters could no longer forgive their indiscretions. They had their reason for change.

**Zaher:** To me, the 3rd District in Brookhaven is the most interesting. I haven't had an opportunity to fully analyze election district by election district, but it appears that this southeastern part of Brookhaven changed its votes from Republican to Democratic. Peter O'Leary was upset, and Democrats won the council seat from this area, giving Democrats a 10-8 edge in the Legislature and 4-3 in the Brookhaven Council. Corruption and a desire to change the status are likely factors. These working-class areas could symbolize a fundamental shift among voters. Republicans used to be able to rely on these working-class areas in Brookhaven, Babylon and so forth. In an earlier generation, they were the Reagan Democrats. Losing this group on Long Island would be devastating to Republicans and would help to indicate a realignment locally. But I don't think we're there yet, and Republicans can take action, even on the local level, to prevent this from happening.

**Where does this election result leave the Nassau Police Benevolent Association?**

**Grossman:** Looking for a new leader?

**Zaher:** PBA efforts to attack Suozzi as anti-law enforcement reflect the frustrations of one of Long Island's strongest unions losing its grasp over the county executive's office. Perhaps Suozzi and Levy together could bring the debate beyond politics and seek real reform of binding arbitration.