

Two Peas in a Pod

Conditions are ripe for a serious debate, yet both candidates are hogging the center

By John C. Zaher

Though there is political parity between Long Island Republicans and Democrats for the first time in many years, with less than three weeks to go in the Suffolk County executive race voters are being left to wonder if they really have a choice between the two candidates who would replace retiring County Executive Robert Gaffney.

It would seem to be an opportunity for real differences to emerge on important issues, since Democrats and Republicans appear to be of relatively equal strength and competitive in major races.

Nassau Democrats gained control of the office of Nassau County executive in 2001 and have maintained control of the county legislature since 1999 by a 10-9 margin. In Suffolk, while Republicans hold on to a narrow 10-5 majority in the legislature, a coalition has placed Democrat Maxine Postal as presiding officer. Despite a huge Republican lead in voter registration, in both counties three out of four members of Congress are Democrats (four out of five if you include Rep. Gary Ackerman).

Yet, while the Suffolk executive's race has been punctuated by the kind of negative attacks to be expected in closely contested elections, in their face-to-face debates Steve Levy, the Democrat, and Ed Romaine, the Republican, seem to agree on most of the issues.

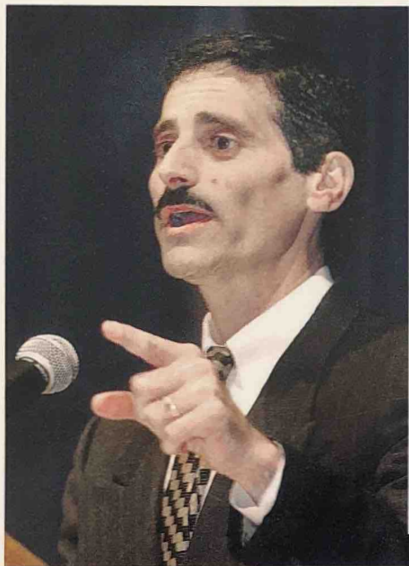
To explain this, it's important to recognize that Suffolk is not alone: A number of national political trends are at play. General elections have become battles for the political center, the place on the political spectrum that most voters call home. Candidates are well armed with nearly daily polls that identify the positions of the vast majority of voters and they center their campaigns around these themes.

One of the widely recognized examples of this phenomenon was the 2000 presidential debates. The candidates actually debated whose "lockbox" for Social Security would be stronger, neither wanting to veer too far left or right.

Compounding this trend is the fact that an increasing number of new registrants are not identifying with either of the two major parties. Locally, voters who are choosing not to register for a party or who have registered for the Independence Party, sometimes thinking this is registering as an independent, outnumber those choosing to register as Republicans or Democrats.

No longer can Republicans, who still have a large but dwindling enrollment edge, count on enrollment to win their elections. They must widen their appeal to the broader center.

Nationally, Democrats also have been forced toward the center. They have to sound more like Republicans to win in the



Levy, left, and Romaine

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suburbs, the new political battleground. This has succeeded on Long Island to the extent that Peter King is the only Republican U.S. representative between Montauk and Manhattan.

The latest example of the centrist Democratic message is the Suffolk executive's race where, despite Romaine's charges that he is a tax-raiser, Democrat Levy has cast himself as a political reformer and fiscal conservative.

It's ironic. Levy's opponent in the Democratic primary, William Cunningham, ran a traditional Democratic campaign targeting Democratic constituencies, taking controversial stances such as supporting a hiring hall for undocumented immigrants and

targeting support among key unions such as Suffolk County's Association of Municipal Employees, calling himself the real Democrat in the race.

But Levy, the party's nominee, chose not to cater to the party's liberal base. He ran as a centrist and focused criticism on the Gaffney administration and Republicans. In the end, while risking the party's nomination, Levy won in a landslide by positioning himself within the political center. Had he tried to appease the party's more liberal base, he would have exposed his right flank to Republicans in the general election.

This has left Romaine with little room to differentiate himself. He has run negative commercials focused on Levy's votes to in-

crease taxes during the administration of former County Executive Patrick Halpin, when he was a county legislator, and more recently as a state assemblyman, when he joined a coalition of Republican senators to override a veto by Gov. George Pataki to increase taxes and restore education funds. He has also touted his record as an accomplished administrator in the Suffolk County Clerk's office, which has earned high marks for use of technology and efficiency, not to mention the growing revenue stream coming from his office to the county budget.

In their debates, the two candidates generally have agreed on a number of positions, including pledges to hold the line on taxes, streamline and reform government

functions and lobby state government to end unfunded mandates.

Still, voters have to choose one or the other in the election, and it is fair to ask, Is there any indication, even though they look the same on the campaign trail, that these men might behave differently from each other once in office?

A review of the candidates' Web sites shows Levy providing greater specifics and taking strong stances against important issues such as binding arbitration for law enforcement and plans to restructure county functions. These positions won't win Levy support from the Suffolk PBA, municipal employees or other unions, although the Suffolk County Deputy Sheriff's PBA has endorsed Levy.

When it comes time to reorganize and reform government and control spiraling police costs — with average police salaries topping \$100,000 per year — considering where his support is coming from, Levy may be more inclined to bring change.

Romaine's Web site provides few specifics, often advocating the appointment of nonpartisan or blue-ribbon committees to find solutions. These include a nonpartisan land acquisition committee to curb overdevelopment, the appointment of an inspector general to root out waste, and promises to perform a complete management audit.

Romaine, a former legislator and county clerk for the past 14 years, has run his campaign as if he were the incumbent, trying to keep coalitions of supporters together, especially among special interests, including county unions. Taking strong positions and providing specifics could alienate these constituencies, which are likely to vote in an election that may have a great impact on their working conditions and livelihoods.

Levy, it would appear, is taking the tact of trying to motivate disenfranchised voters and the general public, hoping to increase voter turnout to minimize the impact of special-interest voting.

For Suffolk's 1.4 million people, the county executive is one of the most important elected officials. For the first time in a generation, an incumbent is not seeking re-election. Despite the lack of specifics in the campaign, the next county executive will have to make hard choices.

In the two-plus weeks that remain in the campaign, the media and voters should demand specifics on how the candidates will address the vital issues at stake. For example: How do the candidates propose to address issues of illegal immigration, rising police costs, unfunded mandates, and higher taxes and how to provide affordable housing that will impact more than a handful of residents?

Most importantly, in an election where it is expected that no more than 35 percent of registered voters will turn out, Suffolk's residents must vote, and by doing so, help guarantee that in future campaigns issues of importance to the general public will more likely be discussed.

What's In This for Nassau County?

By Stanley B. Klein

The people in Suffolk County are about to elect a county executive and, with no incumbent, it seems as though there is a very close two-horse race. But what has this to do with Nassau County?

The answer lies in how the winner might have an impact on the aspirations of Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi, who, many believe, wishes to run for governor in 2006.

This speculation was heightened

when William Cunningham, a major player in the Suozzi administration, challenged the Suffolk County Democratic Party choice for executive by running an expensive and hard-fought primary. Many in both counties viewed the Cunningham challenge as a power play by Suozzi, an effort to lock up the support of both major Long Island counties for a future run.

If that was Suozzi's plan, he was foiled, of course, when Levy easily defeated Cunningham.

Politics is sometimes compared to an onion. As you peel off one layer,

another one appears and another, until all that's left are tears.

Now a big question is, If Levy wins the election for Suffolk executive, would he help Suozzi run for governor in 2006? He might. But then there is another player in the mix — Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, who rumor has it, has his eye on the governor's chair as well.

Levy and Richard Schaffer, the Suffolk Democratic party chairman, might well decide to support Spitzer in order to repay Suozzi for the Cunningham primary.

If the Suffolk organization spear-

headed a winning Spitzer campaign, it would have more to gain than if they were playing follow the leader to Suozzi. It's better to be a kingmaker than an ally.

If Levy loses, Suozzi would have to go another route to get Suffolk Democrats behind him. We could expect his good friend Jay Jacobs, the Nassau County Democratic party chairman, to reach out to his counterpart Schaffer in Suffolk in an effort to get the two Long Island counties behind the Suozzi-for-gov-



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