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**REMARKS BY THOMAS R. SUOZZI
AT
CITIZENS UNION FOUNDATION AND BARUCH COLLEGE
SYMPOSIUM ON REDISTRICTING IN NEW YORK STATE**

I was invited here today to talk about redistricting. I support changes to State law that currently allows legislators to draw the boundaries of their own districts.

Assemblyman Gianaris deserves our praise for the renewed interest his proposed bill has brought to the redistricting issue. In fact, we should support all efforts to end the mutual incumbent protection society in Albany and I wholeheartedly support Assemblyman Gianaris' bill.

I think we can all agree that redistricting reform is a good idea.

Unfortunately, good ideas are not always enough

We have a lot of problems in New York—the highest local taxes in the nation and a struggling economy that is driving thousands of New Yorkers away each year.

And we have a lot of good ideas about how to solve them—there's probably enough brainpower in this room alone to find bold, innovative solutions to almost every single challenge facing our State. And I know there's the ability, the talent, and the desire for good among our State legislators to find these solutions, as well.

So why aren't we solving our problems?

Why has the Comptroller just come out with a report showing that property taxes in New York continue to go up and up, threatening our downstate suburbs and crippling the upstate economy? Why won't our State properly fund our New York City schools and help them succeed? Why can't we build the affordable housing necessary to keep young people from leaving our State? Why is New York—the Empire State—losing more residents per year to domestic migration than the next two biggest losers combined?

I can answer all of those questions in one word

Fear.

Our State government, our elected officials are afraid.

And what are they afraid of?

They're not afraid of the people, and they're certainly not afraid of losing their seats

Over the past twenty years, in over twenty-five-hundred Statewide legislative elections, a mere thirty-four incumbents have been defeated! That's a reelection rate of nearly 99%. You'd have an easier time knocking off an incumbent in the Politburo in the former Soviet Union

So if legislators aren't afraid of voters, who or what could they possibly be afraid of?

Well, they're afraid of the party bosses who control their committee assignments and the special interest groups who fund their campaigns and control their agendas

They're afraid of changing a status quo that protects their lulus, funds their campaigns, and allows them to attend dinners, hand out proclamations, and distribute member items, while freeing them from the obligation to make the understandably unattractive choices that are necessary to solve our State's serious problems.

James Madison wrote in the Federalist Papers that "it is essential to liberty that the government in general should have a common interest with the people," and that it is "particularly essential" that legislators "have an immediate dependence on and an intimate sympathy with the people."

And how did Madison see this being accomplished?

Competitive elections

"Frequent elections," he said, "are unquestionably the only policy by which this dependence and sympathy can be effectually secured."

With every uncontested election, with every challenger scared out of running by the threats and caresses of party bosses and establishment insiders, we make a mockery of the democratic system the framers of our Constitution designed.

According to NYPIRG, of the 212 legislative districts in New York, only 25 have even a possibility of being competitive.

In 2004, of the 212 losing candidates, 124—almost 60 percent—did not even spend \$1,000 on their campaigns—a sure sign of a lack of competition.

In that same year, the average margin of victory was 63%. That means that most incumbents win with more than 80% of the vote.

And in 77 races—over a third of the elections that year—the incumbent didn't even face a challenger from the other party, leaving voters with no choice at all.

These “frequent elections” are certainly not what James Madison had in mind.

And what's the result of this lack of competition? The mutual incumbent protection society. The Republicans have controlled the State Senate for 67 of the past 68 years, and the Democrats have controlled the State Assembly for the last 32 years.

There is no question that redistricting reform would be a major and essential blow against one of the basest forms of anti-democratic power mongering our government knows.

But how are we going to get redistricting passed? How are we going to convince our legislators to make changes to effect real reform, reform which they currently perceive as being against their own self-interest?

We need to Fix Albany. We need to use the political process to drive out members of the status quo and thereby send a message: if you are not willing to make the tough decisions necessary to solve the serious problems our State faces, if you are not willing at least to fight publicly for those changes, then we will defeat you.

The motivation behind my original Fix Albany campaign was simple: to bring accountability to what was later called the most dysfunctional State legislature in the United States. The mechanism was even simpler: we would target one member of the majority party in each legislative body.

When we succeeded in defeating a Democratic Assemblyman in a primary on Long Island and a Republican State Senator in Syracuse, the New York Times proclaimed “The Message Gets Sent.”

When accompanied by the work of the people in this room, the Brennan Center, NYPIRG, the Citizens' Budget Commission, editorial pages throughout the State, and a newfound quest for reform, our elected officials in Albany followed with the first on-time State budget in decades, and the pressure we brought contributed to the implementation of a Medicaid spending cap that is now saving New York City and local taxpayers across the State hundreds of millions of dollars every year.

We put a little “fear of the people” into our elected representatives, and they started behaving a little better

I was heartened by this productive use of the political process. I also knew that bigger challenges lay ahead: the unfunded mandates passed down by Albany to local governments were increasing a local tax burden that was threatening the economic viability of New York. Something had to be done, and that something had to come from the very top

So I decided to run for Governor

As it turns out, that decision made a lot of very powerful people very unhappy

The leadership of my own party tried to convince me not to run. When that didn't work, they began plotting to keep me off the ballot

They are treating the Governor's mansion like a safe seat, and my house has just been drawn out of the district.

Now they're telling me I will not even be permitted to speak at the State Democratic Convention if I don't receive 25% of votes from an establishment that has sworn to try and stop me from even running

Let me ask you this: if this is what we do to a legitimate challenger for the position of Governor of the State of New York, what kind of message does that send to political aspirants at every level of government? Here in New York, we've hung a sign out on our government: “Challengers Need Not Apply.”

We complain about voter apathy, but we are making the voters apathetic by taking away their choices—by taking away the excitement and interest generated by competitive debate and elections.

Instead of trying to involve more people in the political process, we run campaigns with the expectation that nobody is paying attention until the weeks immediately before the election, when a barrage of television ads can buy if not the clearest of messages, then certainly the loudest.

And when one candidate takes a big lead, they can ignore their opponents and hope they just go away. And everyone has become so cynical that that's perceived as acceptable behavior

Well, I'm not going away.

I am making this basic point: the cause of redistricting reform and my efforts to force Eliot Spitzer to compete, instead of being simply coronated, are joined. They both seek a common goal: competition. Without competition, democracy simply does not work.

Just this last Tuesday, I challenged Eliot to debate me twice a month from now until the primary in September. After my initial challenges went ignored for weeks, I argued in writing that if he and I had a chance to appear in every region of the State and give as many voters as possible a chance to judge us on our records and our visions for New York, then we would be doing the Democratic voters and the democratic process a great service

I am yet to hear back from my opponent and it makes me wonder: if, as candidates, we won't even engage with each other, how can we even dare to hope that we can engage with voters?

We are living in a country in which more people have seen a debate on "The West Wing" than between two real candidates for office

Are people more interested in watching a scripted debate between two fictional characters than observing a battle of ideas between two people seeking to be entrusted with the future of what should be the greatest State in the nation?

I refuse to believe that this is simply a reflection on the tastes of the electorate and the public's apathy. In New York at least, it's not that the people are being distracted from paying attention to politics. They're being ignored by the politicians.

We can—and should—talk about redistricting reform and budget reform and government reform until we're blue in the face. We should keep coming up with good plans like Assemblyman Gianaris' redistricting reform plan and enact them

Redistricting reform is essential to our goal of competitive elections. As Governor, if Assemblyman Gianaris' bill or something substantively similar is not passed, I will veto the boundaries sent to me by the Legislature.

But more than anything, we must stop ignoring the people

If we want more people involved in the political process, then let's excite their interest with real competitive debate that engages and entertains their intellect and passion for change.

It was Thomas Jefferson who said that "when the people fear their government, there is tyranny; when the government fears the people, there is liberty."

Let us fear the people. Let us be afraid to lose elections if we have not done our jobs. Let us allow politics to serve the purpose it was meant to serve in our democratic society: to ensure that we, as elected officials, have an "immediate dependence" on the voters and an "intimate sympathy" with their concerns and the problems they face in their everyday lives.

Only then will our good ideas become realities. Only then will New York once again stand proud among all the states in our nation. Only then will we make New York the Empire State once again.

Thank you

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