



## MEMORANDUM

**TO: Interested Parties**

**FROM: Alixandria Lapp, Executive Director, House Majority PAC**

**DATE: May 26, 2016**

**RE: Congressional Democrats Poised for Pick-Ups Across the Empire State**

With just over a month until New York's June 28 congressional primaries, and just under six months from the November general election, Democrats are poised for significant pick-ups in congressional districts across the Empire State. This year Democrats are overwhelmingly on offense in New York – with at least six Republican held seats that could be flipped this November. Multiple Republican incumbents and challengers are finding their already-precarious political prospects diminishing even further as they struggle with a damaging party brand, a toxic presidential ticket-mate, and increasingly prove themselves out of touch with their own districts.

Bottom line: With New York's congressional Republicans increasingly vulnerable heading into the fall, Democrats are overwhelmingly on offense and well-positioned to win key districts across the state in 2016.

### **New York Republicans Tied to Toxic Brand**

As in any presidential year, down-ballot races will be heavily shaped by the top of the ticket. For Republicans, particularly in New York, that's bad news. Even before the GOP presidential race took shape, New York's congressional Republicans faced significant structural political challenges. In six competitive Republican-held districts, President Obama either won or came within 1% of winning in 2008 and 2012. Now with Donald Trump as their presidential ticket-mate, down-ballot prospects for New York Republicans are far worse. Earlier this month, a poll by [Morning Consult](#) found that nearly half of all Americans would "be less likely to support candidates for public office if they say they back Donald Trump."

And despite Donald Trump's big win in New York's presidential primary, there's no indication that it will translate to success in November. A poll taken before the state's GOP presidential primary, by [Public Policy Polling](#), found that despite his lead in the primary contest – "Trump is hated in his home state, with a 30/65 favorability rating" among the general electorate. Furthermore, the poll found that Trump did the worst amongst Republicans in hypothetical match-ups against Democratic candidates in New York – trailing Hillary Clinton by 26 points.

Up and down the state, Republican congressional candidates are finding themselves increasingly imperiled by the Trump effect. Some have openly embraced their presumptive presidential nominee and even the demagoguery and divisiveness that has defined his campaign. Other GOP candidates are searching for safety in parsed words and Paul Ryan's talking points. While fear of the Trump effect is inciting GOP candidates to split in political strategies, none of them will be unable to separate from the largely shared political realities they face this cycle.

Even with the immensity of its impact, the top of the ticket still isn't the only disaster facing GOP congressional candidates in New York and across the country. The Republican party is outright toxic itself – with the [Pew Research Center](#) recently finding the GOP's national approval/disapproval rating at 33%/62% – their worst rating since 1992 – worse than when Democrats won the House in 2006.

### **Strong Democratic Challengers Step Up to the Plate**

Adding to Democrats' prospects are a slew of top-notch Democratic House challengers who have stepped up to run in Republican-held districts. They include but certainly aren't limited to Navy veteran and native-Western New Yorker John Plumb who's taking on Tea Partier Tom Reed in NY-23; businesswoman Kim Myers who's helping make the Republican-held open-seat in NY-22 one of the most competitive races in the country this year; and Anna Throne-Holst and Dave Calone whose records of service and focus on Long Island's communities couldn't contrast more with Lee Zeldin's prioritizing his national party's most extreme politics. Similar contrasts are seen between Democrats and Republicans in NY-24, NY-21, and NY-19 – districts won by President Obama. With Democrats bringing compelling personal stories, impressive records, and a focus on commonsense solutions to competitive races across New York, the choice couldn't be more clear up and down the ticket.

### **In NY-01 & NY-23, Incumbents Endorse Trump & Embrace Far-Right Fringe**

**NY-01:** *National Journal* called Congressman Lee Zeldin, "[Donald Trump's Vocal House Supporter](#)," and it's no wonder why. The far-right fringe Congressman not only [endorsed](#) Trump, he's actively "[touting his ties](#)" to the GOP's controversial presumptive presidential nominee. Even before making his endorsement official, Zeldin [praised](#) Trump for "politically incorrect leadership" – apparently counting the demagoguery of women, Hispanics, Muslims and other Americans as leadership qualities. The [East Hampton Star](#) called Zeldin's endorsement of Trump "a sad moment for the American political process and the First Congressional District."

Zeldin's eager embrace of the Trump agenda is shocking but not surprising given his own reckless record. Since his election to Congress in 2014, Zeldin has proven himself out-of-touch with Long Island in almost every way possible. Last year, he drew [press](#) scrutiny for associating with an extremist group best known for hateful rhetoric and fringe conspiracy theories. Along with Tom Reed, Zeldin was one of only two Members of the New York Congressional delegation to vote to [shut down](#) the Department of Homeland Security.

Zeldin's positioning himself as a leading figure of the far-right won't do him any favors in this swing district where President Obama won twice. His extreme and out-of-touch record has made him one of House Majority PAC's earliest targets this cycle. Our organization began by running an [ad](#) last fall taking Zeldin to task for voting to make devastating cuts to women's health care. HMP has also already reserved more than [half a million dollars](#) in airtime on local cable targeting Zeldin in the final weeks of the 2016 election cycle.

**NY-23:** Meanwhile, in Western New York and the Southern Tier, Congressman Tom Reed has the dubious distinction of being Trump's first congressional endorser facing a competitive race. That full-throated support has likely made his position only more precarious. As [The Hill](#) noted, Reed's "full-on embrace of Trump could be a liability for him in his GOP-leaning district that narrowly backed Obama in 2008 and then went to Romney by 1 point in 2012 after redistricting." And following Reed's endorsement of Trump, the [Cook Political Report](#) shifted their rating for this district from "Likely R" to "Lean R."

Meanwhile, Reed's record has made him anything but popular in his district. His support for the House GOP's reckless budget drew [criticism](#) from local charities. Like fellow Trump-endorser Lee Zeldin, Reed was one of only two Members of the state's delegation to actually vote to [shut down](#) the Department of Homeland Security.

## **Turnout, Trump, & Troubling Records Imperil Incumbents in NY-24 & NY-21**

**NY-24:** Congressman John Katko is perhaps New York's most vulnerable House Republican. NY-24 swings heavily Democratic in presidential cycles. President Obama won big here twice – by approximately 57%, and Katko's seat has been ranked as one of the ten [most likely to flip](#) in the country.

It's no wonder the prospect of presidential election turnout and Trump's presence at the top of his ticket have Katko worried. For proof just look at Katko's desperate attempts to decouple himself from his presidential ticket-mate. Despite having already [pledged](#) "to back whoever the Republican nominee is," Katko went quiet when asked for comment on Trump more recently by [Politico](#). He's also tried parroting Paul Ryan's [talking points](#) with unclear claims about Trump needing to earn his vote.

Unfortunately for Katko, as the [Cook Political Report](#) noted when it shifted his race to “Toss Up,” “rates of split-ticket voting are at all-time lows and House candidates are defined by their party and the top of the ticket more than ever.”

More importantly, Central New York’s well-informed electorate will see through Katko’s parsed words to the inevitable truth – that Katko will fall in line and vote for Trump in November.

It certainly wouldn’t be the first time Central New Yorkers witnessed Katko saying one thing and doing another. When running for Congress in 2014, Katko promised Central New York voters he wouldn’t vote to [defund Planned Parenthood](#), then turned around and did just that during his first year in office.

Also in 2015, Katko was [exposed](#) for signing a pledge to run his legislative agenda by the NRCC.

With increased turnout, Trump at the top of the ticket, and Central New Yorkers continuing to learn the truth about their Congressman, 2016 is already spelling big trouble for John Katko. HMP has already targeted Katko with a reservation of more than \$370,000 in broadcast airtime this fall in Syracuse.

**NY-21:** Like John Katko, presidential turnout and a place on Trump’s ticket also have Congresswoman Elise Stefanik running scared. In a district where President Obama twice received over 52% of the vote, Stefanik has plenty of reason to worry. When pressed by the [Albany Times Union](#) earlier this month on whether she would support Trump, Congresswoman Stefanik also tried to hide behind Republican Party talking points. Stefanik pledged to “support my party’s nominee in the fall” but as the *Times Union* noted, “could not bring herself to say the New York mogul’s name.”

*Stefanik declined repeated requests for an interview. Her word parsing paralleled that of Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., whose embattled re-election campaign said in a statement that she would “support” Trump, but will not “endorse” him or anyone in the election cycle. – Albany Times Union, 5/5/16*

Stefanik even made the Washington Post’s list of [top 10](#) most tortured Republican responses to Donald Trump for dodging the question with the same reply [three times](#) in an earlier interview with *Time Warner Cable News New York*.

Neither occasion is the first time Stefanik has been called out by the media for blatant political posturing. In an [editorial](#) earlier this year, the *Glen Falls Post Star* concluded that following a meeting with Stefanik “our board still had concerns about what Elise Stefanik stands for and what she does not.” And like Katko, Stefanik was also [exposed](#) for signing a pledge to submit her legislative agenda to the NRCC.

Adding to the Congresswoman's electoral vulnerability is a Washington record deeply out-of-touch with the North Country – including votes to defund Planned Parenthood and freeze Pell Grants.

## **Open-Seat Opportunities for Democrats**

**NY-22:** While NY-22 has been a tough seat for Democrats in the most recent election cycles, a confluence of factors makes 2016 a truly exceptional opportunity for Democrats to take it back. Incumbent Republican Congressman Richard Hanna's announcement last December that he would not seek reelection quickly put this district on the map as one of the most competitive in the country, and it has been rated as a "Toss Up" by *Cook Political Report*. As in the rest of the state, the Democrats will be bolstered by increased turnout and Republicans burdened by the toxicity of the Trump-led GOP ticket. Much as in the presidential primary, Republicans in NY-22 are left without good options when it comes to picking their nominee next month.

Assemblywoman Claudia Tenney, who previously challenged Hanna in 2014, is probably best known for being a Tea Party extremist who [touts](#) her being "consistently ranked as the top conservative legislator in New York."

Meanwhile, Tenney's GOP competitor, Steve Wells has [attacked](#) her for, in his view, actually being insufficiently supportive of Trump.

Neither the Tea Party nor Trump are associations likely to benefit the eventual GOP nominee in this swing district.

**NY-19:** Another top pick-up opportunity for Democrats this fall is in NY-19. Like NY-22, the seat has become extra-competitive given the retirement of a Republican-incumbent, presidential turn-out, and the damaged GOP-brand. And similar to NY-22, Republicans face a choice between heavily flawed candidates.

Career politician John Faso has been part of the problem in Albany even since leaving the state assembly. According to the [Hudson Register-Star](#) in 2010, Faso's law firm "cut a deal with the New York state Attorney General's Office that includes paying the state \$550,000, in regard to that agency's ongoing probe into a 'pay to play' scheme involving the state's pension fund."

As an alternative in NY-19, the GOP has proud Trumplican Andrew Heaney. Heaney is an adamant Trump endorser who called the GOP presidential nominee (again best-known for offensive rhetoric and demagoguery of women, Hispanics, Muslims, and other Americans) ["a favorite son of New York."](#)

This GOP primary in NY-19 has quickly become one of the [most heated](#) in the country. With both candidates tearing each other apart and bringing attention to their significant

flaws – the eventual nominee will inevitably enter the general election already severely damaged.

## **Fundamentally Flawed GOP Challengers in Democratic-Held Seats**

In Democratic-held seats – Republicans may be hoping for miracles but, similarly, will be burdened by turnout, Trump, and heavily-flawed candidates. These factors have diminished the GOP's chances in swing districts currently held by Democrats.

**NY-03:** GOP candidate Jack Martins brings plenty of baggage to the open-seat race for NY-03. Besides his place on the Trump ticket – Martins' record of fervent opposition to [women's reproductive rights](#) places him firmly outside the mainstream of voters in this swing district twice won by President Obama. Furthermore as former state Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos faces a five-year federal sentence for corruption, Martins will be forced to answer for his own ["outspoken" support](#) for Skelos which continued even after Skelos' corruption charges came to light.

**NY-18:** While NY-18 saw competitive races in 2012 and 2014, and House Majority PAC made significant investments here to help secure victories in each cycle, this district looks increasingly out-of-reach for Republicans in 2016. Incumbent Democrat Sean Patrick Maloney has a well-established record of representing the interests of the district. He's also proven himself a formidable fundraiser – outraising both Republican opponents so far by more than \$2 million. Given this year's political environment and Maloney's fundamental strengths, neither Albany GOP-favorite Phil Oliva nor [Trump-enthusiast](#) Ken Del Vecchio currently look likely to alter the electoral landscape this fall.

## **Conclusion**

Amidst the inherent Democratic political advantage present in a presidential-election year – the toxicity of the Republican ticket, out-of-touch GOP incumbents, and extremely flawed GOP challengers greatly strengthen Democrats' position in congressional races across New York.

In 2012, during the last presidential election cycle, Democrats won three competitive New York congressional races (including two Democratic pick-ups) in which House Majority PAC invested more than \$2,000,000 combined. In 2016, New York offers even more opportunities for Democrats to increase our margin in the House and work towards a majority.

As previously mentioned, our organization has already placed airtime reservations targeting NY-01 and NY-24 in the final weeks before election day. As the cycle continues

and House races further develop, HMP will continue making strategic investments to secure Democratic victories across the Empire State.