

- Christina Greer: [00:12](#) Manhattan Neighborhood Network, in partnership with the League of Women Voters of New York State, welcome you to Race to Represent, a MNN election initiative. A Democratic Party primary election is being held for New York's 12th Congressional District on Tuesday, June 26. The winner of that election will advance to the general election in November.
- Christina Greer: [00:32](#) Long-time incumbent, Carolyn Maloney, is facing a competitive primary challenge from Suraj Patel, a 34-year-old attorney and businessman, who worked on Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns. The 12th District is in New York City. It covers the Upper East Side in Manhattan and parts of Brooklyn and Queens. I'm Dr. Christina Greer, Associate Professor of Political Science at Fordham University. Ms. Maloney was not able to be here today, but we are pleased to have Suraj Patel with us.
- Christina Greer: [01:01](#) Thank you for joining us. So you've never held public office. You're facing an opponent in Carolyn Maloney who's got a very long history of public service in New York. What can you tell the voters why are you a better choice on Election Day? And Election Day is June 26, for New Yorkers who are out there. So why are you the better choice?
- Suraj Patel: [01:19](#) Because I am attuned to what's going on in this country; because I've actually been in the city; because I've actually been living the shared experiences of real New Yorkers. I think representation ought to be someone who actually shares your experiences.
- Suraj Patel: [01:36](#) Everybody is not a career politician in this city. I'm an activist; I'm a lawyer; I'm a business ethics professor; I run a company; I ride the subway every day; I eat at Halal carts and coffee carts. I mean, all those things, this is one of the most dynamic, diverse, aspirational, and young districts, and America has the obligation to lead. We have 81 percent college-educated in this district, and solidly blue. This is from where we should be talking about the future, about injecting ideas about what we're for as a party, as a Democratic Party, instead of just being anti-Trump.
- Suraj Patel: [02:14](#) The main point, time and time again in America's history, it has been New York that has led the charge when periods of division and discord and things happen. And we come with ideas, Teddy Roosevelt or Franklin Roosevelt or whatever. And no one's doing that right now in New York. Name me one person with a vision for the future in this city right now and in its city's political establishment right now in the congressional delegation.

Suraj Patel: [02:39](#) And certainly, 25 years of incumbency, I've been at this, Doctor, for eight months. And it may not seem like it, but I am already more cagey and careful with my words, a little more risk-averse. Imagine what 25 years in Congress would do to you. I just think it's time to turn the page. We have to try something different.

Christina Greer: [02:59](#) So what are two experiences that you can tell the voters out there who are watching this, what are two experiences that you're bringing to the table that make you a better candidate than Congresswoman Maloney?

Suraj Patel: [03:09](#) Well, first off, I recognize that the future for the Democratic Party, for the city, for our country, is going to be through nonvoters, young voters, people who have been so turned off by the political establishment that 93 percent of this district doesn't even turn out for congressional primary. And only 26 percent of America gave us Donald Trump. So I'll give you the experiences. Right after the last election, I spent one whole day at Olive Garden in Chelsea eating my feelings away.

Christina Greer: [03:43](#) I was in Paris that day and I did eat bread.

Suraj Patel: [03:43](#) Six hours of all-you-can-eat breadsticks will get you right back on the saddle.

Suraj Patel: [03:47](#) But I started an organization with a bunch of folks from the Obama White House where I worked in campaigns called "The Arena" to get young people to run for office. Four weeks later, we had 450 people come to our first summit in Nashville, Tennessee, from 32 states, half of which had never touched politics before. We organized four more summits, had 3,000 people come. We've got hundreds of people running for office.

Suraj Patel: [04:09](#) I'm an activist. I was marching at the women's march the day after the inauguration, and a week later I was at JFK as a voluntary attorney for the ACLU when the Muslim ban happened. And you know what? Mia Velasquez was there. Joe Crowley was there. The only person that I didn't see there conspicuously absent was Carolyn Maloney.

Suraj Patel: [04:34](#) I think we need to have people on the ground that understand the realities of what's going on in this country instead of saying, ho hum, everything's okay, we'll just win in November with anger against Trump.

Christina Greer: [04:43](#) I want to backtrack a little bit because you said that basically only seven percent of the people in this district that you're running for actually turned out in the primary last time.

Suraj Patel: [04:52](#) Yeah, by design.

Christina Greer: [04:53](#) And that could be. So what would you do to increase voter turnout if you're successful on June 26 and then subsequently on November 6?

Suraj Patel: [05:00](#) I'm doing it. The proof is in the pudding. We are engaging every single -- so I've studied a lot of campaigns; helped launch a bunch with all these folks, young people who are running first time. I realize the politics itself is broken; that our representation we have is significantly older, whiter, and more conservative than the population as a whole because of the way we do it.

Suraj Patel: [05:19](#) See, traditionally, you go out and you find the voters who vote, people who traditionally turn out, and you say, those are the people we're going to target. We'll send them mail, we'll knock on their doors, we'll make phone calls to them. And all these other people, young people, people of color, naturalized immigrants, they're not very likely to vote, and therefore we don't talk to them. And you create a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is the only business that blames its customers for not buying an unappealing product.

Suraj Patel: [05:43](#) And so we started with the premise of 100 percent of New Yorkers, 100 percent of these people are deserving of representation. And we have engaged them, and we're showing it. I've got 25 employees, 59 interns, 300 active volunteers on this campaign, average age maybe 22, 23. We're proving it.

Suraj Patel: [06:03](#) As of May 15th, the Board of Elections told us that 5,500 absentee ballots have been requested for this election. Last cycle, 1,000 total, in sum total. So we're already proving that by engaging everybody, by educating and informing them about the election, we've got six coffee carts across this city, because the ethnic community, the communities of the city are rallying around this campaign too, seeing representation for the first time that looks and feels and understands them. I'm a first-generation American myself. So they're registering hundreds of voters for me at coffee carts. It says, "Suraj for Congress, Vote New Blood, Register Here." New York is consistently below 40th in turnout.

Christina Greer: [06:47](#) Oh, we know.

Christina Greer: [06:49](#) So we know we have a turnout problem. We know that you have an uphill battle because you're going against an incumbent who's been in office for quite some time. But there are a lot of young people really inspired post- 2016 election to run for office.

Suraj Patel: [07:02](#) Single best contribution Donald Trump made for us.

Christina Greer: [07:05](#) True, some would argue, but there are a lot of folks who are like, okay, Suraj, you clearly have energy, you clearly have qualifications, why don't you start with city council? Why are you going straight for Congress? What do you say to those people who are asking that question?

Suraj Patel: [07:19](#) We do not in this city wait our turn when we know something is wrong. This city is defined by people who are bold and dream big. And we come, we're here because this place is a magnet for people like us. It's a home for people like us. But I don't want to go through a stale political establishment, a machine that hand-picks its winners, who decries competition, and come out the other end just like that. We have to shake things up. And there was never some sort of -- career politics was not the intention of our founders. There was never supposed to be steps through which you paid your dues to get to Congress. I'm running for Congress because I looked around and I saw no one injecting competition. Without competition, there's no incentive to innovate, to get better. We see that with 25 years of incumbency or more for all the representatives in Lower Manhattan right now. That's 75 years of combined incumbency between Nadler, Velasquez, and Maloney without any real progressive challenge ever.

Suraj Patel: [08:24](#) And we're doing it because it's time to push folks. The day that I decided that someone ought to primary Carolyn Maloney was when I worked for the Obama campaigns in the White House. Near and dear to me is diplomacy; is the idea that we lead best in America when we lead in diplomacy.

Suraj Patel: [08:40](#) Now, I knew she voted for the Iraq war in one of the most progressive districts in America. And I'm like, I cannot believe someone hasn't challenged her for this. But more recently, she voted against the Iran deal with only 25 other Democrats. President Obama's deal puts her squarely on the side of -- she basically supplied Donald Trump with the arguments he made to pull out of it. And when that happened, I lived with my brother in the East Village. I remember looking over to him on

our sofa and saying, man, someone ought to primary her. Lo and behold, happened to end up being me.

- Christina Greer: [09:11](#) What's the most pressing issue you see in District 12 right now, and how are you prepared to address it?
- Suraj Patel: [09:16](#) Transportation. Transportation.
- Christina Greer: [09:18](#) Okay.
- Suraj Patel: [09:19](#) Specifically for our district. I mean, aside from everything that Trump attacks on a day-to-day basis are democracy. For us, acutely, decades of mismanagement of the MTA, decades of dwindling revenues, and you know what? Transportation, I know that the mass transit system in this city's subways are our arteries, they're clogged, but what's crazy is that not a single representative from this city sits on the Transportation Committee in Congress.
- Christina Greer: [09:51](#) So would that be your request?
- Suraj Patel: [09:53](#) Absolutely. Absolutely. And not only that, we have the largest public housing project in the country, in New York 12, in Queensbridge, where Nas is from. And what I think is crazy is that the Transportation Committee in Congress actually also works on appropriations for public housing.
- Suraj Patel: [10:13](#) So where are your priorities? If for 25 years, you have chosen not to sit on the one committee that has the most day-to-day impact on the most people in your district, and so transportation, in order to -- look, for every dollar we have sent to Washington D.C., we receive 81 cents back. And for decades we have been paying for roads and bridges and highways in Texas and wherever.
- Christina Greer: [10:42](#) Michigan.
- Suraj Patel: [10:42](#) Michigan. It's time to bring some money back to New York. The MTA, the mayor and the governor have proven they cannot be adults. They cannot play well in the sandbox. So we need an adult in the room. It happens to be maybe a 34-year-old adult. But what we need to do is bring money to the MTA's operating budget on a consistent basis and put federal board seats in the MTA to break this logjam.

Suraj Patel: [11:07](#) There has to be an accounting and an auditing of these insane costs. You know, the 2nd Avenue subway cost 1.6 billion dollars --

Christina Greer: [11:15](#) Do not get me started on the 2nd Avenue. I will flip this table over. I'm so frustrated with that deal. That's another show where we can just rail against the --

Suraj Patel: [11:23](#) It's an essential part of our district's transit problem and system, and I'm glad it's finally done. But 70 years late and six times more expensive than the next closest subway line in the world is not a success.

Christina Greer: [11:36](#) You talk a lot about making politics -- your mission is to make politics more accessible to folks. What does that mean?

Suraj Patel: [11:47](#) I call it activism check. Whenever you walk into this establishment machine, one of the first things people ask you is like, what have you done? What's your activist history? Where have you worked? And that is so insulting to so many Americans that are awakening to their obligations as citizens post-Trump.

Suraj Patel: [12:07](#) The largest generation in American history is mine. And as of last March, it became the largest voting bloc in American history. And it's marching, and it's resisting, and it's going to town halls. And I looked around, and nowhere in the Democratic Party, nationally even in the establishment of it at least, and certainly not in the city do I see anyone saying, let's build a bridge to bring these people into the process.

Suraj Patel: [12:28](#) Let's first explain simply, there's an election coming up June 26. Here's what a congressperson does. Here's what they could be doing. You can redefine this. Only eight percent of the city in my district can name their congressperson. And so we're really, really starting from square one. A lot of our content that we produced all in-house is me doing explainers, talking about what a democracy is, because --

Christina Greer: [12:52](#) Civics 101. We see so many incumbents --

Suraj Patel: [12:58](#) We have neglected civics for so long in schools in this country. And that's okay, we can make it up. But a campaign ought to be an act of service. Today is the 50-year anniversary of my political hero's death, Bobby Kennedy's death. And the last campaign to me, and I studied that so much, it's why I went into political science, that a campaign can be aspirational. It can empower and include. And that way, if you end up spending

one-and-a-half million dollars on a political campaign and it's simply created to take the static little electorate that you believe will vote and win it for you, if you lose, you've wasted everything.

Christina Greer: [13:43](#) So talk to us a little bit more about your thoughts on campaign finance because of that. So many incumbents do have access to capital that a lot of insurgent candidates and challengers just don't have. So tell the voters at home some of your thoughts on campaign finance, briefly.

Suraj Patel: [14:00](#) I refuse to take corporate PAC money. I teach business ethics at NYU, and I think for me personally it is an ethical dilemma to take corporate PAC money from the very same companies you regulate. Now, as Democrats, we cannot sit, because I am vehemently against Citizens United. I think it has a massively distorting impact on our elections and on our policies. This giant monstrosity of a garbage tax cut to corporations and billionaires and millionaires passed simply because they buy policies for themselves. And it ought to incense you.

Suraj Patel: [14:34](#) But it ought also to incense you if I told you that the Democrat from your district, in District New York 12, has been accepting corporate PAC money from Wall Street, from the very same banks she regulates for almost a decade. She's accepted three million dollars from the financial service industry directly. It's one thing to take money from people who work in an industry, an individual, living, breathing human beings. But to take money directly from the very same companies, PACs, that you regulate, I don't think that's acceptable.

Suraj Patel: [15:09](#) And when Republicans call us hypocrites, it's because we are. In some cases, we are. We open ourselves up to that. So I don't take corporate PAC money, I refuse to take it. I think overturning [inaudible 00:15:18] is a number one priority for Democrats and for everyone in this country that runs in this party, because we need to take our democracy back.

Christina Greer: [15:27](#) I do want to remind our viewers, we did invite your opponent here today and she declined to participate, so I'm going to ask you a question I think I know the answer to, but I'm still going to ask it anyway.

Christina Greer: [15:37](#) So your opponent voted -- this is Congresswoman Maloney, voted against the Agricultural and Nutrition Act of 2018 which we know as the Farm Bill. It proposed providing funding for agricultural subsidies and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program which many of our New York voters know as SNAP,

among several other things that were in that bill. How would you have voted and why?

- Suraj Patel: [15:59](#) I'm going to be honest with you. I did not know she voted against that bill, and so I don't know her reasons for it. But simply put, I am in favor of increasing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program right now because rising in equality in this city and in this country is having devastating impacts in the long term on our populations; that we are wasting so much human potential. And we ought not immortalize her on poverty in this country. And so yes, we have a lot of work to do to address a lot of root causes of inequality. But we certainly should not have our children bear the brunt of it.
- Christina Greer: [16:41](#) So I think a lot of people in the district would agree with that and want to hear more, hopefully in another forum.
- Christina Greer: [16:49](#) You mentioned this earlier about some of the work you did right after the Muslim ban came down and going to the airport. Can you tell us a little bit more about how you will work, if elected, to protect immigrants, minorities, and more vulnerable residents of your district, since you do represent folks in Manhattan, Queens, and Brooklyn?
- Suraj Patel: [17:06](#) I know, and I love every single part of this district. I don't just favor one, first off. But on this issue, so near and dear to my heart, Doctor, because I'm a first-generation American. My family moved to the United States about ten years before I was born from India. We've had lots of immigrant cousins and families live with us before they set off to their American dream.
- Suraj Patel: [17:34](#) I was the first candidate in New York State and one of the first nationally to call for the defunding of ICE. Way before all this became very publicized with the missing children and all that. Because I know this President does not respect the rule of law. I know this President is a racist. But he's only using the tools that Congress gives him. Now, we have lasted in this country 200-plus years without ICE until 2001 when it was created, and we can last another 200-plus years without it now.
- Christina Greer: [18:05](#) What do you say to Democrats, because there are several Democrats who say defunding ICE is a hoop dream; it can't be done, only inexperienced candidates are saying that --
- Suraj Patel: [18:14](#) How can it not? It's not inexperienced candidates. It's candidates with new ideas. You see, those Democrats have

been in the political system so long and they're so pathetic at the concept of leverage that perhaps they need to take a business lesson.

Christina Greer: [18:29](#)

At your class.

Suraj Patel: [18:30](#)

At my class. Since 1996, since that Immigration Reform Act that Congresswoman Maloney and so many Democrats from the era of triangulation took the easy path, continued to vote for more deportations, more detentions, more walls, more security every single time with the hopes that all of a sudden, one day Republicans would wake up and grow a heart and do something about the 11 million people living here without documentation but who are an integral part of our society, the vast majority of which have committed no crime other than being here.

Suraj Patel: [19:04](#)

And in every single time, Republicans use defunding, say Planned Parenthood, whoever, as an act of leverage when they have control of Congress. We have the same opportunity if Democrats take back control of the House, and the seven Democrats or whatever that are out there right now saying that they would stand firm and defund ICE. I don't think we're going to have -- if we end up in the majority of, say, seven votes, and we stand firm, we can sit there and say, we're not going to fund this thing until Donald Trump comes to the negotiating table and does something about not just the Dreamers, who are essential, 900,000 Dreamers, but all the 11 million people living here without documentation.

Suraj Patel: [19:44](#)

ICE is right now a 50-state deportation force terrorizing our courthouses. The Brooklyn DA, Gonzalez, said, we are literally having witnesses not show up because ICE is deporting people waiting outside a courthouse. It's not making it safer. It's terrorizing our communities, and if we as Democrats aren't going to stand firm for the most marginalized among us, then who will?

Suraj Patel: [20:08](#)

One other thing I will say is that I always ask this question at my town halls. Some people want to do the job, some people want to be the job. You have to ask yourself in Congress or in any public office, what would you be willing to give your seat up for? And if you find yourself, what issue would you give your seat up for?

Suraj Patel: [20:24](#)

Take the hard vote. Take the stance, be bold and do it, knowing you were going to get voted out of office. If you made it 25 years in Congress, you never found one issue. I promise you this: If I could defund ICE and end this terrorizing nightmare for

so many people living in this country, on January 10th of next year I would happily return back to the East Village a private citizen again.

Christina Greer: [20:47](#) We're almost out of time because I want to ask you three quick questions, because obviously ICE is a conversation that we could have much longer because it does affect so many Americans, not just people who are immigrants and have family members who are undocumented. I think it should concern all Americans.

Christina Greer: [21:04](#) But I want to go back to something you said, because you made this link between transportation and housing. And because you would represent Queensbridge housing, and we know that we have a disproportionate number of individuals in public housing in need of affordable housing not just in your district, but unfortunately across all five boroughs. So we know that it's rare and it's a shrinking commodity in New York. So if you were elected, how would you work with city council and the state senate to increase the number of affordable housing units?

Suraj Patel: [21:34](#) Well, I think that we need more housing, frankly, in this city of all kinds. I'm a big proponent of transit density, which is increased density along transit lines, because that is the link -- you nailed it -- the link between housing and transit are one and the same.

Suraj Patel: [21:50](#) But affordable housing, market rate housing, subsidized housing, public housing, we need more of all kinds of housing. And I'm willing to be experimental with some of this. There's cooperative housing models that worked in Forest Hills as a potential solution to NYGA problems. But a lot of this is bringing funding and having fierce advocates and fighters, and even just showing up.

Suraj Patel: [22:12](#) First, be on the committee that brings money for housing, then talk to city council and state reps and say, look, we're going to work together with communities to maintain the character of our neighborhoods, but to really increase housing. New Yorkers cannot -- we're not the kind of people who get somewhere and then lift the ladder behind us.

Suraj Patel: [22:32](#) You should never have to choose between living in the city you love and raising a family. And it really bothers me that many people have to, the minute they need to raise a family, move out of the city. It's not good for the character of our city. A lot of politicians punt on issues that are state and local, including, say, for example, Rikers. I think your representative, your federal representative, ought to use the bully pulpit of their position to

fight and advocate for what's right, including more affordable housing.

- Christina Greer: [23:05](#) How would you do that? Let's just say the partisan makeup of Congress remains the same, even if you're successful on June 26 and then November 6. So you go to D.C. and you have a Republican House, a Republican Senate, and Republican President. How do you propose to work within this system that we've seen can be pretty logjammed and gridlocked, to actually get some of these advances forward?
- Suraj Patel: [23:31](#) I think that the vast majority of people in public service are in public service to do right by this country. And they're not all Donald Trump. And so I think if you come in with actual arguments and messages that say, look, in the long run this is good for the country; in the long run this is good for our tax base; in the long run this is good for people; and you really actually attempt to make new arguments instead of this stalemate 30 years of increasingly narrow ideological battle that Americans are tired of, you come in with new ideas and new energy. I just said one. Cooperative housing model for NYGA, for example, that like Forest Hills did, is kind of a market solution that would be able to -- and I'm willing to do that. There are no sacred cows here.
- Suraj Patel: [24:27](#) By the way, we mentioned something and I want to come back to it real quick. I would be the first person supportive of a Federal audit of New York City's transit construction costs. Because if we're going to ask people to pay tax dollars, hard-earned tax dollars, we ought to be damn good stewards of their money.
- Christina Greer: [24:45](#) And transparency.
- Suraj Patel: [24:46](#) And transparency, right.
- Christina Greer: [24:47](#) Last question before I let you leave. This district, your 12th District covers most of the east side of Manhattan including Roosevelt Island and Queens. It covers Astoria, Long Island City, and other western neighborhoods and in Brooklyn and includes Greenpoint and East Williamsburg is a very diverse set of households, as you've mentioned.
- Christina Greer: [25:04](#) Before I let you go, just give us, give the viewers and the voters sort of one thing that you've done to fully understand the enormous diversity of your district, and what would you do to be the best representative of District 12?

Suraj Patel: [25:22](#) Let me tell you one thing that's really honestly personal. But I'm at a time in my life on this campaign because I'm not having to look at polls, because we're not doing that, I'm not talking to consultants. I'm going directly to voters. I'm going directly to New Yorkers, in fact. And if I do my job right, they'll become my voters.

Suraj Patel: [25:42](#) I'm not even starting with the premise that some people are inherently likely to vote. This last weekend, I was in every single part of the district you named. I was in Astoria, I was in Queens, I was in Long Island City, Williamsburg and Greenpoint. I canvassed on Roosevelt Island, Upper East Side for a street fair, Gramercy, and Murray Hill for a street fair at East Village at the dog run where I took my dogs Eli and Peyton and hand out information.

Christina Greer: [26:06](#) So I take it you're a Giants fan.

Suraj Patel: [26:08](#) Yeah. This district is home to me, and I am almost the median representative of this district in so many ways. It's diverse. It's one of the most diverse districts in America. And I think it's incredible to go to Astoria and see how bustling that activity is. And it almost saddens me when I go and I see how many empty storefronts there are on the Upper East Side, because rents are so high and there's commercial blight in the city. I look over there, and I see how dynamic it is.

Suraj Patel: [26:38](#) When you go to Brooklyn and Williamsburg parts of this district and you see how aspirational these people are, how many artists and folks are rallying behind this campaign, and I'm back in my East Village home and I've got a lot of people hearkening back to the '60s, loving the hell we're giving the establishment right now, really hating the fact that we've got a representative that consistently votes for wars. This district is perfect for me to represent.

Christina Greer: [27:04](#) Well, good luck on June 26. It was a pleasure talking to you. Thank you so much for joining us.

Suraj Patel: [27:04](#) Thank you very much, Doctor.

Christina Greer: [27:09](#) The primaries are on Tuesday, June 26. Please remember, only voters enrolled in a political party having a primary may vote in the primary election. And for more information about voting, locating your poll site, and all the candidates, you can visit our website, [racetorepresent.com](http://racetorepresent.com) or the League of Women Voters website, [lwnvny.org](http://lwnvny.org).

Christina Greer:

[27:31](#)

Thank you for watching Race to Represent on Manhattan  
Neighborhood Network.