

Race To Represent 2018: State Senate District 69 Debate

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Moderator: Julie Walker

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Announcer: Manhattan Neighborhood Network in partnership with the League of Women Voters in New York State presents Race to Represent, an MNN election initiative.

Julie Walker: Hello, I'm Julie Walker. New Yorkers will be voting in the general election on Tuesday, November 6th. They'll cast their ballots for offices, including governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, comptroller, state senate and state assembly. Today we bring you a debate with the candidates running for state assembly in District 69. The winner will take office in January of 2019. The New York State Assembly works alongside the state senate and the governor to create laws and establish a state budget. The 69th district is in Manhattan, and it covers the neighborhoods of Manhattan Valley, Morningside Heights, and portions of the Upper West Side and West Harlem. Joining us today is Democrat nominee and incumbent, Daniel O'Donnell, and his Republican challenger, Corina Contenescu.

Julie Walker: Assemblyman Daniel O'Donnell, let's start with you. What three words would you use to describe yourself that identify you as the better candidate?

Daniel: Progressive, independent and hardworking.

Julie Walker: Now to your challenger, Corina Contenescu.

Corina: Fearless, faithful, and I would say fighter.

Julie Walker: We'll stay with you for the next question. What makes you the right choice over your opponent?

Corina: I came here in 2000. I came alone with two suitcases. I managed, on my own, to graduated from Columbia University. I worked in Wall Street. I made it on my own without anyone's help. I am a free spirit, a fighter and an independent. I want to fight and fight for America. I'm scared to see socialists coming to the shores of the U.S. The reason I'm running right now is because I want to make sure no one suffers through what Venezuela is suffering now. I lived in communism, and I want to make sure America stays the amazing country that offered me all the opportunities.

Julie Walker: Assemblyman O'Donnell, why should voters send you back to Albany?

Daniel: I was the first openly gay man elected to the New York State Assembly. I'm a feminist. I'm a progressive. I have passed important pieces of legislation, including the Marriage Equality Act, including the Dignity for All Students Act, the state's anti-bullying bill. I'm an effective legislator. I come from the community, and I have lived in the district since 1990. That's the reason I believe I deserve to be reelected.

Julie Walker: Going back to Ms. Contenescu. If elected, what committees would you like to join?

Corina: I would first like to join women committee, the banking committee. I would stay with arts, and I would join education. The reason I would like is because education for me was very important being here. Without education, coming from a poor country, basically ... Romania is not a rich country ... I would have not made it here. I like women because I'm a woman. I work on Wall Street, and I know how women are not paid equally the women, and I've been there. I would like banking and finance. I would like immigration to help our community. Immigration is not a state-level issue, but it's a housing issue. It's a safety issue. It's a school issue, and it's about the future of America. So these are communities I personally feel involved because of my background and who I am and what I believe in. I will believe that we should fight for the rights of everyone. We shouldn't place one group's rights over the other group's rights. We are America. We are all together. We need to be better in the future.

Julie Walker: Mr. O'Donnell, the committees that you're on, what are you most proud of with the work you've done?

Daniel: Well, before I was appointed chair of the arts committee, which I am now currently, I was the chair of the corrections committee. In that capacity, I visited 38 prisons and talked to the inmates in those prisons and the people who run those prisons about the conditions of the prisons. As the arts chair, I've secured funding, \$20 million in capital funding and \$2 million in additional arts funding, so organizations in the state can get access to providing art programming. Many people, when I fight for those things, accuse me of being a socialist, just like they accuse us of being socialists when we pass equal pay for equal work statues. So, in the end, I believe that those accomplishments, the work that I did, clearly send the message that I'm the right person for the job.

Julie Walker: What are two of the major issues facing District 69, and what are the policy proposals that you want to pursue and address those issues?

Daniel: The biggest one is housing. There's a lack of affordable housing throughout the city, and that's certainly true where I live. The second issue I would say has to do with homelessness. The problem is not on the state level. The problem is on the city level, that the city is not doing enough to address the concerns and needs of

the people who are in homeless shelters. They need services to help them to get out of the shelter system, and they're not getting enough support.

Corina: I would say first one is housing as well, but the problem is the supply and demand, and we need to create more low-income housing, and that's not what it being built on the Upper West Side. You're building luxury buildings, not low-income. The requirement for low-income d luxury building is still not affordable. Second issue, besides homeless, which is related to housing, but for better or for worse, and 20% of the homeless population is children. I would say besides housing, I would say business. Upper West Side needs to go back to promote business, not Starbucks, not [inaudible 00:06:02]. You need small stores opening back in Upper West Side where you have so many front stores basically empty.

Julie Walker: So let's go to small businesses. How do you suggest or plan to encourage or keep local business owners in your district. Do you support cuts to the commercial tax?

Corina: I would say the reason that commercial spaces are empty is because tax deductible, tax laws for the landlords allows them to stay with no problem waiting for a higher rent. That's one thing I'm not necessarily happy about it. I would allow the commercial real estate to have one year tax laws for a space that has been rented, but, other than that, I do not like to encourage greedy landlords. Therefore, that will encourage the landlords to be more, I would say, open to accept tenants. In terms of business, I would say the problem is taxes in New York. As long as you don't lift Upstate New York in order to be able to lower the taxes in New York City, you're not going to be able to promote business. In order to promote business in New York, you need incentivize businesses to come to New York because of taxes. Right now, we are the most taxed state in the U.S. We need to uplift Upstate New York in order for New York to be able to lower the taxes. New York City is the rich guy in the state of New York, but we pay the most taxes. So we need to kind of lift up the whole state in order to lower the taxes and promote business.

Julie Walker: Assemblyman O'Donnell?

Daniel: The problem is that landlords get tax breaks, even when the space is vacant, and so I have a bill that would take that tax break away from landlords. Additionally, we need to do a better job of working with the organizations and entities like the universities that have vacant storefronts, because they are not a for-profit business. They should be taking a better responsibility to filling the vacancies in their community so that the people who work and live around universities and hospitals will have the access to the services that they need.

Corina: Actually, as a Columbia Graduate, I intend to work strongly with Columbia, because Columbia's endowment, I remember from my accounting class, it's higher than Romania's GDP. Columbia is a huge factor in, actually, District 69, and we should approach it and make Columbia help with vocational trainings

with business startups, because they have business startups for students. Why not do that for the community as well? Because Columbia would be interested with someone that approaches them in a practical manner.

Julie Walker: Mr. O'Donnell, to give you enough time to respond, since your opponent [crosstalk 00:09:02]

Daniel: Well, I do work with Columbia University, and I have fought Columbia University when they go and try to evict the neighbors in my community. But we have worked together on many occasions, and I have a meeting set up to talk to them about this very issue, about what role they can play in filling vacant storefronts. Because the vacant storefronts, aside from being ugly, they also contribute to a feeling of a lack of safety, when you're walking by empty places one after another. So I do believe that universities and hospitals have additional responsibility that's different than your average for-profit landlord.

Julie Walker: Let's move on to the budget. New York State has a \$168 billion budget. What issue in this district would you like to see get more funding? We'll stay with you, Mr. O'Donnell.

Daniel: I would like to see us create a new Mitchell-Lama program. Mitchell-Lama was the name of two legislators who created the program that built the Mitchell Lama co-ops that allowed us to stabilize places like the West Side in the '70s. We need a Mitchell-Lama-like program to create the incentives to get developers to build affordable housing.

Corina: I would say the same, because, actually, the problem in the Upper West Side housing, it's because the very expensive high rises are not Mitchell-Lama programs. It worked. Mitchell-Lama program worked very well. I wasn't here, but I heard only good things about it, and I think that's the future for low and middle income housing. Also, I think it's a lot of waste of money, the way ... The problem is not money; it's how efficiently you use money. MTA is a waste of money. They use money to make stations beautiful, but the trains are not running on-time. You need to be efficient with your money. It's not only how much money, it's how you use it and how efficiently you use it. That goes in everything in the budget of the New York State. It's a rich state, but we need to be more careful how we spend the money.

Julie Walker: So let's stick with the MTA. What steps would you take to improve the reliability of the district's public transportation?

Corina: First, I would look very seriously how they spend the money. I would rather have MTA run the trains on time, improve the signal system, than make the stations beautiful. I don't enjoy necessarily wait longer in a prettier station because the train is not on time. For me, most importantly, it's for the trains to run on time. For that, you need to have an efficient signaling system, which I would put the money on that. I would put the money on improving the actual

timing of the trains and the efficiency of running the trains, versus making the stations pretty. That was one. Also, it's a lot of waste, and a lot of the work that they do in MTA is like, why you need 22 employees? Because the unions are having a very strong hold on MTA, and usually they are Democrats voters, and you could do that work in a least expensive way. It costs three times more in New York to fix something than in Europe, for the same train stations, because of the unions. You should make it more efficient. You don't need 22 men to put a rail. You need to make it safety, efficiently, and cost-effective. That's one of the issues. Look at the expenses, and look at the practical priority needs, not the package, the content.

Julie Walker: Assemblyman O'Donnell?

Daniel: My opponent has a glaring lack of understanding of what this job is. We have no control in the state legislature how the MTA chooses to spend their money. We don't have that. There are reasons for why things cost more here in America, and it's not to blame the unions. It's outrageous to me that someone would suggest that it's the union's fault that the MTA is both inefficient and choosing to do the wrong things. I do agree with her that they ought to be fixing the signals and the infrastructure and not just on the beautification.

Daniel: However, one of the examples is the trains themselves. In Europe, the subway system ... In Paris, for example, it costs less money. Why does it cost less money? Because the cars are made out of aluminum. In New York City, the cars are made out of steel. Why are they made out of steel? They're made out of steel so if there's an accident, people won't be dead. Those are some of the reasons why the costs are higher. In order to fix the MTA, you have to have a dedicated revenue source to give them the money to do those things. I have a bill that would do that. It would only tax people who make more than a million dollars in the city of New York to pay for the infrastructure that's required to be done. It would raise \$3 billion a year, I believe. So in the end, we need to change the way it's funded by creating a dedicated revenue source that the MTA can rely upon, knowing it will be there next year to do the infrastructure repairs that we need.

Corina: I see you as bully as your sister Rosie in regards to me. I'm not lacking any understanding, and, also, the response of taxing the rich more and more is not the solution. The response is using your money efficiently and be responsible with your money. Taxing the rich, we tried it for the last 16 years you've been in office, and you see how well it worked.

Julie Walker: Would you like to respond, or would you like to move on?

Daniel: I would like to respond. We're having a debate because you're running for office. Me questioning what you say is not bullying you. My sister and brothers, who I love very much, have no relevance to this discussion, and it's embarrassing to me that you would bring it up.

Julie Walker: Let's stay on topic. You are debating each other and no one else, so let's stay on topic, please. Yes or no, do you support the MTA Fast Forward plan?

Corina: I will have to look more into it, and then I'll make a decision.

Daniel: Yes.

Julie Walker: You do. Let's move on to congestion pricing, because that could be a source of revenue for the MTA. How do you feel about congestion pricing, because it would definitely affect your district, Mr. O'Donnell?

Daniel: I have voted for congestion pricing in different variations in my time in the assembly. The problem always is you have to get the details correct. So how is it going to be implemented, and where is the line going to be? They've done it in London, and one of the questions is whether or not it has the positive health impact that people who want it claim that it will. So in principle, I support the idea of it. It's just, unfortunately, whenever someone says that, there's not a bill to read to know exactly how it would be implemented. I would need to be able to do that to support it in the future.

Corina: If elected, I would not support something I don't read, and I'd do research and find my own opinion on it. That's how I've been, and that's how I will always be. So I would look into it, see what it is, and see, if it's been done before, how it works and how efficient it works, what are the strong and the weak points. That's how I work.

Julie Walker: So you're saying you're not familiar with congestion pricing?

Corina: I am not, and when I will research it, I will make an opinion. I'm not afraid to say I'm not familiar, because I haven't researched it. But when the case will come, I will research it, and I will work on it, and I will work hard.

Julie Walker: Let's move back to housing. NYCHA, the New York City Housing Authority, places a vital role in maintaining a large portion of the city's affordable housing stock, and the living conditions in public housing are deplorable by many standards. So let's start with you, Mr. O'Donnell. When was the last time you were in a NYCHA building in your district? What policies or proposals would you sponsor or enact to chip away at the living conditions of the people in public housing?

Daniel: The answer to your first question was in the last couple of months. I work very closely with the tenants associations in the buildings in my district. I have two very large New York Housing Authority ... There are a variety of problems. Some of them come from the shelf life. For example, all the roofs need to be replaced. They're 50 years old, and to replace a roof of a building of that size costs a lot of money. We have provided, in the assembly, money to the developments in order to provide them with safety and other issues. For example, they installed

new doors in the Grant Houses. That was money that the assembly restored. We were not permitted to use them for roofs, for example.

Daniel: So part of the problem is there are three different levels of government. All levels of government share in the responsibility for this, and it needs to be fixed. Certainly, in those cases where they are infested or there's lead, the city has to do a much better job of making sure that they eliminate those problems.

Julie Walker: Ms. Contenescu, when was the last time you were in a public housing in your district?

Corina: Actually, I was last week in Douglass housing, which is assemblyman district, and I talked to the president there. Her exact words were, "The assembly is a very nice person, but he has not done much." I would say lead is a huge problem in the public housing, and also I think the problem is that the mayor wants to privatize NYCHA. We have to look into that seriously, and that's a huge issue. As an assemblywoman, I would definitely fight for NYCHA not to be privatized. Also, I would like to get people that are on parole and very low misdemeanors, instead of going to jail, make them do voluntary work for NYCHA, paint, fix. It's better to give a kid of 18 years old a sentence to fix something than to send him to jail. I would say privatizing NYCHA is a crime.

Julie Walker: Let's talk about Rikers. Are you for or against the closing of Rikers Island and moving the inmate population to the borough based facility?

Corina: I'm against it. The reason is, in my neighborhood, I would not like to have my kids passing by a prison. It's not safe. The reason the prisons were put on an island is because it's harder to get out of that island. The prison used to be on Roosevelt Island, and what they did, they moved it to Rikers Island, and Roosevelt became a residential island. I do not see the benefit of having prisons next to people, next to subway, ways for people who escape out of prison to get hostages and be far more dangerous.

Julie Walker: Assemblyman O'Donnell?

Daniel: Yes, I do support the plan to close Rikers. It is not a prison; it is a jail. There is a difference. The people who are there are pre-trial detainees. Many of them have not been convicted of anything. As a former public defender in Brooklyn, I learned firsthand what happens at Rikers and the way the culture at Rikers is not helpful to getting people to move their lives forward. Additionally, it costs an awful lot of money and time to move people to and from Rikers Island. That creates inefficiencies in the court system. Anybody who's worked in the court system knows that we need to make it so that the people who are going to court are closer to the courthouses than Rikers Island is. For those reasons, I support the idea of closing Rikers Island, putting the pretrial detainees closer to where their court cases are, closer to where their families are for support, and hopefully get them into programs so they don't have to go to prison.

Julie Walker: Let's move on to reproductive health, the Reproductive Health Act. The state assembly passed the Reproductive Health Act. That would write into New York State law a woman's right to access abortion that is consistent with Roe versus Wade. Assemblyman O'Donnell, do you support the bill, and why?

Daniel: I'm a sponsor of the bill, and I voted for it a number of times. Any of the people in this country who watched the debacle of the Kavanaugh confirmation could understand why it's at risk for a woman to control her own body. I'm a feminist. I was raised a feminist. My mother was pro-choice, pre Roe v. Wade in 1970, and so I remain pro-choice to this day.

Julie Walker: Ms. Contenescu?

Corina: I'm a Christian. I am a woman, and I personally, if faced with the choice, I don't think I will do abortion. The women have the choice to do what they want. I personally think there are other ways to avoid. Make sure you do not get to the point where you do have to have an abortion. I do not think abortion could be used as contraceptive. You have other means to protect yourself as a woman. I really think that the guilt, the toll on your body, on your mental health as a woman, it's a huge price you're going to pay. I've been with a friend of mine. She was a teen, and I've been with her to get an abortion. The guilt and the pain she suffered for years, I've seen it firsthand. I agree that, when there's a health issue for the mom or for the baby, I understand there are situation. I had a friend who had to have an abortion because of health issues, but I do not see it as a contraceptive method. That's my personal faith and as a woman stance.

Julie Walker: Do you support the bill?

Corina: Women have to have the right, and it's their choice. They respond in front of God.

Julie Walker: So that's a yes. You support the bill, but you do not believe-

Corina: [crosstalk 00:23:14]

Julie Walker: ... in abortion?

Corina: ... neutral. It would be against-

Daniel: [crosstalk 00:23:18] to vote.

Corina: I would not vote.

Julie Walker: All right. Let's move on to ... The move towards legalizing marijuana would put New York among the growing number of states that have legalized the drug, including California, Colorado, Washington. Where do you stand on the decriminalization of marijuana? We'll start with you, Ms. Contenescu.

Corina: I personally ... My sister married a guy that had opiate addictions, had an injury, had an opiate addiction, went on treatment. After that, marijuana was sort of an exit drug for him. Actually, it proved not, because he relapsed three times after marijuana. In my personal opinion, marijuana is still a drug. That's why you have a 12-step for marijuana as well. I really think we should look at the root issue. People are hopeless. People are scared. People have injuries and traumas, and that's where you need to go to the root, not patch the outside. Marijuana, in my opinion, is affecting the motivation center of the brain, which I personally do not agree with. You need to have drive and ambition in life.

Julie Walker: Assemblyman O'Donnell?

Daniel: I was the author of the bill that would allow medical marijuana to be used for opioid addiction, and the governor signed that bill. In the end, it's a very important step forward in acknowledging the role that marijuana and cannabis can play in our society. We started that for people who had chemotherapy, and one of the things I learned in this drive is that the body's response to chemotherapy is very similar to the response a body has when they're addicted to opioids. So in states where they have done that, you've seen a 25% reduction in deaths from opioid addiction because people have access to marijuana. We have to look at marijuana the way it is, not the way we perceived it to be 20 or 30 years ago. I believe we should legalize it.

Julie Walker: What is your position on New York City as a sanctuary city, and what are your thoughts on the Dream Act?

Daniel: I fully support the Dream Act, and I have voted for it a number of times. These are people who came here with no willful intent. They were children, and now they're here. We should treat them like they belong here, because they do. So I fully support the Dream Act and have voted for it and would be happy to do it again.

Corina: You also support your state to become a state sanctuary, so I don't think that's a good idea to make New York State a sanctuary state. That's a bill you propose as well, and I definitely think you should own that one as well. In terms of immigration, I came here legally, and I support legal immigration. I know there are a lot of people in difficult situation, and they are exploited here because they are in a legal situation. I would try to help them get legal statutes, get better work opportunities, and safety, and get away from the fear of deportation. In terms of DACA, if the students are hardworking and deserve to be here, yes, so that's my position. You need to prove yourself. I worked hard, and I really believe in the merit education. In terms of immigration, I definitely support legal immigration, based on merit. I do not support a sanctuary state.

Julie Walker: So you do not support New York City as a sanctuary city-

Corina: The sanctuary state bill that assemblyman is proposing.

Julie Walker: Assemblyman O'Donnell?

Daniel: I just think she's wrong.

Julie Walker: We're going to move on to closing statements, so if you'd like that to be part of your closing statement, we'll start with you. Ms. Contenescu, your closing statement, please.

Corina: I came here for a better life. I don't want America to become a socialist country. The Democratic party is the socialist country. You're promoting laws that inhibit the travel ... laws that inhibit [inaudible 00:27:31] ... You kind of strangle America and transform it in a socialist country. You have a 28 years old women voted on a socialist agenda in the U.S. I want education. I want legal immigration. I want jobs. I want better opportunities. I want America to be the America we all dreamed when we came here. I came here with dreams, and I want to make sure we all have them. I do not agree with state sanctuary. I do not agree with illegal immigration. I really believe America deserves better. My opponent here proposed a bill that not allows people to travel in emergency situations in states like Colorado, proposed a bill that supports state sanctuary, proposes a bill that controls where the pension funds should be invested, proposed a bill that creates a New York State health care that is exactly like the one I lived in socialism. So I do not agree with that, and I will fight every second of my life to make sure no one in the U.S. will go through what socialist means. [Spanish 00:28:41].

Julie Walker: Assemblyman O'Donnell, your closing statement.

Daniel: Thank you very much. Our country is in a moment of crisis, a moment of crisis because the Republican Party has nominated a misogynist and a fascist to be the leader of our party. That's what we're up against. America is a land of opportunity, and it's great, not because it's opportunity, but because the opportunity is supposed to be equal. All of the programs that we're talking about here, Social Security, Medicare for all, all of those things were created by Democrats. I'm a Democrat. I'm a feminist. I believe in a woman's right to choose. I believe in people having access to health care. I believe in education because I'm a product of it. Although I am not an immigrant, my grandparents were, and I was the first person to get a law degree in my family. My father was the only member of his family to get a college degree. So I understand also what it means to pull yourself up.

Daniel: But our district needs representation that's effective, that understands what the role of the assembly and the state legislature is, and has a history of passing progressive legislation, like marriage equality, the Dignity for All Students Act. I did those things, and it's not easy to do those things. It's not just about spouting opinions; it's about being effective as a member of the government. So I'm asking for your vote for reelection.

Julie Walker:

Thank you both. Thank you for watching. Please remember to vote. The general election is on Tuesday, November 6th. For more information on voting, locating your polling site, and all the candidates, you can visit our website, RaceToRepresent.com, or the League of Women Voters website, LWVNY.org. Thank you for watching Race to Represent on Manhattan Neighborhood Network.