

Race To Represent 2018 State Assembly District 69 Democrat Debate

Aired: Sunday September 9th at 8:30pm
Re-aired: Monday September 10th at 5:30pm

Moderator: Elinor Tatum

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Elinor Tatum: Manhattan Neighborhood Network, in partnership with The League of Women Voters of New York State and the Amsterdam News presents Race to Represent, an MNN election initiative.

Elinor Tatum: I'm Elinor Tatum, publisher and editor-in-chief of The New York Amsterdam News. Today, we are bringing you a debate among the candidates for State Assembly in District 69. The district covers Manhattan Valley, Morningside Heights, and the Upper West Side. There are 150 seats in the Assembly, all of them are up for election this year. The New York State primaries will be held on Thursday, September 13th.

Elinor Tatum: The Democratic candidates for the New York State Assembly, District 69, joining us today are Daniel O'Donnell and Ruben Vargas. Welcome, candidates, and thank you for being here. My first question goes to Mr. O'Donnell. How would you describe, for those who may not know it particularly well, what is the job of the State Assembly member, and how would you describe the major responsibilities?

Daniel O.: I would say the job is divided to two parts. The first part is the local part, so you have an office in the neighborhood where people can come and get constituent services. People who are facing evictions, people who are subject to elderly abuse, a variety of things. They come to my office, we have a full-time staff there to assist them. I do this job full-time, so I'm in that office on a daily basis.

Daniel O.: The other half of the job is to go to Albany, the state capitol, and to write and pass legislation. And those two different part of the job require different skill sets, so you have to write legislation and then find a way to get it passed.

Elinor Tatum: Mr. Vargas, are you in agreement with Mr. O'Donnell, and what do you believe are the most important aspects of being an assembly member?

Ruben Vargas: Yes, I do agree with Mr. O'Donnell's two references. But, I also agree there is a voice of the community, and as a fighter for the community also. In the same way that the community come to you, but sometime the community may have problem, and we, the assembly member or the legislator, I think they will also

need to have the ability to foresee problem and prevent problem from happening.

Ruben Vargas: No waiting for problem to happen and to come and being the hero. I like, also, include being able to foresee problem, like tenants' problems, problem like many, many, which the elected official have to deal with. Thank you.

Elinor Tatum: Mr. Vargas, what makes you the right choice to fill a seat over an incumbent assembly member, Mr. O'Donnell? Have you held office before? Been on the community board? What have been your accomplishments and what are you most proud of that would display your ability to be a successful assembly member?

Ruben Vargas: Great question. I have been for more than 20 years in 1996, I have ran for office unelected, but I have always won, I won all of the elections. Winning is different depending on what kind of person it is or what kind of person intention. Winning to me is achieving an objective, to others it's being elected. I've never been elected. However, I have only won because I have always achieved my objective. The objective of bringing about issues to the people to the forefront of the community that other than that will have never been the objective. Having an elected official is getting out of the desk and out to shake hand with the people they're objecting. And reminding elected officials the people are not to be taken for granted, that the people they're served and then we got to the got to go out and say hi to the people and shake hand and listen to the people from outside the office.

Elinor Tatum: So are you seeking to win the election and sit in the office or are you seeking to get the issues out?

Ruben Vargas: My objective, I'll actually say that winning is not only been elected. It's achieving an objective. Running for office right now for state assembly, I'm bringing about the two more progressive ... more progressive issues that will have never been brought to the front or to here. Other than that, me running for office because I believe I have the God-given ability to foresee problem, foresee how to help society to improve the well-being of society in all terms and meaning the good society, organized society.

Elinor Tatum: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Vargas. Mr. O'Donnell, you are the incumbent. Why should people vote for you again on Primary Day and what have been the two or three accomplishments you are most proud of and what has been your major disappointment?

Daniel O.: I run a full-time office. I do the job full-time. I provide constituent service to thousands of people every single year. In terms of my legislative accomplishments, I'm currently the chair of the Arts Committee. I was previously chair of the Corrections Committee where I toured 38 prisons in the state of New York. In terms of legislation, I passed the Marriage Equality Act. I

passed the Dignity for All Students Act, which is the anti-bullying bill, which is the first time that transgender people were written into state law. I am a fighter and I am bold, and when an issue was put in front of me, I don't take no for an answer. My greatest disappointment is not getting more done on criminal justice reform. We need to change the rules of discovery. We need to change cash bail, we need to change solitary confinement.

Daniel O.: All those things are things that I have written and proposed and I've not yet succeeded in making the changes that I think are necessary.

Elinor Tatum: What has been the hold up on getting those things done?

Daniel O.: Well, it's a variety of things. One is the difficult thing about being a legislator is that the devil's in the details. So how do you change it? So you change one thing, what if it affects something else? And then all of a sudden there's people who were in favor of the change who become against the change because of an impact you didn't think of. But primarily it's because the Republicans controlled the state Senate and they're not interested in criminal justice reform.

Elinor Tatum: So New York state has \$168 billion budget. Mr. O'Donnell, do you think your district is getting a fair share of those resources?

Daniel O.: As it relates to education? Absolutely don't. Which is why I have been instrumental in fighting for full funding of the CFE decision. We have not yet completed that. I think that we need to have a governor and a state legislature that is willing to say that we need to continue to restore the funding that the Court ordered us to have.

Daniel O.: As it relates to other things. It's not more specific than that, but with education, the answer is absolutely no.

Elinor Tatum: Okay. Mr. Vargas, what would you do differently with those resources? Positions you've held that gives you the experience to deal with a budget of this size?

Ruben Vargas: Well, I'm, one of the thing that I would like to do is to allocate more money for education, bring more money to education on the standard of fighting bullying. And then the other thing that I like to do is ...

Elinor Tatum: How would you do that?

Ruben Vargas: Well, the bullying is a serious problem in school. Right now it's a city issue, but it's a serious problem in school.

Elinor Tatum: Right but how would you bring more money?

Ruben Vargas: Well, fighting out there with my colleague, and also finding the common ground with my colleagues so we could help each other. So to pass, to achieve the

purpose that we have in, in bringing more money to our district. The fresh air to our district.

Elinor Tatum: And this is a question for both of you, what do you think was left out of the state budget in this last budget cycle?

Daniel O.: The full funding of the CFE. So allowing the court-ordered money to go to the lower income places in the state of New York and that is the city, but it's also other places. There is poverty in rural communities where they too have the same problem. And so we can't have an educational system where if you live in a rich neighborhood, your child gets a fabulous education. And if you live in a not-so-rich neighborhood, they don't. That's what CFE was about. That was the biggest thing lacking this year's budget.

Elinor Tatum: Now, isn't that something that's been going on for decades?

Daniel O.: It's been going on since I got there, that's correct. Robert Jackson led the fight for the CFE lawsuit. The Court of Appeals ruled that the State Constitution requires the State to provide equal funding. And we have not yet achieved that. We've gotten closer, we've moved in the right direction, but we haven't achieved it.

Elinor Tatum: So what are you hearing on the ground from the people of District 69? What are some of the major issues facing the district? In each of your opinions, what are the top three issues. Mr. Vargas?

Ruben Vargas: Rent. Tenant problems. It's unbelievable the way that rent has been. There's a rate increase in the people ... that how hopeless people feel with the problem with rent. People feel that they're going to disappear, that they don't want. People have been leaving for a long time. And with the eminent domain issue and Columbia University and the friendship with the elected officials and Columbia University. And not just that. The rent, how this happened and these other ... they want to take everybody out of Manhattan, especially on the Upper West Side in Manhattan. It's a problem. That's the most serious problem that happened, is the lack of affordability rent, affordable housing.

Elinor Tatum: And how would you address that?

Ruben Vargas: It definitely would be one of my issue. Well, bringing more resources, speaking more to the people, my colleague.

Elinor Tatum: What specifically?

Ruben Vargas: Definitely it's bringing resources to fight the issues because everything include money. And to bring legislation that will stop the rent for the ... and make the rent really, truly, affordable for people. There are people, young people graduated from college with job but they're still living in their houses. They

cannot get out of their house because there's no place to live. They have to stay in the same place. You could say, 25 years, even graduated from college with Master's degree, but they have to stay in their place because there's no place to rent a new apartment and other place.

Elinor Tatum: Mr. O'Donnell, same question. What are the major issues facing the district in your opinion?

Daniel O.: Uh, well, the first one I would raise is transportation, specifically buses and subways. What is the solution? The solution is money. I have a bill in the Assembly currently that would provide a millionaire's tax that would provide the MTA enough money to provide first class transportation. You can't live in a city if you can't get around. And with our elderly, aging population, many of them rely on those buses. So we need to make sure that they're running on time and consistently. I agree with Mr. Vargas about housing. One, we have to get rid of vacancy decontrol, which is a way in which people have a rent-stabilized apartment to go to market rent, which makes it impossible for the people from the community to live in.

Daniel O.: And the other part of that is creating affordable housing and addressing the problem in NYCHA. NYCHA exists, the very important housing for many people throughout the city. The roofs are leaking, the elevators are broken. We have to commit to the resources to get the public housing stock to be in better condition and safe for the people who lived there.

Elinor Tatum: All right. Thank you. Now, current New York State law does not adequately protect a woman's right to access to safe and legal abortions. Our only protection comes from the US Supreme Court decision that Donald Trump, Mike Pence, and the GOP have vowed to overturn. This puts our fundamental reproductive rights at risk. Fact: the State Assembly passed a bill to fix this. It's called the Reproductive Health Act, RHA, and it would write into New York State Law a women's right to access abortion that it's consistent with Roe v. Wade. Mr. O'Donnell, did you support the Reproductive Health Act?

Daniel O.: Absolutely. My mother was pro-choice pre-Roe v. Wade, and she was an Irish Catholic woman with five children. My life, I've always been committed to a woman's right to control her own body. There's an intellectual consistency with the gay rights movement and the women's movement about control of your own bodies and I will do everything in my power to ensure that a woman continues to have that right, which is why I'm very proud to have the endorsement of Planned Parenthood in my race for re-election.

Elinor Tatum: Mr. Vargas, what is your position on the New York Reproductive Health Act?

Ruben Vargas: I'm not totally in agreement with it ... I mean, agree that ... I will fight for it, but for female, for women to have the right to make a decision with their body. But I'm also concerned in making that happen willfully and intentionally and grossly

negligently. I like people to take care, they enjoy life, have fun out there, but be careful and don't be ... also be concerned that something else is happening. Not with just a female ... I support all women, I have two daughters. I support them to do anything they want when anything happen today. And, but I also concern that will be ... be a little bit careful.

Elinor Tatum: I'm not sure I understand your answer. Would you have supported ... would you have voted for the Reproductive Health Act?

Ruben Vargas: Yes.

Elinor Tatum: All right. Thank you. Now let's-

Ruben Vargas: With that attachment that I mentioned before-

Elinor Tatum: What, what is that [inaudible 00:14:56]?

Ruben Vargas: What I don't like to people to be concerned that the ... it's not just that the person had the right to do what they want to do with their body, but also the right to protect their body also. If it's not necessarily to put the body through that.

Elinor Tatum: So would you-

Ruben Vargas: Don't be-

Elinor Tatum: Would you-

Ruben Vargas: [crosstalk 00:15:17] don't be grossly negligent. Enjoy life and be careful.

Elinor Tatum: Would you want a different type of sex education in school?

Ruben Vargas: Well, I think that there is ... it doesn't have to be different. It has to be improved, I will say, in the sense of yes, you have ... we support you, you have our support to do which thing your body, but be also aware that it's no need because when the female that wouldn't go through all these, some time the negative effect up to her own body has an impact. So to be careful with own health, so it's much better if protect or prevent it from happening to not to have an unwanted, an unwished member to come into the family. Be careful also. That's what I want to be educating to that thing.

Elinor Tatum: Alright. Thank you. Alright, let's move towards another subject: marijuana. The move towards legalization of marijuana would put New York among the growing number of states to legalize the drug, including California, Colorado, and Washington. Currently, medical marijuana is legal in New York for only a handful of serious ailments and conditions. Mr. Vargas, where do you stand on the legalization of marijuana on any level?

Ruben Vargas: I do not. And I repeat, I do not support the legalization of marijuana because it hurts society. It hurts the people. We will lose. Middle class student of generations ... if we put this into our student, it will be the one more element to bullying the students in school. If they don't do marijuana, the other one would be bullying in the school. don't think is a good thing for society. I do oppose energetically, actively, and I did not agree with them, the legalization of marijuana or any kind of drug.

Elinor Tatum: On any level?

Ruben Vargas: Any level.

Elinor Tatum: Including medical?

Ruben Vargas: I do not agree with this because you're providing a bridge to worst thing to happening. Look at the people, look around. When you walk on Broadway, how many people you see that they are ... they started one day with different things. Some people have the ability to, to stop that at a point, but all of the poor people, they don't have the ability to stop.

Elinor Tatum: Okay, so prescribing opioids is okay, but marijuana for the-

Ruben Vargas: No drugs or okay to not support any type of drug. All done, I barely support what the medication is. I want the natural health on the people.

Elinor Tatum: Okay. Mr. O'Donnell, you've been a leader in the push to legalize marijuana for the use in treating opioid addictions, and you have some credits for that as well. Can you talk about that?

Daniel O.: Sure. We have an opioid crisis in our country and it has developed primarily from people being given prescriptions by a doctor for pain and then they get addicted and then they're addicted. The addiction is a horrible addiction and so medical marijuana could be used to assist those people. The symptoms of withdrawal from opioids are the same symptoms of getting treated for chemotherapy, which is how we originally started using medical marijuana. If I had a child or a niece or a nephew who was addicted to opioids, I would much prefer them to try to see if medical marijuana would work for them before giving them methadone, which is just another opioid.

Daniel O.: I think that the science has moved significantly forward to the days when people believed that marijuana was an entry drug into addiction, when in fact, now there is evidence that it can be an exit drug from addiction and we have to stay with the current times and provide the people who are treating people with opioid addiction with as many tools as they can in their toolbox to help them.

Elinor Tatum: Okay. Thank you. Now going back to rents, but to small businesses. As in most neighborhoods in Manhattan, you can't help but see all the storefronts that are

closed up on the Upper West Side. How would you suggest or plan to attract and keep local business owners? Mr. Vargas?

Ruben Vargas: Definitely, it is time to bring commercial rent control. It have been said, it have been utilized many time. Like for example, every time Robert Johnson had an election, he was talking about his opponent commercial rent control, but we never did it. He only did it when he was out on election. That does no good. It is time to have rent control, commercial rent control. The small businesses, it's the backbone of our economy, the national economy, and we're destroying them small businesses with our commercial rent control. And as I'm so sad when I see like the corner of 113 and Broadway, it's a bakery that was long time there is closing because they only saw they'll bring their rent control. They bring the rent to the ... every private landlords are looking at businesses. They watching if the business is prospering. Then the next lead is he going to go to \$100,000 to the sky. So forcing the people to, we call it a form of slavery, working hard nights. It's 16 hours a day, all every day of the week and just to pay rent.

Elinor Tatum: Mr. O'Donnell?

Daniel O.: I agree with Mr. Vargas about that. I have a couple of bills in Albany that would address the question of commercial rents. Commercial rent control's an excellent idea. Mr. Jackson was a city council member, had no power to do that. The power is in Albany. If he becomes a state senator, perhaps he and I could work on that very issue. The issues are complicated though because many, many a commercial tenant has come to my office and we've interceded and tried to negotiate with their landlord to allow them to stay.

Daniel O.: Part of the problem is the changing nature of retail. You know, Amazon has changed the way people live their lives. They don't want to go to a store and carry home a box of toilet paper or paper towels. They just want to click and get it delivered to their house. So, there are two different kinds. The for-profit landlords, which is one problem. And then there are the institutional landlords, which we have, Mr. Vargas mentioned, Columbia University, and I've pushed very hard to get them to fill their vacancies. They just filled a vacancy that had been vacant for years in Ricky's. And I think that the vacant storefronts are a plight on the neighborhood, which a university has an obligation to participate in fixing.

Elinor Tatum: Is there any way to penalize landlords that leave storefronts vacant?

Daniel O.: The problem is it is viewed as a taking under the US Constitution. And so that's the problem. We've looked at it. We've tried. But, to penalize them for not using what is theirs from the government would require due process ... it's a problem.

Elinor Tatum: All right, thank you. Mr. O'Donnell, are you for or against the closing of Rikers Island and moving the inmate population to the borough-based facilities and is 10 years too long?

Daniel O.: I was a public defender in Brooklyn from 1987 to 1995. I spent many hours on Rikers Island. I had been the chair of the Corrections Committee for four years where I toured Rikers Island. Rikers island is a problem. It's a problem for a variety of reasons. One of the greatest reasons it's the problem is that it's far away from where the courts actually are. So it is not wise to put somebody on a bus at 8:00 AM and drive them all the way to Queens or to Brooklyn to go to court. That's not an efficient use of resources. Additionally, it's not safe and it's not safe for the guards or the officers and it's not safe for the people who are there. Please remember 90 percent of the people on Rikers Island are pretrial detainees. They have not been convicted of anything. So yes, I do believe Rikers Island should be closed. Yes, I believe that people should be housed closer to their families and to the courts where they're going to go. And I think it should be done quicker than 10 years.

Elinor Tatum: Mr. Vargas, same question.

Ruben Vargas: Well, I wouldn't like to have the Rikers Island facility in my district. I don't know if the honorable family member would ... before I decide to get it, to take it out of what it is I would have to think of the solution of the problem. I don't want to have it in my district. So I guess somebody else it wouldn't like to have it his district. I think that we should improve what it is. It's a matter of ... we gotta look at this. How many people escape from that? Not that many. That's why don't want to make it easier for someone who has been decided by the law under the law. They had to be there and make it easier for them to escape or to leave. That's not what I'm looking for and I don't want them to be in my district, also. So I think what we should do is to work better to improve what it is and make it better condition for everyone, but what it is.

Elinor Tatum: All right. And this is our last question. I know this is a very large issue in in your district: senior citizens. The senior citizen population in New York City is growing. How would you plan on supporting the needs of the growing number of seniors in your district? Mr. O'Donnell.

Daniel O.: Thank you, that is a very important question. We now have what are called NORCS, which stands for Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities, and what they were were buildings that were built in the sixties and seventies. And the people who moved into them have never left. And so now what you have is a facility filled with an aging population and they need services. So I provide services. When I got capital money, I gave capital money to the Morningside Gardens for their retirement center and what they do there is really just God's work. They work to ensure that the people who live there get to stay there and not have to be moved out and so we need to do more of that. And back to the previous question, we need to understand their needs, which are different. Most elderly people will not get on a subway, they just won't. And so we need to ensure that the transportation is available. Buses for them to get around the city and to live their lives for as long as they can with mobility and independence.

Elinor Tatum: Mr. Vargas?

Ruben Vargas: I think we should look into SRIC. Senior Rent, Increased Control. I think right on the 50,000 maximum. We should double that and they also we should give them the chance to do live in their own place rather than being in the nursing home. I think we should be a little bit more concerned about the home attendance, the people come and help them. And provide the ability that a close relative be able to be with them and be also paid for being with them when it comes to taking care of a senior citizen. And also made sure their safety, their security. But my main concern is SRIC, to that situation, and that the bicycle, which is the way they've been terrorizing the bicycle, so terrorized in the senior citizen going into, on the sidewalk, we've got to enforce the law with the bicycle not going into the sidewalk. And that's my message about senior citizens.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you both very much. We're now going to have closing statements, we'll start with Mr. Vargas.

Ruben Vargas: I'm Reuben Dario Vargas. I have run for office on electively for more than 20 years, consecutive since 1996. I ran for Congress, city council, state assembly bar precedents. I never been elected, but I have always won because winning to me is achieving an objective, an objective that which is mean to bring about issues that I will never be brought to like renewable marriage. It is time to better the society, to foresee what we live in right now. They average marriage in the state of New York is very low. But I think my renewable marriage is the issue that I'm bringing about, which is a marriage that will expire in 10 years. 10 years, marriage, it will be renewed and like [inaudible 00:28:42] a driver's license, but it will be renewable.

Ruben Vargas: People want to continue being married, that people will marry again and they go to another honeymoon. That's one of the things. The other issue that I want to bring about is the legalized government control sexual therapist and that will help us to ... sex is a need for all people, for all genders. And that's one of the thing that I want to bring ring the bell and bring that about. It is time to legalize a physical sexual therapist for all genders. All gender, all single person, the had no part in that will be able to go to this place regulated by the government and take care of their physical sexual therapies.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you, Mr. Vargas. Mr. O'Donnell.

Daniel O.: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Vargas for joining me. Thank you for having us for this very important opportunity to talk to our voters.

Daniel O.: I'm very proud to have been the first openly gay man elected to the New York State Assembly. I'm proud of the work that I've done there, but I'm also proud of the work I've done in my community fighting for parks, fighting for historic districts, fighting for the preservation of housing. All those things are very, very important.

Daniel O.: When I got to Albany, they said I was too bold and too loud and too pushy and too aggressive. And in the end, that's what you need in an elected official. Somebody who's independent, not bought, and does what he or she thinks is right. I believe in the 16 years that I've served, I've proven that's who I am, and I'd like to continue doing the work that I do. Thank you very much.

Elinor Tatum: I want to thank all the candidates for participating in today's debate and thank you for watching. Please remember to vote. A closed primary election will be held on Thursday, September 13th and the general election will be held on Tuesday, November 8th.

Elinor Tatum: For more information on voting, locating your pulse site and all the candidates you can visit our website racetorepresent.com or the League of Women Voters' website, lwny.org. Thank you for watching Race to Represent on Manhattan Neighborhood Networks. Goodbye.