

Race To Represent 2018 : State Senate District 28 Debate

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Moderator: Julie Walker

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Speaker 1: Manhattan Neighborhood Network, in partnership with the League of Women Voters of New York State, presents Race to Represent, a MNN election initiative.

Julie Walker: Hello, I'm Julie Walker. New Yorkers will be voting in the general election on Tuesday, November 6th. They will cast their ballots for seats, including governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, and the state legislature with it's 150 assembly seats and 63 state senate seats.

Julie Walker: The state senate is the upper chamber of New York's legislature. Along with the Assembly, it works alongside the governor of New York to create laws and establish a state budget. Today, we bring you a debate with the candidates running for the state senate seat in District 28. The winner will take office in January of 2019. The 28th State Senate District represents 317000 residences, and covers most of the east side of Manhattan, including the Upper East Side.

Julie Walker: Joining us today are two of the candidates vying for your vote, the Democratic candidate and incumbent Liz Krueger, and the Republican Challenger Pete Holmberg.

Julie Walker: We're going to start off with a lightning round. We're going to start with the state senator, the incumbent, Liz Krueger. What three words would you use to describe yourself that make you the best candidate for the position?

Liz Krueger: Serious. Prepared. Respected.

Julie Walker: Okay, we're going to go to your challenger now. Pete Holmberg?

Pete Holmberg: Loyal. Resourceful. Passionate.

Julie Walker: Okay. Staying with you, what are the two or three biggest issues in your district effecting your constituents right now?

Pete Holmberg: In my opinion, having been on the streets of my district for months now, I would say two things. Safety and affordability. Affordability for people who are rich. Affordability for people who are poor.

Julie Walker: Okay. How would you address those two issues?

Pete Holmberg: Safety, I think a lot of it comes back to Mayor de Blasio. I think we have a mayor who has handcuffed the police. We have a mayor who has told the police officers not to arrest people for smoking pot on the streets. We have a mayor who, I think, is truthfully positioning himself for larger things, and does not want any sort of police scandal.

Pete Holmberg: So people in my district are not feeling safe. They're feeling the threat. More incidents are happening. There's more gay bashing in this town. As a gay man, I'm certainly very aware of that.

Pete Holmberg: As for affordability, I really do not believe that 421A is a viable option. I know people who live in those buildings. There's a lack of dignity to people who are living in the affordable housing. Having to prove themselves every two years, they feel like they're on parole.

Pete Holmberg: I'm also a rent stabilization positive Republican. I live in a rent-stabilized apartment. I have lived there for 23 years. I have paid my rent on time. I do not sublet. I'm not subsidizing a house in the Hamptons. I believe in rent stabilization. I believe it is part of the bedrock of this city. So, as a Republican ... And often the Republicans are up there and often fighting rent stabilization. I would be a republican in Albany fighting to preserve rent stabilization.

Julie Walker: We're going to get to housing a little later, but let's go to Liz Krueger. What are the two or three biggest issues facing your constituents, and what are your plans to fix them?

Liz Krueger: Well, I would agree. Affordable housing is a critical issue, not just in my district, but for the entire city of New York. The rent regulation laws do expire in June 2019. The Republican Senate has worked to do harm to rent stabilization and tenant protections every year for the last 35 years. Every time this law has come up for renewal, it's been weakened. I'm feeling pretty confident, with the Democratic majority in January, we will finally see an opportunity to improve protections for the tenants in my districts and improve rent regulation laws.

Julie Walker: Okay. Getting back to an issue you brought up, Mr. Holmberg, let's talk about marijuana. In New York City, African Americans are four times more likely to be arrested for carrying weed than their white counterparts. So what is your position on the legalization of marijuana and its impact on the judicial system?

Julie Walker: And you also mentioned that the mayor is, you believe, tying the hands of police by not letting them make marijuana arrests.

Pete Holmberg: I believe in the legalization of marijuana. People say that marijuana is a gateway drug. It's a gateway drug because to get it now you have to go through an illegal process, and that puts you in touch with a drug dealer who sells other stuff. That's the gateway. The narcotic effect is not the Gateway.

Pete Holmberg: I am someone in recovery. I do not enjoy smelling marijuana smoke. When I smell it on the street, I exhale, I walk very fast through it, and I pray. That has been my process for over 10 years now. People throw marijuana cigarettes down on the street, dogs eat them in a way they don't regular cigarettes. Children shouldn't be exposed to the smoke.

Pete Holmberg: I have no problem with people smoking pot. As far as the legalization, it's not a free lunch. If we legalize marijuana, a whole new group of people will do it. The problem is not the legalization, the people than buying it illegally going through a dispensary where they buy it. That's not the problem. The problem is a whole new class of people trying it for the first time, saying, "Wow, this is amazing."

Pete Holmberg: And I will tell you that when a person has never done a drug before does it, thinks it's the answer to their prayers, that is the beginning of a nightmare. And so, there will be public health issues along with legalizing it. In Colorado, they noticed that the number of people listing marijuana as their drug of choice after it became legal went up 15%.

Pete Holmberg: So it's not just, oh, let's legalize this and collect the revenue. There are implications to legalizing marijuana. It is a drug.

Julie Walker: Okay, Liz Krueger, your position on the legalization of marijuana?

Liz Krueger: So, I'm the lead sponsor on the piece of legislation, known as MERTA, to legalize marijuana for adult recreational use in New York state. It is not a simple set of questions. I fundamentally came to this issue because of the unequal treatment of people under existing law. I looked at the data on the number of young people of color who were being dragged into the criminal justice system, ending up actually with misdemeanors, violations, potentially worse, on their records, prevented from the same opportunities as everyone else for school, for housing, for jobs, and I thought, "This is crazy. Prohibition has not worked."

Liz Krueger: So I made a commitment to try to do something about it, have been developing and working on this bill for four years. Now, I agree smoking marijuana on the streets smells, and I don't support it. My bill would not allow smoking marijuana on the streets or in anywhere that the Clean Air Laws on inside air, because it also smells through apartment walls.

Liz Krueger: If we have a legalized model, we can actually have a legalized set of options that don't involve having to smoke marijuana to enjoy its value to people. There is a fact that there's concerns that some new people will start to use marijuana. But I've had police experts tell me marijuana's actually the easiest product to get in New York City. You can dial on an app and get it in 15 minutes anywhere. They actually have told me it would be harder for young people to get marijuana when we legalize, because it will require that your age 21, and you will need ID in order to buy it legally.

Liz Krueger: I really do believe there's an opportunity to have a huge win in criminal justice. We've spent 600 million dollars a year in New York state on low-level marijuana busts and the correction system. We could use that money for something much more important, including new revenue from new legal businesses.

Julie Walker: Okay, we're going to stay with the state senator, Liz Krueger, and we're going to talk about small businesses. Because your district which basically spans the east side of Manhattan, has lot of small businesses. And we know that they are struggling to stay afloat. What are your plans to help them, to ignite even more small businesses in your district?

Liz Krueger: Partly we're in a period of economic change where what businesses are, are different. So massive tech growth and decrease on many retail because the whole world seems to be using the computer to order products.

Liz Krueger: Now, that has all kinds of impacts, not to mention the number of trucks delivering door by door, 24 hours, which is causing real trans-traffic and congestion problems. But we need to support the new kinds of businesses that are growing and that can be supported. I am an opponent, to be honest, of New York State's entire model of Economic Development, where we give away enormous amounts of tax dollars to certain large companies and projects. It's the government acting as if we're venture capitalists. That's not what we should do with tax dollars. I would far prefer an even playing field in taxes, lowering business taxes by evening out not spending billions of dollars a year for certain selected projects.

Liz Krueger: I am totally open to the idea of loan funds and technical assistance and supports for new entrepreneurs and small businesses. But really, if you just looked at the four to six billion dollars a year we currently spend on our economic development "programs", we could do so much better with that, including lowering small businesses taxes so that they have a better chance at being able to grow.

Liz Krueger: Do you know small businesses grow jobs? Big businesses not so much. So there's a double reason for us to focus on the small business person.

Julie Walker: Mr. Holmberg?

Pete Holmberg: Small businesses people in New York right now feel under siege. Revenues are going down, regulations are not going down. We need to look at the regulations around them. We need to look at sidewalk responsibility. What is the role there? Could the city possibly help with that?

Pete Holmberg: People feel constantly under pressure, and there's a relief when people do go out of business. I have known many people who have just given up and gone out of business in Manhattan. One thing Senator Krueger touched on. This is the change of technology and how it's changed the retail market. We have a lot of

retail space that, frankly, there isn't a demand for in the current form. We have a commercial rent tax that goes into effect at a certain point, and we need larger businesses to feel comfortable coming in larger less income.

Pete Holmberg: Down in Chelsea, someone opened up a miniature golf pop-up, and it did very well. That is a very creative use of space. We can use the retail space for theaters. We can do other things that will bring someone into the realm of the commercial real estate tax, but we need to address that and get rid of a commercial real estate tax. We're the only state. It's Manhattan below 96th Street and Florida, are the only places that have commercial real estate tax in this country, and we need to get rid of ours.

Julie Walker: What is your opinion on congestion pricing? Because you talked issues that are intrinsic to Manhattan, and that would be one of them.

Pete Holmberg: Congestion pricing is something I think, in many ways, the congestion has been created. I think we look at all the bike lanes, we look at all the closed down streets. My real concern is that if we do congestion pricing, we have started off in a way, and I've been very public on this, I believe the tax for Uber, Lyft, and cabs that goes into effect on January 1st, 2019, is a completely unfair tax.

Pete Holmberg: It's only a Manhattan, only below 96th Street, and we have cab drivers suffering. When I started this campaign, we'd had five cab drivers kill themselves in the last year. I had to make an edit on my website when a sixth cab driver killed themselves.

Pete Holmberg: Cab drivers are part of the bedrock of this city, and in the name of congestion pricing, we have made their lives even harder. And one of the things I would fight for as a state senator is to repeal the cab riding tax of 250 that goes into effect January 1st, 2019. I would leave Uber left and the rest of the services alone, but I really think we need to look after our cab drivers.

Julie Walker: Liz Krueger, your response?

Liz Krueger: I actually support congestion pricing as long as we make sure that the money is dedicated to the MTA and not sucked away somehow through the general fund. The fact is, the future of New York City, the future of my district in Manhattan, is completely dependent on the strength of our mass transit system. They're reducing the number of buses going through my district, which I hear complaints about all the time. They talk about ridership going down. Well, when you can't move through the streets because of congestion, when buses don't show up because the MTA hasn't mastered any of their internal systems, you understand why people end up choosing to use vehicles instead.

Liz Krueger: My opponent's right that every time you increase the cost somewhere, there's a cause and effect. I don't believe the taxi industry believes that the fees not yet there are what's causing the crisis in the taxi industry. It is the changing

technology of the fact that we have Uber and Lyft and a different model for how people are using fee-for-service cars.

Liz Krueger: I do think that New York's Manhattan is blessed with far more mass transit than most of the city of New York, so in fact most of the people who will be paying that fee are not the people who live in our district. It will actually be people coming into and going out of our district, and we all have to figure out how we roll up our sleeves and pay for mass transit.

Julie Walker: So Senator Krueger mentioned the MTA, and staying with you, the MTA says it lost 69 million rides between 2016 and 2017 because of bad service. So what solutions do you have to improve service, improve the infrastructure, the growing cost, and also, do you support the fare hike next year?

Liz Krueger: Okay. I support more money for the MTA when used correctly, and I would prefer to try not to do fare hikes when we can avoid them, but I don't think, realistically, we will come up with an alternative. I'm sorry, but I just don't think we do.

Liz Krueger: I'm very happy that the city created, this year, a program to provide subsidized fare cards to lowest income New Yorkers. Of course, elderly and disabled people get the half fare, so there's lots of sub pricing within the system. But the fact is we need billions of dollars for Capital Construction in the MTA's plans. We do five-year capital plans in Albany. We're getting up to the next five-year plan. We need to make a greater commitment at the state level to get the MTA the money they need.

Liz Krueger: We actually need to deliver on money we've promised. The last MTA capital plan had the state committing eight billion of the money. I don't think we've ever really gotten it out the door, which is a real concern of mine because we have to continue the Second Avenue subway, we have to deal with the crisis of signaling on many of our Subway Lines, we have to rebuild the L-line, which is going to create havoc for quite a few people for a year-and-a-half. But guess what? It was going to collapse in on itself. We have no choice.

Liz Krueger: So these are real issues with real effects on people's lives. But going back to my point about buses, because people like to talk more about subways, if we don't figure out how we provide quality bus service that actually shows up and goes where it's supposed to, they'll see a continuing drop in ridership, and we'll see more congestion on the streets with cars.

Julie Walker: Mr. Holmberg?

Pete Holmberg: I agree with just about everything Senator Krueger said. I think to add to that, when we get the money, when the billions do come in, how are they being spent? So let's go to construction cost, because that's going to eat away. We have laws in this state that do not make sense. We are the only state with a

Scaffold Law that increases liability across insurance all across the board. That is why it is more expensive to do construction in New York.

Pete Holmberg: Before we get these billions, or when we're spending these billions, let's repeal Scaffold Law. Let's go after that. It's an underlying dysfunction of the state. We will get more bang for our buck for whatever money we do get from Albany. It'll just be cheaper, and it will go quicker, and we'll have a better result. I think that is a key element of the subway. You cannot discuss the subway problems without discussing Scaffold Law.

Pete Holmberg: We need to tie that in and get the voters and everyone in the city and everyone in the state engaged with that issue so that we can repeal it, and we tie into Subway. That's how you get people's consciousness. I've been told, "Oh, don't bother with [inaudible 00:17:49] reform. It's boring."

Pete Holmberg: It's not boring if you explain how it links to their everyday lives, and people are waiting on subway platforms and bus stops longer and longer.

Julie Walker: I promised to get back to housing. Let's talk about NYCHA.

Pete Holmberg: Yes.

Julie Walker: The federal government labeled three of the buildings in your district as the worst in the country.

Pete Holmberg: The Stanley Isaacs. Yes.

Julie Walker: Recently, the state Senate decided that they would create an office of an independent monitor to look over NYCHA. What else would you like to see the state Senate do to protect the people living in public housing?

Pete Holmberg: I think that one of the key things of public housing is the vacancy problem in public housing, having someone monitor that. That's key with a monitor. I also think with housing, lot of people that I've met in the Stanley Isaacs house want to move. People do want to move. They want larger apartments. They feel stuck where they are. We need more fluidity and that means we need more construction. And that, again, comes back to Scaffold Law, but it also comes back to just design-build contracts and getting the bills. So when the state is building something, we're not in endless repetition of bidding. We're able to really get construction costs down. That will get more housing. That will free people up.

Pete Holmberg: There are people in NYCHA who don't want to live in NYCHA anymore, and we need to create a better market for them.

Julie Walker: But how are we going to create a better housing system for them in the situation that they're already in?

Pete Holmberg: I think that we need simply more monitoring and we need community involvement. We need people. We need more reporting of what goes on with security risks, frankly, when people don't feel safe, and we need them listened to. And that is a problem, people feeling not safe. And I've had that experience with friends who live in ... I have friends in those buildings. I have friends in the Stanley Isaacs houses, and we certainly need, one thing, is the police more responsive to them. And we need better communication with the NYPD.

Julie Walker: When was the last time you were in the Stanley Isaacs house in an apartment in the house?

Pete Holmberg: It was last year. It was last year.

Julie Walker: Okay. On to you Liz Krueger. When was the last time you were in an apartment in a NYCHA building.

Liz Krueger: Actually, I was in Robinson Plaza, which is another NYCHA senior complex, not that long ago visiting someone. And I just want to point out, Stanley Isaacs isn't in my Senate District. It's Holmes Towers. Stanley Isaacs is actually in Senator Serrano's districts. They are right next to each other, a block apart, but it's actually Holmes Tower in our district.

Liz Krueger: So the fact is the federal government walked away from its responsibility for public housing several decades ago, and we are now living with the outcome of this investment in critically needed public housing. Some people don't necessarily understand there are 500000 people living in NYCHA in New York City. If we were to actually have to close any of these buildings, and we might be getting close to it, we could double the number of homeless in this city overnight.

Liz Krueger: So this is actually a crisis. It's a crisis that all levels of government must take responsibility for, and fundamentally, we have a problem with a lack of money for repairs and maintenance. When you look at what's going on in these building, when the elevators are breaking down, when the boilers are breaking down, when the roofs are leaking, if there's not the money in the capital budget to ensure that these repairs are made, it only keeps getting worse.

Liz Krueger: There was a hearing yesterday where hundreds of people from NYCHA came and testified in a federal court who's determining whether there should be a federal monitor overseeing New York City Housing Authority. And that federal monitor, I believe, would be looking at both the management issues, the operational issues, and hopefully the capital needs issues, and maybe even ordering the federal government to do the right thing after years and years of neglect.

Liz Krueger: But again, my district has probably the smallest number of NYCHA units of any district in the city of New York. It doesn't changed the issue. I'm a state senator.

I have responsibilities far broader than just my district. The future of NYCHA, and returning it to a functioning group of housing, is a crisis that must be addressed.

Liz Krueger: Again, do you want to take 500000 people home with you at night? Do any of us? No, we can't. We have to save NYCHA.

Julie Walker: The Reproductive Health Act Bill is currently stalled in the state Senate. So the bill would legalize abortion in New York City even if the Supreme Court overruled Row vs Wade, or overturned Row vs Wade.

Julie Walker: What's your opinion or position on this bill. I'll start with you Mr. Holmberg.

Pete Holmberg: The Reproductive Health Act is something I would vote Yes on. I know that other Republicans have voted no. In fact, all the other Republicans have voted no. I'm not here to be Republican of the month. I'm here to be a good New Yorker, and I moved to the state in 1992 knowing that we had progressive laws.

Pete Holmberg: As a gay man, I felt fairly certain I would not be jailed for having gay sex in the state of New York. New York was the first state in the United States to make abortion safe and legal. That is part of New York. That was not a Democratic effort. That was bipartisan. A Republican led the assembly. A Republican led the Senate. A Republican governor signed off on it. That has been part of New York since 1970.

Pete Holmberg: The Reproductive Health Act, the only thing really changing ... In my having read through the bill, I see it clarifies that for a woman who to have a health threatening pregnancy, a need to terminate after 24 months, her doctor should not be in danger or feel in danger of getting arrested. I think that it is simply something ... As a gay man, I've never directly been involved with a pregnancy, but I have been involved with many different choices that can be made with reproductive freedom. And I have been witness to a situation where someone had to terminate a pregnancy well after the 24th week, and that is a tragedy.

Pete Holmberg: And what the Reproductive Health Act does is it removes just one layer of hell from that tragedy, so there isn't the medical trauma, "Is my doctor going to be arrested for doing this?"

Pete Holmberg: I think RHA is a compassionate law. I think it makes sense, and I think it's good for New York, and I think it's true to the spirit of New York State. I would vote yes on it.

Julie Walker: Okay. Senator Krueger?

Liz Krueger: I want to thank my colleague. I am the lead sponsor of the Reproductive Health Act. I've been trying to get it to the floor for a vote in the Senate since Eliot Spitzer was the governor. I have started a pro-choice bipartisan legislative

caucus in Albany. We have 105 legislators who are members. Not one Senate Republican has been willing to say they are pro-choice and join the caucus.

Liz Krueger: So certainly I do not wish you to replace me in the Senate, but I'm very glad to hear that we have a Republican running for the Senate who understands how crucial this issue is for all New York families. And yes, we are at serious risk of losing our federal protections under Roe v Wade. When this debate is aired, we may already have a new additional judge on the Supreme Court who appears to be committed to undoing our civil rights and human rights, protections to abortion, for the LGBT community, and many other communities. So it is imperative that New York State and other states take the lead in establishing our own protections, absent Federal protections.

Julie Walker: Okay. We only have time for closing statements now, so we'll stay with you Senator Krueger. Your closing statement.

Liz Krueger: Thank you. First off, thank you for hosting this debate today, all of the co-sponsoring organizations. There's nothing more important than having a chance to talk to the voters about each of us, why we think we would be the better representative for you and Albany. My frustration for years has been nobody focuses enough attention on what is happening in Albany. No one really understands what a crucial role Albany plays in their lives, whether it's health policy, education policy, transportation policy.

Liz Krueger: We didn't discuss the environment today. Crucial, crucial issues there. We discussed a little bit housing. I think everyone in our district understands the importance of getting the policies on housing right. I am excited to be going back, hopefully, if people vote for me, to Albany in January. I think it will be the first opportunity in a very long time that I will be in a Democratic majority, that I will have colleagues across the board in my conference who understand the importance of governing well and the challenges facing the state.

Liz Krueger: I started off by saying that I'm serious, and that I'm experienced, and that people respect me. I think those are true by both parties in Albany, and that I look forward, if reelected, to being able to go back in a different position, but able to work across the aisle to get crucial issues dealt with. Not just for New York City, but for all 19 and a half million New Yorkers. Thank you for having me here today.

Julie Walker: Okay. Thank you. Mr. Holmberg? Your closing statement.

Pete Holmberg: Senator Krueger is working into a future where the Democrats have the majority in the Senate. I'm working to a future where the Republicans have the majority in the Senate, and I think my future is more likely to happen than Senator Krueger's future. I believe Manhattan has been off the map in terms of legislation for a long time. I think the Democrats take Manhattan for granted. I think the Republicans in many ways write it off.

Pete Holmberg: As your state senator, I will be up there and I will fight for Manhattan. I think the taxi cab riding laws is a certain sign that they put it into the budget, they knew it was going to Manhattan, they didn't care. They knew they could get away with it. We need someone fighting for Manhattan up in Albany. I will make Manhattan relevant again in Albany.

Pete Holmberg: I am the fighter. I respect people. I fight in a respectful manner. I have compassion for people, but I know how to do what's right. I moved to this town in 1992 with nothing. I had no job, no friends, no apartment, \$2000 to my name. This is the city that made me. I will fight for New York, and I think we need new blood up there in Albany.

Pete Holmberg: I respect Senator Krueger. I respect her achievements. I think that we need new people in the Senate. We also have a wave of Democratic socialism coming in in the next wave. There will be people in the 2020 primary. Every Democrat in the city. So where we going? Are we welcoming Democratic socialism to the fabric of New York? Are we going to have that part of our structure?

Pete Holmberg: We're already losing people. People want to get out of here. They tell me on the streets, "I'm leaving. I'm getting out."

Pete Holmberg: They say South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas. And I know if someone's a Democrat, because they say they're going to Austin, Texas. That's the favorite choice among high earning Democratic people.

Pete Holmberg: We are losing our tax base. People are getting out of New York. We don't have the hold on people we used to. Technology has not only changed retail, it's changed the residential market. I'm a real estate person. When I got my license two years ago ... Or it was a year ago, all these people were like oh, I'm getting out. And it's scary.

Pete Holmberg: We're losing people in Manhattan. We need to keep them, and we need someone up there in Albany fighting for them. Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here with you, Ms. Walker and Senator Krueger.

Julie Walker: Thank you both.

Liz Krueger: Thank you.

Pete Holmberg: Thank you.

Julie Walker: And thank you for watching. Please remember to vote. The general election is on Tuesday, November 6th. For more information on voting, locating your poll site, and all the candidates, you can visit our website Racetorepresent.com or the League of Women voters website lwny.org.

Julie Walker:

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