



Political roundtable held at the College of Staten Island

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Staten Island's unique political history and future were the topics of conversation at a campaign-season roundtable at the College of Staten Island Tuesday.

The Dean's Symposium program, titled "Election 2012 - Staten Island and the Nation," was moderated by Associate Professor Richard Flanagan, co-author of the book "Staten Island: Conservative Bastion in a Liberal City."

But panel members had more of an eye to 2013 mayoral election than they did for this year's federal and state elections. The local topic stemmed from discussing pivotal political moments from the past, like the election of Rudy Giuliani and his relationship with former Borough President Guy Molinari.

"I think the pivotal point in political history on Staten Island is the election of Rudy Giuliani," panelist and City Councilman James Oddo offered. "I think the days of citywide elected officials not campaigning on Staten Island or forgetting about Staten Island are over."

Oddo urged Island politicians and voters to hold to the fire the feet of any citywide-office hopefuls, saying the Island should play a major role in the selection of the next mayor.

With focus on Democratic candidates for mayor, Oddo (R-Mid-Island/Brooklyn) said it's important for registered Democrats to play a role in their party's primary process. The majority of the Island's voters are registered Democrats -- but the number of them voting in mayoral primaries has shrunk from more than 30,000 in 1977 to just 11,100 in 2009.

"My friends in the Democratic Party, who may control the fate of the next mayor, we have to do better," he said.

Advance Political Editor Tom Wroblewski, also a panelist, touched on Giuliani's election again when he named his big Island political moment -- the closure of the Fresh Kills Landfill.

"I've always kind of likened the landfill to our version of the Berlin Wall," he said.

To many, it was a prime example of the city's not caring about the borough, he said -- but Guy Molinari was able

to use his influence in swaying elections in the direction of Giuliani and former Gov. George Pataki to help get it shut down.

For panelist Jeffery Kroessler, an author and professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, among the Island's pivotal political moments were its inclusion as part of the city to cement New York's control of the harbor, the creation of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and the election of state Sen. John Marchi -- who he said was a true statesman.

The panelists also discussed the impact of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge on Staten Island, and how the borough is seen by the rest of the city. Kroessler pointed out that other boroughs often think the way Staten Islanders vote -- mostly Republican -- is odd, but said it is the other boroughs that are out of step.

"Staten Island votes like the rest of New York state except for the City of New York," he said. "The country votes a lot closer to Tottenville than to Brooklyn Heights."

Those who aren't from the borough often perceive Staten Island as "the Mississippi of New York, a backwards place, a sort of reactionary place," Wroblewski said.

Oddo said those from elsewhere "don't have the foggiest idea" about the Island, and don't realize it's one of the few spots in New York City with a "very healthy two-party system."

"The perception of this borough by outside folks is something we have to overcome," he said.

They also debated whether the borough was still made up of so-called "Reagan Democrats." Oddo said voters care more about local issues in local elections -- pointing out that he and Mid-Island Assemblyman Michael Cusick, a Democrat, are elected by many of the same people. He recalled advice he gave to a Republican in another heavily Democratic Council district outside the borough.

"The guy that calls you about his pothole isn't going to care that you have an 'R' next to your name," Oddo said, "if you fix his pothole."

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