

Rival Candidates in State Senate Race Say They Won't Toe Party Lines

by {ga=dking}

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NEW YORK — On a warm Sunday morning in September, a pastor at the The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Ozone Park, Queens, speaks about the importance of being both a U.S. citizen and a leader for God. An American flag is perched just a few feet away.

While the sermon might be at the forefront of their minds, parishioners are unlikely to have forgotten that two members of their congregation are locked in a heated political battle. When they go home at night, they probably see their councilman's commercials, where Councilman Eric Ulrich walks the streets of Queens talking about local business.

They've probably seen their state Senator, Joseph Addabbo, at events across the district. It's an uneasy feeling for a good deal of the parishioners here who say they wish the two men weren't

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opponents.

“I wish they wouldn’t run against each other... but it is politics,” said Ruben Martinez, who has been an active member of the congregation for 16 years. He said he knows Joseph Addabbo Jr. through the Knights of Columbus and Erich Ulrich through the parish. “I’m up in the air about who to vote for,” he said.

The two men vying for the 15th State Senate District in Queens know each other fairly well beyond their shared congregation. As councilman and Senator, both men have appeared at political gatherings together despite being from opposite parties. They also attended the same school and live near each other — Addabbo in Howard Beach; Ulrich in Ozone Park. Each claims to be independently minded, and not bound by party loyalty.

But on the issues that matter to their community, they are mostly far apart. And each has been working to paint the other as someone who either believes the wrong things, or won't actually stand up for what they believe in.

The two men had strikingly different starts in life. Ulrich was the first in his family to earn a college degree when he graduated from St. Francis College with a degree in political science. He worked for the Transportation Security Administration and the New York City Board of Elections. In 2005, at age 20, he ran for a Republican district leader post and lost by 120 votes.

Then, in 2009, he ran and was elected to the Council, where he is the youngest member of the body. Ulrich [was also chosen by the Mitt Romney campaign to be their chairman](#) in New York City.

In contrast, Addabbo comes from a well established political family. His father, Joseph P. Addabbo Sr., served 13 terms in the U.S. House of Representatives and became a noted critic of defense spending during the Reagen years.

Addabbo Jr. has sought to link his work as a lawmaker with his father’s legacy. After spending several years practicing law following his graduation from St. John’s University and Touro Law

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School, Addabbo Jr. ran for and won election to the City Council in 2001. He served for seven years before defeating 10-term Republican incumbent Sen. Serphin Maltese in 2008 to represent the 15th district.

Debating The Issues

Things have gotten ugly quickly in the race between the two men.

Ulrich has attacked Addabbo for “flip-flopping” his vote on same-sex marriage. Addabbo voted against the measure in 2009, but voted for it in 2011. Now, though, Ulrich says the vote shouldn't even be an issue.

“It's the law of the land,” he said. “I would not have voted for it if I was in the Senate at the time because of religious beliefs, but now that it is the law it is not going to be repealed and, if it came up for a vote, I would not vote for repeal.”

But Ulrich is willing to attack Addabbo forcefully on other subjects. “I think he has been a lap dog to his party. He went to Albany and forgot his constituents in Queens and raises taxes on small businesses,” he said.

Addabbo has stressed his experience and independence. “Listen, I watched Eric in the community and he has played my playbook,” the senator said. “I was involved with the local police council, community groups — that was my playbook before I was elected in 2002. But I have a lot more experience that he does. He has only been in public service for three years.”

Addabbo also emphasizes his time on the City Council as a formative experience that has prepared him for his service in Albany.

“He has not had to deal with anywhere near as bad budgets as I've had to deal with,” he said. “We had the worst city budget in history in 2002 and then, when I was elected to the Senate, we had the worst state budget in history. During tough times who do you want representing you?”

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Ulrich has been successful at setting the terms of the debate so far. His commercials focus on small businesses in an obsessive manner.

As Liz Benjamin of the State of Politics noted, “Ulrich mentions the phrase ‘small business’ once every six seconds on average,” and he has attacked Addabbo repeatedly on his record of helping small business.

Addabbo has responded with events in the district focused on business, like a small business walk and he has cited work to cut tax breaks to companies that outsource jobs overseas.

Addabbo may be playing defense because Ulrich’s campaign is much better funded. Ulrich has been the winner in fundraising, with his committee having raised nearly \$299,000 in 2012. Addabbo’s committee has raised \$150,311.

Ulrich has touted a National Federation of Independent Businesses report card that gave Addabbo a 50 percent score. The NFIB is a right-wing group that donates heavily to Republican candidates. The scorecard is based on seven bills the group supported. Addabbo voted for three of their measures, including a property tax cap; but he also voted against three, including a bill that would impede the state from imposing regulations on Voice over Internet Protocol services.

Addabbo also got a bad score from the NFIB for missing a vote on Tier VI pension reform because he had walked out of the chamber in protest with the rest of the Senate Democratic conference.

But Ulrich has a list of his own disagreements with Addabbo’s votes. “He voted to repeal the STAR rebate” — a property tax rebate — “and then voted two years later to restore it. He voted for the MTA payroll tax which hurts small businesses — I would not have voted for it, and he supports more charter schools because he is beholden to the teachers union,” Ulrich said.

He also said he feels Addabbo “half-heartedly” supports stop-and-frisk. “It seems to be that he wants his cake and to eat it, too,” Ulrich said.

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State Sen. Michael Gianaris, the head of the state's Senate Democratic Campaign Committee, said the issue of small business and job creation actually favors Addabbo.

"There is only one candidate in this race that produced jobs, only one who actually supports a minimum wage hike and equal pay for women and is not an extremist right winger," Gianaris said.

Scott Reif, a spokesman for the Senate Republicans, said Ulrich is viewed as an up-and-comer. "There is every indication that he has been a great councilman fighting for his community, and fighting for the middle class," he said.

Addabbo notes that he has passed legislation to give tax credits to small business and has worked to lower utility bills for small businesses in his district. He also says that while Ulrich is focused on one important issue, his campaign has the experience to deal with a multitude of issues facing the people he represents. He points to job fairs he has held across the district; environmental issues facing the area; and concerns about rising rents.

Ulrich says that, unlike Addabbo, he won't be beholden to his party. "They are in for a surprise. I told [Majority Leader Sen. Dean] Skelos I'm not going to be tapped on the shoulder and told how to vote," he said.

For instance, Ulrich says he supports a hike in the minimum wage — which Skelos has labeled "a job killer" — saying it will help workers and communities.

Addabbo insists he is also not just a cog in his conference's machine. "I am a proud Democrat but I won't put party interests before my people," he said. "My voting record is out there. You can see when I didn't vote with my conference because I didn't think it was right for my people."

As for Ulrich's support of the minimum wage, Democrats point out that the councilman [missed hearings on a resolution](#)

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in support of it.

But Ulrich campaign spokeswoman Jessica Proud said that while he might have been absent from the committee meetings, he voted in favor of the resolution when it came before the full Council later that afternoon.

Ulrich, she said, “has been a consistent and vocal supporter of raising the state's minimum wage... . If anyone is trying to suggest otherwise, they are simply wrong.”

When asked if he believes Ulrich does not truly support a hike in the minimum wage, Addabbo declined to speculate, but noted that he supports it and may have supported it before Ulrich.

He did, however, point to another issue that makes him question Ulrich's independence.

“When he actually said he is for hydrofracking and gave the same line Sen. Tom Libous delivered on the floor of the Senate about how it will benefit the upstate economy I was taken aback. Do you know what it would do to the people and businesses of this district if our drinking water was tainted? It would be a disaster. So if he is pulling the Republican line, I don't know how independent he can be,” Addabbo said.

Regardless of Ulrich's own beliefs, Democrats argue that keeping the Republicans in the majority in the state Senate will prevent votes on a minimum wage hike, tougher gun laws and other legislation.

But Ulrich has broken ranks with his party before — he supported full immigration reform and was the only Republican on the Council to vote for rent stabilization. “He certainly has been an independent voice, but our conference is made up a lot of different voices,” Reif said of Ulrich.

Another issue on both candidates' minds is reforming the culture in Albany. Ulrich says he wants to see the state Board of Elections get tougher on candidates who violate state regulations.

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“The state Board of Election needs to increase its enforcement,” he said. “It needs a robust financial enforcement unit and if the laws are vague we need to change them. Candidates should not be able to use campaign donations as a piggy bank for themselves while they are in and out of office.”

Addabbo cites his time as the chair of the Senate elections committee, where he championed a number of bills that broadened voter access, as a sign of his commitment to reforming Albany and good government. But he would like to take election reform further than increasing enforcement rules. During his time on the Council, Addabbo worked on campaign finance reform and public financing of elections, and says he wants to use his experience on the issue in Albany.

“Unfortunately, both sides of the aisle like getting big corporate checks with little oversight and reporting,” Addabbo said. However, he says he hears there is motion in Albany on larger campaign finance reform, including possible movement on bills he has co-sponsored.

“The bottom line is we have to do this,” he said. “I implore the governor to go further because we won't restore credibility to Albany without it.”

Independent But Partisan

So who will be more independent, and who will stick to the party votes? Addabbo says he doesn't think that is how voters will think about their choice between the two candidates in the end.

“My people don't care about who is more Democrat or Republican, they don't care about commercials or billboards. They care about, “what are you gonna do for me?”” he said.

Regardless of what any candidate says is the most important issue of the race and how much they claim independence, each of them are beholden — at least financially — to partisan interests.

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For instance, Ulrich received a donation fo \$10,000 from Friends to Elect Dean Skelos, and the New York State Senate Republican Campaign Committee has given Ulrich \$234,700. The New York State Republican Committee has given Ulrich \$250,000.

Addabbo, on the other hand, received much of his campaign cash from the committees of his fellow Democratic Senators, such as Liz Krueger, Kevin Parker and Mike Gianaris. Friends of Mike Gianaris has given Addabbo over \$10,000 in this election cycle.

Other major donors to his campaign include various trade unions and gambling interests. Genting New York LLC, the company that was involved in lobbying Gov. Andrew Cuomo to build a mega casino in Queens, has donated over \$10,000 to Addabbo.

Kamelia Kilawan contributed to this report.