

Battling the Boss in Brooklyn

by Kamelia Kilawan

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Photo by Mitch Waxman, used with permission

NEW YORK — For the average citizen, trying to run for office can be frustrating and confusing at the least, and downright intimidating and repulsive at the worst.

But if you happen to be running in Brooklyn and have the backing of someone like party boss Vito Lopez, suddenly doors begin to open for you, you have decades of experience on your side — and an entire organization of politicos who know how to navigate the political system and control who gets to run for office.

But over the last few years, a group of insurgent Democrats have come together to try to challenge Lopez and his stranglehold on the party structure that determines who gets to run for office. They want to make getting involved in politics a process that is welcoming by educating and involving as many disgruntled politicos as possible. They have formed an alliance, the Brooklyn Reform Coalition, bringing together some of the borough's top reform political clubs.

“We would like the party leadership to be more responsive to the desires of the growing progressive wing of Brooklyn's Democratic party,” said Matthew McMorrow, the co-president of

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Lambda Independent Democrats.

Besides the Lambda Independent Democrats, the coalition includes political reform clubs from all parts of Brooklyn: New Kings Democrats, Independent Neighborhood Democrats, Central Brooklyn Independent Democrats, Bay Ridge Democrats and the Southern Brooklyn Democrats.

Working Together

Alex Low, president of New Kings Democrats, said the clubs worked together on issues such as last year's fight for marriage equality. He said the groups knew they had similar reform initiatives, though they targeted different neighborhood issues.

But this year, Low said the coalition's top priority is to change the system itself by recruiting people across Brooklyn to run for county committee so they can level the power of chair Lopez.

Two years ago, NKD was able to recruit over 100 local Brooklynites to run for the unpaid positions; now the coalition has managed to increase the number to 260.

"This year, by using social media, community organizing, and word-of-mouth outreach, the Brooklyn Reform Coalition hopes to increase tenfold the number of reformers elected to the county committee," the coalition said in a statement.

County committee positions give Brooklynites from each election district the opportunity to organize neighborhoods, attend regular meetings and free members to nominate candidates for special and judicial elections.

Hard Reality

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Rivaling the power of the party boss in county committee is not that simple, even now that the Brooklyn Reform Coalition's clubs have banded together.

Low said it will take several years for county committee members of the Brooklyn Reform Coalition to even be able to formally meet. Currently, the party boss can call county committee meetings which according to Low happens just "once every two years."

The county committee — a less glamorous structure compared to the state's Assembly and City Council — is made up of 5,000 members.

"The biannual meeting resembles the court of Louis XVI more than an institution of American democracy," wrote former NKD member Nick Juravich in Dissent magazine earlier this year.

Matthew Cowherd, former NKD president and board member commented on the situation saying infiltrating the county committee to rival the party boss will take some time, especially when it comes to nominating candidates for special elections.

"We don't have the numbers to claim the majority. We don't even have enough votes to outvote. We're not there yet ... but having a few people to raise awareness and educate the importance of the seat changes the game," he said.

Reform Candidate

A notable win against the old Brooklyn Democratic machine came from Lincoln Restler, who put his political reform club on the Lopez radar after reeling in \$60,000 for his successful district leader campaign to defeat a Lopez-backed candidate in Williamsburg.

Despite the win, Restler recollected the initial struggles he had encountered in his first race for district leader. "I was surprised by how few people were willing to stick their neck out and stand up in support of my first, our first campaign, to try and shake up the old democratic machine in North Brooklyn," he told the Gazette.

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Restler's route to politics is unlike many of his political counterparts. Before his interest in reforming Brooklyn politics, he considered a career in academia with a focus on the Caribbean. In 2010, he co-authored a study on financial literacy among Dominicans in New York City for the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute.

Restler's group, NKD, was created in 2008 by a group of twenty to thirty year olds who wanted to use their momentum from the Obama campaign to get local people involved in local politics. The more people get involved, the fewer of Lopez's organizations candidates are gifted seats.

Getting all kinds of people involved in progressive Democratic politics from all walks of life is a goal of the organization.

Restler said his experiences working with local people to build community gardens and organize against subway cuts were examples of the open and inclusive process needed in politics today.

"These are substantive examples of Brooklynites taking ownership of the issues they care about in their community," he said.

While it is also an unpaid position, being a district leader does carry some weight: they select poll workers, select civil court judge nominees and elect county chairs.

A Movement

A recent press conference showcased the growing support Restler and his movement enjoys as it was attended by many politicians including Congressman Jerry Nadler, Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez, Brooklyn Senators Eric Adams, Daniel Squadron and Velmanette Montgomery, Assembly Members Joan Millman and Jim Brennan, and Council Members Diana Reyna and Brad Lander.

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“Everyone that I talk to is intrigued by the prospect of dismantling the old Brooklyn machine and replacing it with a new Brooklyn Democratic party that is reflective of our values,” Restler said.

Restler said Jesus Gonzalez, who made a failed bid for the Assembly in 2011, is also a good friend of his. Restler said Gonzalez has the ability to connect with northeastern Brooklyn in “very deep and real ways.”

Last year, in Bushwick’s state Assembly special election, Lopez backed Rafeal Espinal, who defeated the young community organizer Gonzalez in an impossibly close race.

“His commitment to social justice, long time dedication to police accountability, and his talent for youth organizing are exactly the skill set I would hope for in an elected official,” Restler said.

Bill Samuels, head of the New Roosevelt Initiative, said he was impressed with young reformers like Williamsburg’s Restler running for district leader and Bushwick’s Gonzalez now running for City Council.

He said young people should find other ways to get involved with the community if they want to be a political leader.

“In the long run people should want to go to law school, be a reporter, or a community organizer so they don’t have to beg some boss,” he said.

The Boss

The Brooklyn Kings County Democratic Chair or “party boss” Vito J. Lopez is currently serving his 14th term in the Assembly, having held office since 1984. While Lopez is a legislator with a load of seniority, his power base is in Brooklyn, not Albany where he has served as the chairman of the Kings County Democratic Party.

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Lopez built “the prototype of a modern inner-city political machine,” according to a NYT archive on the Ridgewood Bushwick Senior Citizens Council. Lopez founded the nonprofit, which faced a series of federal investigations despite it receiving over 870,000 in discretionary funds from the City Council this year.

Lopez undoubtedly holds power over Brooklyn voters who often vote for the Democratic party dominated by his candidate endorsements making it difficult for a non-machine or independent candidate to run.

Lopez did not respond to a request for comment for this story.

A fact often recited by Brooklyn political reform clubs is that three out of the last four Brooklyn party bosses were indicted for corruption and that Lopez is under investigation.

Restler says that fighting perceived corruption in Brooklyn politics is one of his greatest motivations.

“The stranglehold of the old machine on our county’s political process has had a tighter grip here in Brooklyn than any other county in the city and that is what needs to be broken,” he said.

But Flora Davidson, a professor of urban studies and political science at Barnard College, said political machines are slowly losing their grip.

“Any candidate who can mobilize support can challenge existing leadership by raising money and generating sufficient voter turnout,” she said.