Guide for the Last Minute Voter

by {ga=dking}
Tuesday, September 11, 2012 03:33 PM

by {ga=dking}
Tuesday, September 11, 2012 03:33 PM

It is a testament to the corruption-as-usual air of the state capital that three or more current incumbents facing challenges in Thursday's primary election could very easily be reelected only to find themselves removed from office or jailed in the coming year.

Are voters paying attention? Will they be sending future jailbirds to Albany, or will they put their faith in people with unfamiliar names who promise change?

Better not to blame the voters — they are likely feeling nauseous from the stink of scandal emanating from Albany, where members of New York's vaunted ethics panel spent Monday morning jousting with each other over transparency instead of talking openly about what everyone who pays attention to the news already knows.

The scandal they weren't allowed to talk about in public involves not only the one-time overlord of Brooklyn politics, Assemblyman Vito Lopez, but no less than three of the most powerful men in the state: Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver who has ruled the Assembly with an iron grip for nearly two decades; the second-term comptroller, Thomas DiNpoli, who was appointed by his colleagues after his predecessor Alan Hevesi was jailed for corruption; and Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, who although up until now was scandal-free, served in the Senate Democratic conference with a number of ethically challenged colleagues.

None of those men face a vote by the electorate this year, but plenty of other scandal-clouded pols do.

Voters won't just be deciding who to send to Albany. They'll also pick people to build out the structure of their county committees. Voters in Brooklyn will have the chance to strip some power away from Lopez. And a few countywide judicial races will let New Yorker's decide who gets to dole out justice from the bench.

Here are a few highlights from the dozens of primaries playing out in the city.

State Legislative Contests

Assemblyman William Boyland of the **55th State Assembly District** is the poster boy for Albany corruption and dysfunction. He wrote no bills last year and made up for it by authoring

three this year. He has had one of the highest absentee rates of any legislator — and saying he has had some legal trouble would be an understatement.

Boyland was arrested on federal bribery charges in November of last year, three weeks after being acquitted in a different case. He is accused of soliciting more than $250,000 in bribes, some of it which he planned to use to pay legal bills from the previous case.

Luckily for Boyland, he faces six challengers who could easily split the vote and allow him to keep his seat. Boyland will again likely be too busy dealing with legal issues to actually legislate.

Read the Gazette's coverage of the election: ***Assembly's Boyland Faces Tough Primary Challenge â€˘ Five Primary Races Worth Caring About â€˘ Family Values at Play in State Senate Race in the Bronx ***

Another incumbent, Asssemblywoman Naomi Rivera**,** has been labeled an “absentee Assemblywoman” by BoroBeat writer Bob Kapstatter, but her record in the community over the past seven years isn’t likely to decide her race against three challengers for the 80th State Assembly District
.

Rivera has been the focus of a scandal surrounding her appointment of her boyfriend to a political position despite the fact that he had no qualifications. The scandal keeps deepening and the Bronx district attorney is investigating. But with three other names on the ballot — Adam Bermudez, Estrada Rukaj and Mark Gjonaj — Rivera may just squeak through the primary.

The fallout of the Assemblyman Vito Lopez sexual harassment scandal may help shape the race in the **17th State Senate District** **,** where challenger Jason OtaĂ±o hopes to further tie 10-year incumbent and Lopez ally Martin Dilan to Lopez’s sinking ship. Dilan and his councilman son, Erik, have helped Lopez keep a reign on political positions in Brooklyn.

But OtaĂ±o has been accused of being interested in the race only out of political revenge. Rep. Nydia Velasquez faced a primary challenge from Erik Dilan earlier this year, and OtaĂ±o’s run

is seen by many as retribution.

OtaĂ±o admits to initially considering a run for Council and speaks openly of his loyalty to Velasquez. He also had to move into the 17th district to challenge Dilan.

One-term Sen. Adriano Espaillat took a risk this year and challenged long term incumbent Rep. Charles Rangel for his Congressional seat. After a series of headline-grabbing mishaps at the city Board of Elections that saw the race grow tighter than initially reported, Espaillat decided to concede and run for his **31st State Senate District** seat.

The man who wants to unseat him is Assemblyman Guillermo Linares — Espaillat's long-time political rival. Espaillat has attacked Linares for being beholden to real estate interests and, in a recent flyer, charged that Linares "betrayed" Latinos by backing Rangel in the Congressional race. In spite of being criticized for the flyer, the message was tuned to voters in the largely Spanish-speaking district.

Rangel has endorsed Linares and his daughter Mayra, who is running to fill her father's Assembly seat. Espaillat seems to be winning the endorsement wars, however, enjoying the support of most of his legislative colleagues and a rare endorsement from Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

More Gazette election coverage: Second-Longest Running Show Now on Broadway is Uptown â€˜ How the State's Political Scandals are Reshaping the Primaries

Mike Miller faces a stiff challenge in Queens' 38th State Assembly District to his three-year incumbency from challenger David Adorno, a staffer for Councilman Robert Jackson. Miller has had to familiarize himself with new communities after redistricting reshaped the 38th district. Meanwhile, Adorno is trying to paint Miller as part of the old guard.

Also in Queens, seven-term Sen. Toby Ann Stavisky is battling John Messer, a former project manager for the Economic Development Corp., for the **16th State Senate District** that was greatly redrawn during the redistricting process to better represent the Asian population.

Messer is trying to capitalize on the district's Asian population with campaign material that spotlights his Asian wife. Stavisky has tried to paint Messer as a Republican, noting his contributions to Republican candidates. Messer has contributed a great deal of his own money

to bankroll his candidacy.

Stavisky enjoys a large base of labor support and, like Espaillat, was endorsed by the governor.

Sen. Shirley Huntley may have the worst time getting relected this year than any other scandal-plagued incumbent. Rumors of misdeeds surrounding her nonprofit have lingered for the past two years — giving a viable challenger a chance to prepare for the race in the **10th State Senate District** seat in Queens.

It didn't hurt Councilman James Sanders chances that Huntley was indicted and arrested earlier this month for committing fraud in a conspiracy to defraud the state, or that The New York Post ran a picture of Huntley in handcuffs on its front page. Huntley should have had a major advantage going into the election, since she was first elected in 2006, has brought home major pork funding to her district and had seniority on a number of committees.

But her arrest has upended all that, leaving her stripped of her committee positions and her reputation further tarnished. Redistricting also altered the district so that it now includes parts of Sanders' council district. Sanders has called on Huntley to step down to deal with her legal troubles. She has pledged to fight the charges.

Rodneyse Bichotte has an uphill battle in her challenge for Assemblywoman Rhoda Jacobs' 42nd State Assembly District seat in Brooklyn. Jacobs was first elected to the Assembly in 1978 — that is a whole lot of incumbency and comes with a whole lot of perks: fundraising know-how, name recognition and the rest.

Bichotte has made inroads with the district's immigrant population, but many insiders are skeptical that the young electrical engineer will be able to topple someone with Jacobs' legacy.

Judicial Contests

Among a handful of noteworthy Democratic primaries for countywide judicial elections, the standout race is in Manhattan for the job of Surrogate Court judge, overseeing sometimes bruising cases involving wills and estates.

The candidates, Barbara Jaffe and Rita Mella, are competing for a 14-year term on the bench. Jaffe is an acting New York State Supreme Court Justice, who has worked on the matrimonial bench. Mella is a county Civil Court judge, a position she won in a general election in 2006.

The New York City Bar Association, which evaluates candidates, has approved both . The Independent Judicial Election Qualification Commission, described as a "network of independent screening panels for judicial candidates," has rated both candidates as "highly qualified."

The New York Times also weighed in on the contest , picking Mella over Jaffe.

"Both contenders are thoughtful and hard-working, and both support court reforms. In a close call, our endorsement goes to Ms. Mella. We are impressed by her solid grasp of the office, excellent people skills and obvious passion for the court's work," the newspaper wrote.

There are also a number of primary elections for 14-year term Civil Court judgeships in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Manhattan.

Party Positions

A group of reform-minded Brooklyn Democrats have mobilized to rival the power of the Kings County Democratic political machine personified only days ago by boss Lopez (until he resigned from the job amidst sexual harassment allegations) .

The reformers are running candidates for unpaid positions within the party structure in a bid to change it from the inside.

District leaders — also known as state committee persons — are unpaid officials elected every two years to represent each state assembly district throughout the city. While the job is rarely talked about except by party insiders, many politicians start their careers as district leaders.

Each district has a male and a female district leader.

One race to watch is in Brooklyn, where District Leader Lincoln Restler, 28, was elected by a slight margin two years ago, and has used his position to rival the Lopez-led establishment. Restler is running for re-election against a Lopez-backed candidate, 65-year-old Chris Olechowski, a Greenpoint activist.

Read the Gazette's coverage of the battle to defeat Brooklyn's political machine.

The position of county committee is sometimes considered a stepping stone for anyone wanting to get involved in the inner workings of local party politics. County committee members are supposed to attend meetings called by the county chair, debate issues on party stances and help to select candidates for higher office.

According to the Grassroots Initiative , a nonprofit that provides information for people considering a run for public office, each election district has two-to-four elected county committee positions. The county committee contains representatives in a county party for about 700-to-1,000 registered voters within an election district. But thousands of these positions are vacant.

The process for running for county committee requires petitioning within the election district. The New Kings Democrats, a Brooklyn political reform club that also backs Restler, has recruited 260 local Brooklynites this year to run for county committee positions, a few of whom will run in contested races.

The polls are open from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. on Thursday. Don't know if you are registered? Call 1-888-VOTE-NYC

Additional Resources

The city's Board of Elections is the go-to spot for information on voter registration and poll sites. They recently updated their website, too. The city's Campaign Finance Board has a comprehensive list

of all the races, plus links to a sample ballot and voter registration lookup.

Good government groups are working to inform voters, too. Citizens Union, the Gazette's sister organization, compiled a voter directory to competitive races . So did The League of Women Voters, which can be found here .

Who Can Vote

If you're a registered Republican, Democrat, Independent or Working Families party member, you can vote. If not, you'll have to wait until the general election. The goal of the primary election is to give party-affiliated voters the opportunity to pick their candidates.

Where to Vote

The polls are located throughout the city, and you can find yours using this handy locator offered by the city's Board of Elections.

___

David Howard King is Gotham Gazette's state government editor in Albany. Additional reporting contributed by Kamelia Kilawan and Cristian Salazar in New York City. Map links courtesy of the Center for Urban Research at the Graduate Center, CUNY.