

Campaign 2003 - Primary Day: Guide to the Last Minute Voter

by Gotham Gazette Staff
Monday, September 08, 2003 12:00 AM



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Like many New Yorkers, Harlem resident Paul Ryneski first learned about this fall's election when City Councilmember James Davis was [shot by a political rival](#) in City Hall in July.

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Since then, Ryneski has been trying to pay attention to his local [City Council race](#) - noting the campaign posters on street corners, reading the newspapers, and saving the Board of Election's postcard with the location of his polling place.

Still he admits that when it comes to issues - things like taxes, education, or housing - he has trouble telling the Democratic candidates apart. "I couldn't really tell if there is a difference between the three candidates [in Harlem]," said Ryneski.

Even for New York's most attentive voters, this year's City Council campaign has been difficult to follow.

There are no races for higher office to generate media attention and half of the 51 incumbent council members have no primary opponent. Even in the competitive races many incumbents have kept a low profile, skipping debates and public forums.

Still, the Primary Election on Tuesday - which will effectively decide 95 percent of City Council races given the overwhelmingly Democratic voters in New York - will have repercussions for the future of the city.

The 51 members of the City Council approve the city's budget and are responsible for tax increases and budget cuts. The council passes the laws governing the city. And council members make decisions that affect their individual neighborhoods - where housing is built, which community organizations are funded, and if a classroom gets computers.

For those voters looking for some help on Primary Day, we offer the following guide:

- â€ˆ [Who Is On the Ballot?](#)
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â€” [How Do I Find Out Who Won?](#)

Who Is On The Ballot?

City Council: All 51 City Council members must run for reelection this year, but there are only 24 primary races on September 9. In the remaining districts, the incumbent is facing no challengers or all of the challengers were already knocked off the ballot.

In New York, which has some of the most complicated election laws in the nation, knocking your opponent off the ballot is a routine aspect of the political game. Dozens of candidates for City Council were eliminated on technicalities. And many more potential challengers did not even bother running, knowing that they would face huge legal bills and hours in court defending their right to run. (Read [Ballot Bumping in New York](#) for more these laws and why candidates were kicked off.)

All of the City Council primary races are for the Democratic party nomination, with the exception of [district 5](#) on the Upper East Side which has a Republican primary.

Judicial Races: There are also a handful of judicial primary races for Civil Court: one in Manhattan, three in Brooklyn, and two in the Bronx. (See a list of candidates running for [Civil Court Judge](#))

No Ballot Questions: There will NOT be any ballot questions on Primary Day, but Mayor Michael Bloomberg's Charter Commission will put several questions on the November 4 ballot, including one that would eliminate party primaries. In addition to nonpartisan elections, the commission will also put two other questions on the ballot dealing with the way the city buys goods and services, and the operations of city government. (For more information on nonpartisan elections, read [It Is Time For Non-Partisan Elections In NYC](#) by Frank J. Macchiarola and [Instead of Non-Partisan Elections, Consider Some Real Reforms](#) by Mark Green.)

Who Is Running In My District?

On Primary Day, some voters will find they live in a different City Council district than the last time they went to the polls.

Since the last local election in 2001, the City Council district lines were redrawn to reflect new census data, and so some voters have new representatives. Those who live on the edge of a district or in a neighborhood that has experienced a large change in ethnic make-up are most likely to see a change. (Read more about the [City Council redistricting](#) and the controversy it generated.)

The best way to find your district is to:

1. Go to Gotham Gazette's [Campaign 2003](#) page.
2. Type in your address.
3. Click "Find It!"
4. Click on the Campaign Button in the top right hand column.

On the district page, you will find a list of candidates running, information about their campaign contributions, candidate biographies, and an archive of news stories from the campaign trail.

There is also information on how each council member voted on the dozen most divisive votes of the last two years - like the 18.5 percent property tax increase, the law that banned smoking in bars and restaurants, and a resolution urging the U.S. not to go to war with Iraq.

What Is At Stake?

While many New Yorkers may not be able to name their City Council member, most have something to say about issues like taxes, trash pick-ups, firehouse closures, or the school system, for which council members are responsible.

One of the City Council's primary responsibilities is approving the city's \$44 billion budget. In the last two years, the City Council has approved increases to the property tax, sales tax, and income tax for the wealthiest New Yorkers. Just a few months ago, the council voted on a [budget](#) that cut 4,000 city workers and closed six firehouses. Next year, the city is expected to have a \$2 billion deficit, which means that more cuts may be needed.

The council is responsible for passing laws that govern the city. This fall, the council is scheduled to consider legislation:

- Requiring gun owners to buy liability insurance
- Ensuring that the city notify residents if a homeless shelter will be built in the neighborhood
- Mandating weekly trash pick-ups
- Requiring landlords to clean up lead dust in apartments.

Council members also fight for funding for local community groups, little league teams, library improvements, and classroom computers.

Which Races Are Competitive?

The most watched race this year has been the campaign to fill the vacant seat of slain City Councilmember James Davis, who was shot in City Hall in July. Davis's brother, Geoffrey Davis, has been selected as the only Democratic nominee and there will be no primary for [district 35](#). Four candidates will face off in the November general election.

But there are some primary races to watch.

In the north Bronx in [district 12](#) , Shirley Saunders, who lost to Larry Seabrook by just 103 votes in 2001, is running again and challenging the record of the incumbent. "I think people have seen Larry Seabrook more over the last three months [campaigning] than they have in all of sixteen years," said Saunders.

In [district 18](#) Soundview and Parkchester, incumbent Councilmember Pedro Espada Jr. has dropped out of the race and handed his seat to his son Pedro G. Espada. He is facing a new challenger, Annabel Palma, who is backed by the Bronx Democratic Party.

In [district 34](#) in Bushwick, Brooklyn, affordable housing has emerged as the number one issue in an area where the waterfront is being developed and trendy neighborhoods have pushed out long time residents. Incumbent City Councilmember Diana Reyna is facing a strong challenge from Juan Martinez, a former community school president.

In [district 45](#) , a nondescript building in East Flatbush could determine the political future of City Councilmember Kendall Stewart. He owns the building and blamed recent violations on his tenants. His challengers say he is not serving the community. "He is a slumlord," said one of his opponents.

For more races, read [A Dozen Races To Watch](#) .

Where Do I Vote?

Registered voters should have received a yellow post card in the mail with the address of their polling place. If you did not, call the Board of Elections at 1-866-VOTE NYC, try the board's poll site locator [web site](#) , or e-mail them at vote@boe.nyc.ny.us with your complete address, and you should receive an email instructing you where to vote.

Polls open at 6:00 a.m. and close at 9:00 p.m. Absentee ballots must be hand-delivered to the Board of Elections by 9:00 p.m.

What If I Encounter Problems At The Polls?

If you have problems at your polling site on Election Day, call the New York Public Interest Research Group Voter Help Line 212-822-0282 to register your complaint.

On their website, the [New York Public Research Interest Group](#) also has a instructions for how to work the [voting machine](#) and a [Voter's Bill of Rights](#), which answers basic questions like "Can I bring someone with me to help vote?" and "Can I still vote if the machine breaks?" (The answer to both questions is "yes.")

How Do I Find Out Who Won?

Television stations and newspapers will cover the City Council races, but some results - like judicial races - are more difficult to find.

Visit Gotham Gazette's [Results Page](#) on election night and the following days. Remember, a close race can take days or weeks to decide.