

Â GENERAL ELECTION CANDIDATES

Incumbent:

[Senator Olga Mendez](#) (Rep/Ind)

Challengers:

Agustin Alamo Estrada (Con)

[JosÃ© M. Serrano](#) (Dem/WF)

PRIMARY ELECTION RESULT: Winner - Jose Serrano (Dem)

PRIMARY CANDIDATES

Agustin Alamo Estrada (Dem/Con)

Nelson A. Denis (Dem)

[JosÃ© M. Serrano](#) (Dem/WF)

CAMPAIGN FEATURE:

Republican and Democratic Feud in East Harlem

Two years ago, after nearly a quarter century representing East Harlem and the South Bronx in the New York State Senate, Democrat Olga Mendez switched parties and became a Republican.

Olga Mendez, who was also one of the first Puerto Rican women ever elected to office in the United States, accused the Democratic party of not doing enough for the Latino community.

"Our needs have not been met," said Olga Mendez. "They haven't, so I do what I gotta do."

Although Olga Mendez argued that the district - where Democrats outnumber Republicans ten to one - would benefit from her move to a rival party, many Democrats were outraged.

State Senate District 28 - East Harlem

by Gotham Gazette Staff

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"Instead of working with the Democratic Party to make things happen, Mendez decided to abandon the party," said Bronx City Councilmember Jose M. Serrano, who is one of three Democratic challengers and a Working Family Party candidate who are hoping to unseat the incumbent and take the State Senate seat back from the Republicans.

Beyond party affiliation, the central issue of the campaign is who can bring the most money back from Albany to the district, which includes neighborhoods in the South Bronx, East Harlem, and Roosevelt Island and struggles with issues of poverty, housing, and health care.

Olga Mendez said she stands on her accomplishments, which include creating jobs in the neighborhood, founding an organization to train small business owners, and lobbying housing developers to increase the number of affordable apartments.

"If we do not build affordable housing, there's only going to be a place for the well to do and the working poor but nothing for the middle class," she said.

Jose M. Serrano, who has the backing of the Bronx Democratic Party and his father Congressman Jose E. Serrano, counters that Democrats must win control of the State Senate in order to help local residents.

"We need to get elected officials who will stand up for reformation of Rockefeller drug laws, who will stand up for increased educational funding," said Jose M. Serrano.

However, two other Democrats - Nelson Denis and Agustin Alamo Estrada - said Jose M. Serrano is not the right candidate to replace Olga Mendez because he is part of the Bronx Democratic machine.

Nelson Denis, who served four years in the State Assembly and also wrote and directed an independent movie satirizing Harlem politics after he was defeated in 2000, said he wants to put an end to the "family fiefdoms" that control Bronx politics.

If elected, Nelson Denis said he would increase bank lending in order to build affordable housing, expand programs for youth, and to bring accountability to Albany.

"At the end of the day, my community, not a bunch of politicians, will turn out on election day," said Nelson Denis.

Likewise, Agustin Alamo Estrada, a retired teacher who has run for various political seats in the past, said that the Democratic Party has "too many entrenched people" and that Olga Mendez "hasn't done anything in 25 years." Estrada said he is most concerned about reducing the cost of health care, eliminating excessive fines for quality of life crimes, and lowering taxes.

"I would refuse to tax the people any more than they are currently taxed," said Agustin Estrada.

One thing all of the candidates agree on is that something must be done to fix the broken system in Albany — where legislators missed their budget deadline for the 20th year in a row, major legislation stalled, and negotiations between the two houses were gridlocked for much of the year.

But Nelson Denis admits it is difficult to change the system. In the four years that he was in office, he was unable to get any of the bills he proposed signed into law. Only legislators who are in favor with the speaker, Denis said, are able to pass bills.

Even the incumbent admits that things must change.

"This year has been the worst," said Olga Mendez, who lays some of the blame on the State Senate's 97 percent incumbent reelection rate.

The 79-year-old state senator, however, believes she is part of the solution, not the problem.

"I'm unorthodox," she said. "When I make political decisions that are difficult, I say its ok, what's the worst that could happen."

But first, she must convince Democratic voters to consider her long history in the district over party affiliation.

CANDIDATE BIOGRAPHIES

Agustin Alamo-Estrada is a retired teacher. He is a community activist, and has run in a number of elections. He graduated from Bronx Community College and Lehman College.

Nelson Antonio Denis represented the 68th Assembly District in the New York State Assembly from 1996-2000. He has also served as member of the local Community Board, and was an editorial writer for El Diaro/La Prensa. Denis was the writer and director of "Vote For Me," a political comedy about East Harlem politics. He received his undergraduate degree in government from Harvard University and his law degree from Yale Law School.

Olga A. Mendez has represented the 28th Senate District in the New York State Senate since 1978, when she became the first Puerto Rican woman to be elected to a State Legislature on the United States mainland. Mendez received her B.S. from the University of Puerto Rico, a Master's Degree in Psychology from the Teacher's College at Columbia University, and a PhD in Educational Psychology from Yeshiva University.

José M. Serrano is currently serving his second term as representative to the New York City Council from the 17th Council District. He is the chair of the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations. He received his B.A. in government from Manhattan College, and worked for the New York Shakespeare Festival.

CAMPAIGN TRAIL

10/26/04

Incumbent candidate state Senator Olga Mendez takes a personal approach to the people of her district, said to be the poorest in New York, from fielding phone calls to giving out hugs. However, this time around, Mendez faces the most formidable challenger in her 26 years in office. Jose Serrano, son of Representative Jose Serrano of the Bronx, is the Democratic

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opponent to the freshly minted Republican. Although Republicans have a slight upper hand in the Senate, Republican incumbents have been facing fierce opposition in this election. Furthermore, this population tends to vote Democratic 10 to 1. Mendez argues that though she switched parties her views remain the same. She insists that her switch has simply granted her more resources, money, and access in a Republican-controlled State Senate. "I've always been a goddamn liberal," she said. (New York Sun)

10/11/04

Beyond the politics, the 28th state Senate district is a series of hardscrabble neighborhoods rich in history and showing signs of bouncing back. It includes the romanticized areas of East Harlem - "Spanish Harlem" in song and "El Barrio" in lore - and the run-down sections of the Bronx around Yankee Stadium. The senator from the district for the past 26 years has been Olga Mendez, 79, the first Puerto Rican woman elected to any state legislature in the mainland United States and the longest serving Puerto Rican official in the country. Shortly after getting re-elected in 2002, the lifelong Democrat switched to the Republican Party, arguing that Democrats had not done enough for her constituents. Two forces have now dovetailed to back Democrat Jose Marco Serrano, 32, a second-term city councilman from the Bronx, against Mendez in next month's general election. Local Democrats bent on revenge have found common ground with statewide Democrats hoping to narrow the seven-seat margin that the Republican majority holds in the Senate. That has put pressure on Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno (R-Brunswick) to show he can protect potential Democratic defectors from retribution on Election Day. ([Newsday](#))

10/5/04

James De La Vega is seeking write-in votes for a State Senate seat in District 28. De La Vega, a street artist known for his murals in Spanish Harlem, is running against Agustin Alamo Estrada, Jose Serrano, and incumbent Olga A. Mendez. De La Vega is set apart from his opponents by his creative campaign tactics, such as his "Become Your Dream" slogan, pensive idealism, and trademark afro-wig and shades attire. De La Vega says he seeks to represent the longtime residents of the district and not just cater to the new money that is coming in and driving prices up. "My biggest fear is once all these people move into the neighborhood, they are not going to worry about the folks who have been here for years." ([NY Times](#))

08/30/04

The New York State League of Conservation Voters has endorsed just one challenger against incumbents from the city, who account for about 40 percent of the 212 members of the State Legislature. Of the 32 city-based races it has taken a position on, Sen. Olga Mendez (R-Manhattan) was the only incumbent who was passed. The group endorsed City Councilman Jose M. Serrano (D-Bronx) over Mendez, a former Democrat whose defection to the Republican Party has prompted a major effort to unseat her. (Newsday)

8/16/04

City Council Member Jose M. Serrano, the son of Rep. Jose Serrano, is seeking to replace Olga Mendez in the state Senate. Ms. Mendez has represented a piece of the South Bronx and East Harlem for years. But she is now considered vulnerable after switching to the Republican Party from the Democratic Party. Before he can take on Ms. Mendez, however, Mr. Serrano must first win his party's nomination against Nelson Denis, a former assemblyman. The younger Mr. Serrano was considered a shoo-in to beat Mr. Denis - until he was drawn into an emerging scandal involving his father. The elder Mr. Serrano was behind the founding and funding of a Puerto Rican cultural group called the House of Artful Expression, which thus far has little to show for the \$1.7 million in public funds that the congressman obtained for it. The group is chaired by Francisco Lugovina, who is a longtime friend of the Serrano family and is the younger Mr. Serrano's godfather. Mr. Lugovina's longtime companion, Noemi Santana, is the executive director. This is now the subject of a federal probe. An angry crowd, apparently organized by Mr. Denis, protested the scandal on Tuesday largely for the benefit of the press, which eagerly lapped it up. The younger Mr. Serrano is discovering the ugly flip side of the politics of inheritance. Those who benefit from their father's name one day may find it a burden the next. (NY Sun)

8/12/04

Olga Mendez has a real challenge to win the election against Jose Serrano for the 28th District after switching partisan groups. Formerly a Democrat, Mendez says she is treated with more respect from Republicans and is now able to obtain more money for district projects by switching to the majority. Serrano said that instead of joining the majority, he wants to cause a shift in the typically Republican senate toward a Democratic majority. The thought is what has led him to run for the seat after three years of being on the City Council. Serrano also noted that even with Mendez's shift, Senate Leader Bruno and Governor Pataki have still made cuts to state aid and social services that affect many living in this district. ([Bronx Times](#))

8/1/04

Pataki's veto of legislation that would raise the state minimum wage to \$7.15 an hour was also a blow to State Senator Olga MÃ©ndez (R-East Harlem, Bronx). The feisty 79-year-old Puerto Rican legislator, a former Democrat, is chairwoman of the Senate Labor Committee. She was instrumental in getting the minimum wage hike passed in the Senate. Not surprisingly, she is deeply disappointed. "Now both Democrats and Conservatives want to destroy me," she said in her trademark raspy voice. "I had sent a letter to the governor asking him to sign the bill, and I am disillusioned he didn't. "I mean, I love the governor, but I thought we should offer some relief to the families of the working poor who, no matter how hard they work, still fall under the federal definition of poverty," she added. MÃ©ndez, however, does not believe all is lost. She is hoping for a veto override, to which Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver is already committed. (Daily News)

7/20/04

In a sign of how fiercely Democratic leaders want their party to regain a State Senate seat, dozens of elected officials came to City Hall yesterday to endorse a Bronx city councilman for the one now held by Olga A. Mendez, the longtime incumbent senator who switched parties to become a Republican two years ago. For months, it has been well known that Councilman Jos  M. Serrano planned to run for the Senate seat representing East Harlem and part of the Bronx. But the formal announcement yesterday on the steps of City Hall was intended as a show of Democratic force in what is expected to be a hard-fought campaign. For the Democrats, the seat is particularly important because they see it as crucial to their strategy to win back the State Senate. While the Republicans now enjoy a 38-to-24 advantage, Democratic leaders say they are well positioned this year to win three of the seven seats needed to regain a Senate majority. (NY Times)

7/13/04

Olga Mendez, who has served in the senate since 1978 and whose district includes parts of the Bronx and Washington Heights as well as her East Harlem base, hasn't submitted a single required campaign filing since September 2002, records reveal. State board of elections officials have hit her campaign with judgments of \$500 apiece—the maximum allowed by law—for each of seven reports never submitted. She has paid one of those judgments so far, a total of \$522 including court costs. Actually, late filing isn't that uncommon among state legislators, who often figure the worst that can happen to them is a mild fine. But in Mendez's case, interviews with campaign donors and records from other committees show that even the reports she did file during the 2002 election year had major gaps, failing to disclose more than \$100,000 in contributions she received from individual givers and political action committees. ([Village Voice](#))

7/07/04

A number of politicians from East Harlem called yesterday for Assemblyman Adam Clayton Powell IV to resign in the wake of rape allegations against him—John Ruiz, a Democratic Party district leader in East Harlem, said yesterday that he was abandoning his candidacy for a State Senate seat to run instead for the Assembly and challenge Mr. Powell. "We're asking that Mr. Powell step down from his seat," Mr. Ruiz said after a news conference in front of the assemblyman's office in East Harlem. "With all the problems he is having right now, he should take time to address those problems. We need a representative who wants to do the job and who will bring integrity to this office." (NY Times)

7/05/04

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Senators were notified late last week to return to the Capitol on [July 19th] for a special session. The betting here is that a range of liberal bills, including a hike in the state minimum wage and expanded rights for migrant farm workers, will be passed. Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno, a one-time conservative, is expected to push for a series of Democrat-backed measures in order to boost GOP chances in two hotly contested New York City Senate races. Bruno, who last year backed the biggest tax hike ever and did a 180-degree turnaround to back a gay-rights bill, is fighting an uphill battle to help Democrat-turned-Republican Sen. Olga Mendez of Manhattan win re-election. ([NY Post](#))

6/22/04

One sign of how squabbling among Democrats might hurt the party's chances can be found in the contest to unseat Ms. Mendez. There are already three Democrats in various stages of unfurling their candidacies. One is Nelson Antonio Denis, a former assemblyman who spent the last two years working on an independent film. Another is John Ruiz, a district leader and firefighter. And there is also Jos  Marco Serrano, a city councilman who represents parts of the Bronx and is the son of Congressman Jos  Serrano. Mr. Paterson and other Democrats say they fear the impact of an expensive race fought along geographic lines. After the 2000 census, the district represented by Ms. Mendez changed from an exclusively northern Manhattan district to one with nearly 60 percent of its residents in the Bronx. That has set the stage for some intense Bronx-East Harlem rivalry between Mr. Serrano, who is from the Bronx, and the other candidates, who live in Manhattan. (NY Times)

6/10/04

At a May 18th meeting of Community Board 11, Robert Gary Stopper allegedly directed homophobic remarks at City Councilmember Phil Reed. A letter written by Geoffrey Eaton, Reed's chief of staff, said that Stopper is a "high level person in the John Ruiz for State Senate Campaign," and condemned Ruiz for being present at the meeting and doing nothing when the remark was made. Ruiz, in turn, defended Stopper and downplayed his role in the campaign. Further, he said that he had filed a complaint with the Manhattan District Attorney, saying that Eaton had broken the law by falsely accusing him of homophobia on official City Council stationery. ([Gay City News](#))

5/29/04

Former State Assemblyman Nelson Antonio Denis declared his candidacy for State Senate on Thursday, April 22, 2004. He declared in typical Nelson Denis fashion, at the Yorkville Democratic club at 225 East 93rd Street. The club endorsed Mr. Denis by an overwhelming vote over Jose Serrano Jr., from the Bronx, and East Harlem District Leader and former fireman John Ruiz. ([EastHarlem.com](#))

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5/27/04

City Council Member Jose Serrano Jr. has agreed to run against Olga Mendez in the Senate district that covers the South Bronx and East Harlem. Ms. Mendez is a former Democrat who switched to the Republican Party when she endorsed Governor Pataki in 2002. She has become an endangered species. Bronx Democrats have already unified behind Mr. Serrano's candidacy, including the borough president, Aldolfo Carrion; a former borough president, Fernando Ferrer; county leader Jose Rivera, and Mr. Serrano's father, Rep. Jose Serrano. The younger Serrano does not have to give up his council seat to run. (NY Sun)

5/27/04

Any lingering hopes among Democrats that state Senator Olga Mendez would quietly retire this year were dashed yesterday, when she announced her re-election bid. A Democrat for most of her 26 years in office, Ms. Mendez recently switched to the GOP, spurring hopes among Manhattan and Bronx Democrats that they might recapture her district, which includes the heavily Democratic neighborhoods of East Harlem, Roosevelt Island, and parts of the Bronx. One theory making the rounds was that Ms. Mendez, 79, only switched to the Republican Party last year in order to give her salary a final boost, as a member of the Senate majority, before retiring this year. That thinking turns out to be wrong. (NY Sun)

5/27/04

Bronx Democrats are likely to endorse City Councilman Jose Serrano (D-South Bronx) in the Democratic primary for the Bronx-Upper Manhattan state Senate seat now held by Republican Olga Mendez. ([Daily News](#))

5/15/04

Former Democratic District Leader and Community School Board # 4 member, Felix Rosado has decided to run for State Senate. He will join former fire fighter and current District Leader, John Ruiz, and former State Assemblyman, Nelson Denis in seeking to win the September 2004 Democratic Primary. ([EastHarlem.com](#))

5/11/04

Forget about President Bush. The Republican local Democrats want most to get rid of this November is state Sen. Olga Mendez of East Harlem, the longest-serving Puerto Rican legislator in the country. ([Daily News](#))

12/4/02

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Saying that the Democratic Party has taken Latino voters for granted for decades, state Sen. Olga Mendez jumped yesterday to the GOP side of the aisle. ([Daily News](#))

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