

The First Campaign Finance Reports; Also, Preview Of 2006

by Susan Reefer

Monday, January 24, 2005 12:00 AM

We are now in 2005, a local election year in New York City, and one that promises to be a busy one, with a noisy and expensive mayoral primary coming in September, and several open races: There are already nine candidates, for example, for the open seat for Manhattan borough president (The current occupant, C. Virginia Fields, is ineligible to run for re-election because of the term limits law, and is instead a candidate for mayor). January is usually the month in a city election year when the rumors and speculation and huffy bravado begin with particular intensity, making it difficult to discern which challengers really have a chance in a town whose electoral process still so decisively favors incumbents.

This month, the candidates for city office have released their first real campaign finance reports, detailing financial activity over the past six months, and political observers traditionally have used these first reports as an indicator of who is really in the race -- and who is in denial.

The mayor's race

The current mayor, Republican Michael Bloomberg, is seeking re-election to a second term. There is no shortage of those who would like the chance to challenge him on the Democratic ticket.

In assessing who has a realistic chance by looking at their fundraising activity, there are two numbers in the campaign finance reports that are useful. The first is the total raised in the most recent period, the past six months, which tells you what sort of momentum the candidate is displaying, and the speed with which he or she can put together the big dollars. The second number is the amount the candidate has actually sitting in their bank account, also known as cash on hand, which shows the fiscal strength of the campaign, how good of a job they have done at hanging on to the money they have raised so far, and how well they have been able to sustain their support over a longer period of time

The first number is interesting, and the second number is ultimately more important in predicting the ability of a candidate to be fully funded.

In this most recent period, Fernando Ferrer raised the most money, \$1.2 million. The former Bronx Borough President, who has run for mayor twice before, is often seen in published polls to have a lead over Bloomberg, although the most recent poll showed the two candidates in a statistical tie. The numbers showing him in the lead during the past six months no doubt greatly

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contributed to his fundraising success. One of the problems with relying heavily on polling data to demonstrate your viability is the fact that polling data can change. If they do, Ferrer may find it a challenge to dismiss as unreliable the numbers that he once used to scoop up checks.

Ferrer was closely trailed in his fundraising efforts by City Council Speaker Gifford Miller and Congressman Anthony Weiner, each of whom raised about one million dollars to add to their war chests.

Although Ferrer pulled ahead in dollars raised during this period, he trails Miller in cash on hand. Miller has \$4.3 million in the bank, while Ferrer has slightly more than half that amount. Weiner, even after transferring money from his federal campaign account, falls even further behind.

Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields raised significantly less than these three. She brought in \$215,000 over the past six months, and has raised a total of just over a million dollars so far.

Ultimately, all four candidates will likely qualify for the city's matching funds, which provide additional funds to candidates up to a maximum threshold. In effect, all of them will probably be on equal footing when it comes to dollars available to be spent.

But it doesn't feel equal to the candidates themselves, who have a short amount of time to prove themselves to city Democrats, which is why they conventionally use this first show of financial strength as a way of convincing the party establishment of their viability.

One bracing fact, though, should serve as a warning: During the last mayoral election, the candidate who started out with the most money, Alan Hevesi, wound up eight months later getting the least votes in the primary.

Manhattan District Attorney

In most of his last eight elections, long-time Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau, now 85 years old, has received the endorsement of both the Republican and Democratic parties

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without any primary challenge. This year, from the look of the campaign finance reports, he is going to have a real challenger for a change.

Leslie Crocker Snyder, a former State Supreme Court justice, has raised \$890,000 over the past year and \$340,000 in the last six months. This is a sizeable sum, considering she has never run for office before and she is seeking to challenge a man who has been in the office for half her life.

But Morgenthau is not going anywhere yet, and by no means gently. He has raised over a million dollars and has been courting political endorsements.

One of the biggest challenges both will face is not taking on each other, but making their voices heard over the din that will be the other contested Democratic primary elections.

Snyder and Morgenthau will have to be fully-funded and creative to get the attention of overloaded primary voters in the waning days of summer.

Preview of 2006

Several races are already taking shape for the 2006 election cycle, with New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer announcing a run for governor, and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. publicly mulling an interest in trying to succeed Spitzer as Attorney General. Kennedy's brother-in-law, Andrew Cuomo, has also expressed an interest in the seat.

There has also occurred the equivalent of a leap-year eclipse: an open seat in the House of Representatives representing New York City.

One of the 13 members of the Congressional delegation from New York, Major Owens from the 11th Congressional district in Brooklyn, has announced that his latest two-year term, his 11th term in office, will be his last. The jockeying to replace him at the end of 2006 is already well under way.

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His son, Chris Owens, recently announced his intention to run. But the Crown Heights resident isn't going to get a clear shot at the Democratic nomination. An open Congressional seat is too good a treat to pass up, especially in New York where Democratic machines and a cost prohibitive media market make it especially tough for challengers.

Chris Owens can expect to face a number of rivals, including two who took on his father in what they hoped would be a pre-emptive strike during the 2004 campaign. City Councilmembers Yvette D. Clarke and Tracy L. Boyland both ran unsuccessfully last year, and both are being mentioned as probable candidates to run again. And there are others.

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