by Mark Berkey-Gerard
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How do you make your decisions on Election Day?

Do you watch candidate debates and consider their positions on issues such as education, health care and housing -- or choose based on name recognition, ethnic pride, or "intuition"?

Do you read newspaper editorials, watch television ads, read campaign literature, listen to recommendations from your union, your sister, a friend?

Or, like most New Yorkers, do you not vote at all?

For those New Yorkers who plan to vote but still have many questions about this year's local election, Gotham Gazette offers the following guide to Primary Day, September 13, 2005. And on the night of the primary and in the days after, see Gotham Gazette's Election Results .

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WHO IS RUNNING?

Mayor

Six Democrats are running for mayor this year. The four major candidates are Former Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields, City Council Speaker Gifford Miller, and U.S. Rep. Anthony Weiner. Two less-known candidates - Christopher Brodeur and Arthur Piccolo - are also running. (Click here to learn more about the candidates running for mayor.)

Although Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg is seeking reelection, he does not face a primary because he was successful in knocking his Republican challenger Thomas Ognibene off the ballot.

Public Advocate

The public advocate is the second-highest official in the city, a "watchdog" over the mayor and the rest of city government. This year, five Democrats are challenging incumbent Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum. Gotbaum's critics not only question the incumbent's record, but what public advocate is, what it should be, and if the job should exist at all. (Click here to learn more about the race.)

Manhattan Borough President

One of the most crowded races this year is for Manhattan Borough President, a position with little real power, but one that many politicians are still seeking. Nine Democrats are vying for the borough president seat in Manhattan. (Read more about the race.) However, there are NO party primaries for Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, or Staten Island Borough President.

City Council

Although all 51 City Council members must run for reelection this year, there are only 25 primary races on September 13 - all of them for the Democratic nomination. In the other 26 races the incumbent's name won't appear on the ballot until the General Election.

The most competitive races are for six open seats in which the incumbent must leave office because of term limits. (Click here for articles on the open seats and other competitive races.)

Manhattan District Attorney

Robert Morgenthau, at the age of 86, is seeking his ninth term as Manhattan's chief prosecutor. Former State Supreme Court Judge Leslie Crocker Snyder is trying to unseat him. (Click here to about the race.)

Brooklyn District Attorney

Current Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes faces three Democratic challengers this year - Arnie Kriss, Mark Peters, and John Sampson - who say Hynes has not done enough to root out corruption. (Click here to learn more about the race.)

Surrogate's Court

Surrogate's Court Judges oversee wills and estates and also consider adoptions in New York City. Earlier this year, Brooklyn Surrogate's Michael Feinberg was kicked off the bench for corruption, and three Democrats are now seeking the Brooklyn seat . In Manhattan , a sitting Surrogate's Court Judge has reached the mandatory retirement age of 70, so two Democrats are seeking that seat.

Civil Court Judge

In Brooklyn, voters will have a chance to vote in a Democratic primary for Civil Court judge. One countywide seat and two seats in district 3 and 6 are vacant.

Political Party Positions

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For many voters, the most confusing thing on Primary Election ballot is the long lists of candidates running for obscure political party positions. This year, Democrats and Republicans will be asked to vote for male and female district leaders, state committee members, and delegates to judicial conventions.

These are positions within the parties.

District leaders are chosen to head up the local party within an assembly district. They serve as a liaison to the political clubs and ensure that the party structure is operating on a local level. In Brooklyn, Democratic district leaders elect the powerful county leader and hire the paid inspectors that control polling sites on Election Day.

State committee representatives report to the State Democratic Party of New York and vote on party matters.

And judicial convention delegates are a group of party loyalists who attend a convention to approve candidates for judicial elections. However, these conventions are often just a formality, since the party leaders nominate the candidates they want. (Find out more about judgeships and judicial conventions in the Judges Game .)

It is difficult to find out any information about these candidates. Few of them actively campaign and information varies from district to district. Some local political clubs can give you information (although they will likely promote specific candidates.) The Board of Elections also has a full list of the people running (in .pdf format).

WHO IS RUNNING IN YOUR CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT?

To find who is running in your City Council district:

1. Go to Gotham Gazette's Campaign 2005 section
2. Go to "Find Your District" on the right hand side of the page.
3. Type in your address and zip code.

4. Click "Go."

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.

You can also click on the link to the Campaign Finance Board's Voter Guide located on each district page for more information about the people running in your neighborhood.

WHICH CITY COUNCIL RACES ARE COMPETITIVE?

In New York City it is difficult to unseat an incumbent City Council member. They generally have more campaign contributions, more political support from clubs and unions, and better name recognition. Many do not even face opponents this year. For example, Councilmember Simcha Felder is running as a Democrat, Republican and Conservative in district 44. In Queens district 27, Leroy Comrie will appear on four party lines: Democrat, Republican, Independent, and Working Families.

However, there are seven open seats where the incumbent is leaving office this year.

On the Upper East Side, City Councilmember Eva Moskowitz is leaving her district 4 seat to run for Borough President, and four Democrats are hoping to succeed her.

In East Harlem, an actor, a former firefighter, a TV broadcaster, a union leader, and the head of a charter school are running for the district 8 seat where Phil Reed is barred from running again because of term limits.

In Central Brooklyn , 64-year-old former State Assemblymember William Boyland Sr. is coming out of retirement to try to keep the seat his daughter is vacating in the family. Nine Democrats are challenging the Boyland dynasty.

One of the most bizarre races is in Richmond Hill, Queens, where three Democrats are trying to unseat district 28 City Councilmember Allan Jennings, who was charged with sexually harassing his female employees. However, several of the challengers have also problematic backgrounds: one faces charges of corruption and another has been accused of physically assaulting another candidate.

For more competitive City Council races, see Campaign 2005 .

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The mayor and other officials who are elected to run the city government for the next four years face significant challenges.

On education: New York City has 1.1 million school children, but only about half graduate on time.

On housing: Nearly a quarter of renters pay more than 50 percent of their incomes for housing. And the city also has a record number of homeless people, about 35,000 people in the city's shelters, 25 percent more than four years ago.

And on transportation: The last new subway line opened in New York City nearly 65 years ago.

To highlight some of these issues that are - or are not - being discussed in the campaign, Gotham Gazette did a series of articles on the challenges facing the city over the next four years. Several of them also explain candidates' views or track record on the issue. Read our Campaign 2005 articles on:

- Arts
- Civil Rights
- Crime
- Education
- Environment
- Finance

- Health
- Housing
- Immigrants
- Land Use
- Social Services
  - Transportation
- Voting
- Waterfront

WHAT ARE THE MAYORAL CANDIDATES SAYING?

In the race for mayor, the four major Democratic candidates - Fernando Ferrer, C. Virginia Fields, Gifford Miller, and Anthony Weiner - are challenging Mayor Michael Bloomberg's record and trying to convince voters that it is time for a change.

But how do they really differ on the issues? And how do their plans compare with the mayor's?

With Gotham Gazette's Mayoral Issue Grid , voters can compare the candidate's agenda on more than a dozen issues, including civil rights, education, housing, immigration, and transportation.

Those who want even more details on a specific topic can read the transcripts of debates and forums where candidates answered questions about poverty, parks, budget and taxes, gay and lesbian issues, and historic landmarks. (Click here for a complete list of debate transcripts.)

HOW DO VOTERS CHOOSE A CANDIDATE?

The question of how voters make their decisions is as old as democracy itself. Political scientists study voter behavior; pollsters try to predict it; and political consultants charge thousands of dollars for their experience.

But most experts agree that the most effective way to reach a voter is through personal contact by someone who is known or trusted by the voter.

"The degree to which voters think a candidate understands and responds to them are every bit as important as issues, " said John Mollenkopf, professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Political science professors and consultants say that in some cases television ads or campaign literature can also be valuable tools in reaching voters, gaining name recognition, and getting a message out to large numbers of people.

Debates can be a helpful way to see a candidate respond to questions or criticism, but not many voters actually watch them.

The reality is that most New Yorkers don't vote . In 2001, only 15 percent of all New Yorkers eligible to vote made Michael Bloomberg the mayor in 2001. And many City Council races draw just a few thousand voters out of the 150,000 people represented in each district.

WHO IS ENDORSING WHOM?

Some voters take their cues from others - unions, newspapers, civic organizations, or politicians - who choose to endorse certain candidates.

Some endorsements matter more than others.

"Union endorsements have a significant impact on what members do, less on their families and others," said Mollenkopf. "Newspaper editorials mostly help when they confirm what someone is thinking of doing anyway,"

See Gotham Gazette's Endorsement Grid .

ARE YOUR ELIGIBLE TO VOTE?

New Yorkers must be registered with either the Democratic or Republican party to vote in the

September 13 primary of your party. If you did not register by the August 19 deadline, you are not eligible to vote.

WHERE DO YOU VOTE?

Registered voters should receive an orange post card in the mail with the address of their polling place. If you did not, try the Board of Elections' online poll site locator, which is new this year. You can also try calling the Board of Elections at 1-866-VOTE NYC.

Polls open at 6:00 a.m. and close at 9:00 p.m.

On their website, the Board of Elections also has instructions for how to work the voting machine.

Absentee ballot applications can be obtained calling the Board of Elections at 1-866-VOTE-NYC, e-mailing a request to vote@boe.nyc.ny.us .

Those who wish to vote by absentee ballot have two choices:

- Deliver by mail: To be counted, an absentee ballot must be postmarked by the day before Primary Day, September 12 and must reach the Board of Elections no more than seven days after the election. - Deliver in person: You can drop off an absentee ballot at one of the Board of Elections borough offices by 9:00 p.m. on Primary Day.

WHAT ARE YOUR VOTING RIGHTS?

The New York Voter's Bill of Rights guarantees the right to:

Vote: The right to vote includes voting for candidates and questions on the ballot.

Have Your Vote Count: Vote on a voting system that is in working condition and that will allow votes to be accurately counted.

Secrecy in Voting: Secrecy in voting will be preserved for all elections.

Freedom in Voting: Cast your vote, free from coercion or intimidation by poll workers or any other person.

Permanent Registration: Once registered to vote, you will continue to remain qualified to vote from an address within your county or city.

Accessible Elections: Non-discriminatory equal access to the election system for all voters, including the elderly, disabled, alternative language minorities, military and overseas citizens, as required by federal and state laws.

Assistance in Voting: You may ask for help in voting because of blindness, disability, or inability to read or write.

Instructions in Voting: You can view a sample ballot in this polling place prior to voting, and before entering the machine, you may request help in how to operate the machine.

Absentee Voting: If you will be out of your county of residence on Election Day, or are unable to go to your polling place due to illness or physical disability, you may cast an absentee ballot.

Affidavit Voting: Whenever your name does not appear in the official poll book, you will be offered an affidavit ballot.

WHAT DO FIRST TIME VOTERS NEED TO KNOW?

New voting regulations may cause confusion at the polls.

New Yorkers who registered to vote for the first time via mail after January 1, 2003, may be asked to provide identification, such as a driver's license, when they go to the polls.

Those without a driver's license can also offer a copy of one of the following:

- a valid photo ID
- a current utility bill
- a bank statement
- a government check or other government document that shows the voter's name and address.

Those who don't have any form of identification or refuse to supply one will be allowed to vote on paper ballot, not in the machines, according to the Board of Elections. Those votes will be counted if they are verified to match registration forms.

The new rule is part of the federal Help America Vote Act, which Congress passed after the turmoil in Florida during the 2000 presidential election.

WHAT IF YOU ENCOUNTER PROBLEMS AT THE POLLS?

If a poll worker says you are not on the list, ask an inspector to verify that you are at the correct Election and Assembly District for your address. If you believe that you are eligible to vote, you can ask for a paper or affidavit ballot. After the election, the Board of Elections will check its records and your vote will be counted if you are deemed eligible to vote and were at the correct polling site.

The Board of Elections says that it has increased efforts to make polling places accessible for senior citizens and handicapped voters, but they admit that there are still problems at some

sites. Voters who feel that their polling site is inaccessible should call the Voter Registration Unit of their local borough office for information.

If you encounter problems at the polls, call one of the following places:

- League of Women Voters Election Day Hotline: 212-725-3541
- New York Public Interest Research Group: 212-822-0282
- New York Civil Liberties Union: 212-344-3005

For assistance in Chinese, Korean, Tagalog, Hindi, Khmer and English, call the Asian American Legal Defense Fund
at 800-966-5946.

HOW DO YOU FIND OUT WHO WON?

On the night of the Primary Election and in the days after, visit Gotham Gazette's Election Results .

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