

NY Times Endorses Charles Hynes

by Gotham Gazette Staff
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For Cleaner Courts in Brooklyn

Two critical contests on the Sept. 13 Democratic primary ballot in Brooklyn -- for district attorney and for a Surrogate's Court judgeship -- offer voters a chance to register their disgust with the cozy clubhouse-courthouse ties that lie at the heart of the borough's judicial patronage and corruption scandal, and the undue influence of Clarence Norman's local Democratic machine. Together, these races amount to a referendum on cleaning up the local political and justice system.

District Attorney

In the district attorney's race, Charles Hynes, the 16-year incumbent, is vying for a fifth four-year term against Arnold Kriss, a former assistant district attorney and police department lawyer now in private law practice; Mark Peters, a private attorney who gained prosecutorial experience in the state attorney general's office; and John Sampson, an undistinguished incumbent state senator who is closely aligned with Mr. Norman.

Mr. Kriss and Mr. Peters have some good ideas for improving the workings of the district attorney's office, and much of their criticism of Mr. Hynes rings true. There is no question, for example, that Mr. Hynes would do well to drop his law school teaching gigs and focus on training young attorneys in his office. And a bad taste lingers from his decision, some years ago, to give a high-paying job to former Borough President Howard Golden.

But Mr. Hynes's innovative view of crime-fighting has led to effective programs that offer appropriate defendants drug treatment instead of prison, provide services to victims of domestic violence and help former inmates re-enter society. His newfound interest in investigating the way judicial nominations are awarded by the Democratic clubhouse is praiseworthy, even if belated.

He is also the only candidate who stands a realistic chance of defeating Mr. Sampson's

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empty-suit candidacy. Voters should see the Sampson campaign for what it is: an audacious attempt by the Democratic machine to derail Mr. Hynes's continuing political corruption investigation. With that in mind, we endorse Mr. Hynes for one final, legacy-enhancing term.

Surrogate's Court

There are two Surrogate's Court seats to be filled this fall in Brooklyn. But voters in the Sept. 13 primary have been granted a say in filling only one -- the vacancy created in June when the state's highest court, the Court of Appeals, took the rare step of removing Surrogate Michael Feinberg, a Democratic clubhouse stalwart, for doling out excessive fees to the crony he appointed to deal with the estates of those who died without leaving a will. In a disgraceful backroom deal, Albany recently created a second judgeship and timed it so that party regulars, not voters, would get to choose the candidate who will appear on the sure-to-win Democratic line in November.

These shenanigans make it all the more important to choose a candidate of proven independence from those who have long treated the Surrogate's Court as their personal cookie jar. Of the three candidates, only one fits the bill -- Margarita Lopez Torres. A veteran Civil Court judge, Ms. Torres would start on Day 1 of her tenure to reorganize the court to serve the people as it is meant to.

Her rivals in the race, Supreme Court Justices Diana Johnson and Lawrence Knipel, are smart, competent and pledge reform. But their close ties to the clubhouse do not bode well for achieving the necessary clean break. We enthusiastically endorse Ms. Lopez Torres.

Civil Court

Brooklyn is also the site of this year's only contested races for New York Civil Court.

For the boroughwide opening, we endorse Sylvia Ash, a quietly impressive attorney, over Norma Jennings, a court attorney for an incumbent Civil Court judge, and Sandra Roper, a local lawyer with a checkered ethics record who ran unsuccessfully for Brooklyn district attorney four years ago.

For the Civil Court opening in District 3 (covering Williamsburg and Greenpoint, and parts of Fort Greene and Bushwick), we recommend Martin Needleman, a respected legal services

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attorney with a caring manner and a wealth of legal knowledge, over Richard Velasquez, a lawyer with a local community program. Mr. Velasquez did not return our repeated phone calls inviting him for an interview.

In the three-way Civil Court race in District 6 (covering Flatbush, Park Slope, Prospect Heights, Prospect-Lefferts, Midwood and parts of Crown Heights) we endorse Ingrid Joseph. Her two opponents, Michael Gerstein, a reform-minded lawyer in private practice, and Cynthia Boyce, an attorney and mediator running with Mr. Norman's backing, might make good judges. But as the principal law secretary to a Supreme Court judge, Ms. Joseph has proved her readiness for the bench.

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