

## Guide for the Last Minute (Primary) Voter

by Gotham Gazette Staff

Tuesday, September 08, 2009 12:00 AM

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Only 18 months ago, Sept. 15, 2009 was shaping up to be a big day in New York City politics. Hundreds of thousands of New York City Democrats would go to the polls to choose between a slew of politicians and maybe even a rich businessperson or two to determine who would be the party's nominee for mayor. It would be a high point in a race sure to be spirited, expensive and maybe vicious.



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At the same time in communities across the city, voters would choose new members of the City Council as the first class of term-limited officeholders prepared to return to private life or find something else to run for.

That, of course, will not happen. Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the City Council dashed the hopes of many city political junkies when they decided last year to give themselves an [additional four-year term](#)

. Several likely mayoral candidates opted to hold on to their less-lofty posts for now. Meanwhile, a number of City Council hopefuls put their plans on hold for four years, figuring they would face better odds in going for an open seat than squaring off against an incumbent.

A number of other politicians and aspiring politicians, though, decided to stick to their plans to seek higher office or challenge an incumbent. As a result, while Sept. 15 may not offer the [free-for-all](#)

some had anticipated, it does feature a number of closely fought contests and interesting candidates.

In citywide office, a scaled down field of candidates will vie for the Democratic nomination for mayor. Brushing aside the extension of term limits, [Public Advocate](#) Betsy Gotbaum and [City Comptroller](#)

William Thompson both are vacating their posts (he to [run for mayor](#)

), spurring spirited Democratic primary contests.

Council members seeking to move up left seven vacancies in their wake, and all feature competitive Democratic primaries. In addition -- unusually for New York -- a number of incumbents seem vulnerable, some because of their vote to override two voter referenda and extend term limits. Others are facing a tough challenge since being linked to alleged improprieties and a few because of their actions as members of the City Council

Add to this party offices, a district attorney race in Manhattan and other odds and ends and many New York Democrats, and even a few Republicans, have good reason to go to the polls on Sept. 15.

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### **Researching the Races**

To guide you through the election thicket, Gotham Gazette's [Who's Running for What](#) provides you with a list of all candidates running for office, what post they are seeking, how much money they have raised and other key information, as well as links to election coverage in other publications. Search by office, incumbent or candidate to find the campaign that interests you.

Along with this, we have updated our City Council district pages, linking them to Who's Running for What (and visa versa), which offer current contact information, demographics data and more.

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To get started, go to our [list of districts](#) . The Board of Elections' [poll site finder](#) will tell you which district you live in.

Gotham Gazette reporters have produced original stories on some of this year's key contests. We will be providing additional articles up to the day of the primary. (See the list of stories at the right or go to [Campaign Coverage](#) .)

The Campaign Finance Board's [Primary Election Voter Guide](#) offers candidate lists by district, biographical information and candidates' answers to a few standard questions as well as voter information.

WNBC, the Campaign Finance Board and the Voter Assistance Commission have assembled a [Video Voter Guide](#)

where candidates present brief comments on their candidacies.

### [Boro Politics](#)

, presented by Community Newspaper Group, presents reporting from the local newspapers owned by Rupert Murdoch as well as debates from a number of council districts. The Daily News offers campaign coverage at its

### [Brawl for the Hall](#)

blog.

For a complete list of all the contests, see the Board of Elections [information](#) on the 2009 primary.

## Who Can Vote

Like all primaries in New York State, next Tuesday's election is open only to registered members of a party in which there is a primary contest. In New York City, this means mostly Democrats.

There is one district where any registered voter, regardless of party affiliation or lack thereof, can cast a ballot: the 38th Assembly District in Queens. On primary day, that part of Queens will hold a special election for all voters to fill the Assembly seat left vacant by the resignation of Anthony Seminerio. (For more on that contest, see "Filling a Vacancy" below.)

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Since there are contested primaries for the three citywide offices, every registered New York City Democrat can vote.

Unusually this year, there are two Republican City Council primaries, one in Brooklyn and one in Manhattan (for more information, see "Council Candidates," below). Some Republicans in Brooklyn and Queens also can vote for people to fill party posts, such as members of the county committee and delegates to judicial elections.

Republicans in the Bronx and Staten Island along with independents and members of the Green, Working Families, Conservative, Right to Life and other smaller parties who live anywhere other than the 38th Assembly District can spend Sept. 15 at the beach without shirking their civic responsibility.

For information on registration, see [How to Vote](#) below.

### City and Borough Offices

Topping the ticket for the Democrats is the mayoral primary. The once crowded field has essentially come down to two contenders: City Comptroller [William Thompson Jr.](#) and Queens City Councilmember

[Tony Avella](#)

. As of the Sept. 4 filing deadline, Thompson had raised \$5.5 million in private funds, compared to a bit over \$290,000 for Avella. Neither candidate had received any public matching money.

Thompson has emerged as the candidate of the Democratic establishment with backing from a number of members of Congress, former Mayor David Dinkins, the Working Families Party, and some unions, including DC 37, which is the city's largest municipal employee union, and the Transport Workers Union. Some Democrats have stayed out of the race or signed up with Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who will run as a Republican and an Independence Party candidate this year.

Few, if any, have endorsed Avella, but that does not seem to phase the council member. A frequent critic of real estate development in the city who often bucks the leadership in the

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council, he is styling himself as a fierce independent who will represent average working New Yorkers. Polls show Thompson with a substantial lead in the primary.

The winner will face Bloomberg and several candidates from smaller parties in November.

Democrats also will select their nominees for public advocate and comptroller. Four candidates are vying for each post. If no one gets 40 percent on Sept. 15, a runoff between the top two vote-getters will take place two weeks later.

The city's five borough presidents are all up for re-election. Three -- Brooklyn's Marty Markowitz, [Helen Marshall](#) of Queens and James Molinaro of Staten Island -- would have been pushed out by term limits this year. Once the extension was approved, they all decided to try and stick around for the next four years. The other two -- Manhattan's Scott Stringer and Ruben Diaz Jr. of the Bronx, who was elected early this year -- are also seeking re-election.

Only Marshall, a onetime member of the City Council, who was first elected borough president in 2001, faces a primary challenge. Her opponent, [Mark Leavitt](#), is a lawyer and civic activist who has also performed with local arts groups. His [platform](#) sets out a number of issues, including creating a more activist borough presidency, protecting and improving Queens' many "main streets," promoting more parent involvement in schools and working to give community concerns a greater role in development decisions.

As of the Sept. 4, reporting date, Marshall had raised \$178,061 in private funds, compared to \$140,536 for Leavitt. But Marshall had not received any public matching funds, while Leavitt had almost \$285,000.

In Manhattan, three Democrats have squared off in a closely fought contest to replace long-time District Attorney Robert Morgenthau, who decided not to seek re-election this year. The winner of the primary gets the job since there are no candidates from other parties. For more, see [The Race to Fill Morgenthau's Shoes](#)

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Kings County District Attorney Charles Hynes' term expires this year as well. In contrast to 2005, when he faced a crowded field of challengers, Hynes is unopposed this year. The other three district attorneys do not have to face the voters until 2011.

### Council Contests

After the ballot bumping and the petition challenges, Democratic primaries will take place in 32 of the city's 51 City Council districts, according to the most recent candidate list from the Board of Elections. Democrats will choose their party's candidate to replace Councilmember Eric Gioia, Melinda Katz, John Liu, David Weprin and Tony Avella in Queens and Councilmembers Bill de Blasio and David Yassky in Brooklyn, all of whom decided to seek citywide office. Another seat, this one in upper Manhattan, was left open earlier this summer when incumbent Miguel Martinez [pleaded guilty](#) to federal felony charges.

Experts see several other incumbents as facing tough challenges this year, evidenced by endorsements, fund raising and the presence of strong opponents. A couple -- Larry Seabrook in the Bronx and Kendall Stewart in Brooklyn -- have been tarnished by the City Council [slush fund scandal](#), though neither has been charged with any wrongdoing. Some, such as [Alan Gerson](#) in Manhattan, may be vulnerable partly because they voted to extend term limits. Others are viewed by some in their districts as [ineffective](#) or have fallen out of favor with political powers.

Many of the incumbents will almost certainly [coast](#) to an easy victory -- as incumbents tend to do in New York. Whether [limits](#) [anger over term](#) -- and a general desire for political change -- will make this a tougher year than usual for those already in office, only the election returns will tell.

Unusually this year, there are a few scattered Republican contests. In [District 4](#) on Manhattan's East Side, [Ash ok Chandra](#), a lawyer who works on new products for Bloomberg LP, and real estate expert [Neil D'Alessi](#) are vying for the chance to face incumbent Democrat [Daniel Gardonick](#) in November.

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The other Republican primary is for the seat from [District 39](#) in Brooklyn [now occupied](#) by [Bill de Blasio](#), who is running for [public advocate](#). Joseph Nardiello and [George Smith](#) are competing to see who will face the winner of the Democratic primary.

### Filling a Vacancy

In an event that has become almost commonplace, voters in Queens have to fill a seat left vacant because the incumbent is a felon. In the case of the [38th district](#), which includes Woodhaven, Richmond Hill, Ozone Park, Glendale, Maspeth, Ridgewood, Middle Village, State Assemblymember Anthony Seminerio pleaded guilty to bribery charges, leaving the seat wide open.

The election will come after weeks of maneuvering during which Gov. David Paterson [called the election](#) for Sept. 15, canceled that decision and then decided to go ahead with the contest after all. By calling the election for Sept. 15, instead of November, there will be no primary for the seat. Five Democrats, including Michael Miller, attorney Albert Baldeo and Afghan war veteran Farouk Samaroo, had been [gearing up](#) for the primary.

Instead three Democratic Party leaders [selected](#) their nominee, Miller. This prompted Samaroo to [go to court](#) in an unsuccessful effort to stop the election.

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Barring any last minute surprises, [Miller](#), a Glendale resident and member of Community Board 5 who will appear on the Democratic, Conservative and Independence party lines, will face Republican and civic activist [Donna Marie Caltabiano](#).

### Other Offices

Sept. 15 features one judicial contest -- for Civil Court judge in Manhattan's Third Municipal district. [Lynn Kotler](#), a lawyer with a private litigation practice, and Anna R. Lewis, a former law clerk and onetime Democratic district leader, will face off in a Democratic primary for the seat.

Kotler, who has the backing of much of the party's establishment, originally [got Lewis removed from the ballot](#) for not having enough valid signatures on her petitions. The incident sparked [controversy](#) because the official at the Board of Elections in charge of supervising the counting of signatures is an open Kotler supporter.

Some 11 Civil Court seats are up for election this year, but there will not be primaries for any of the other 10. In an [editorial](#) earlier this month, the Times criticized the situation saying, "Most Civil Court seats are filled by the reigning political clubhouses in each borough, which still largely control who gets to run on the Democratic line — the key to victory in November."

The Civil Court, which has jurisdiction over civil cases involving amounts up to \$25,000 and other civil matters referred to it by the state Supreme Court, includes a small claims court for matters less than \$5,000 and a housing court that handles landlord-tenant matters and housing code violations.

Primaries also provide political parties with the opportunity to fill their own internal offices. On Sept. 15, Democrats in parts of Manhattan will get to choose district leaders.

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District leaders are intermediaries between the major political parties and the community in which they are elected. Together they form the governing bodies of the Democratic and Republican parties within their respective counties. The position is often seen as a stepping-stone to higher office, and many times is held by members of the State Assembly or City Council. Former New York City Mayor Ed Koch started his political career as a district leader.

Each district elects a male and female representative. District leaders are elected to four-year terms, are not paid and work within the political parties.

Democrats in Manhattan, as well as some Republicans in Brooklyn and Queens will be able to vote for members of their party's county committee. Part of the political party machinery, members of a county committee act as representatives for their political party on a very low scale. Usually their territory is only a few blocks and covers approximately 1,000 registered voters. Members of a county committee help select and endorse candidates for higher office.

In New York City thousands of these positions are often left vacant, according to the [Grassroots Initiative](#), a nonprofits that provides information to people considering a run for public office.

A number of candidates on Tuesday are seeking election to posts that some New Yorkers want to eliminate: delegates and alternatives delegates to state judicial conventions. Those elected will attend a meeting to vote on their party's candidates for state Supreme Court, New York's main trial court. Their action at these meetings tend to be "a formality because the bosses have usually picked the nominees beforehand," wrote Carol DeMare in the Albany Times Union.

Formality or not, Democrats in Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn, and Republicans in Queens can chose delegates and alternate delegates.

### How to Vote

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The election will be Tuesday, Sept. 15, with polls open from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. Only registered voters who have registered at least 25 days before the election can vote. Since this is a primary, only registered members of parties with contests can cast ballots -- except in the Queens Assembly race.

You should have received a notice in the mail telling you where to vote, but if you do not have it, you can go to the Board of Election's poll site locator or call 1 866 VOTE-NYC. This number can provide you with other information as well, including registration deadlines.

On its [Web site](#) , the Board of Elections also has instructions on how to work the voting machine.

Absentee ballot applications can be obtained by calling the Board of Elections at 1-866-VOTE-NYC or e-mailing a request to [vote@boe.nyc.ny.us](mailto:vote@boe.nyc.ny.us).

Those who wish to vote by absentee ballot have two choices. If you choose to vote by mail, an absentee ballot must be postmarked the day before the primary and reach the Board of Elections no more than seven days after the election. Or you can drop off an absentee ballot at one of the Board of Elections borough offices by 9:00 p.m. on Election Day.

If the deadline for requesting an absentee ballot by mail has passed and you cannot appear at the polls on Election Day because of an accident or sudden illness, you may send a representative with an authorized letter to receive an Absentee Ballot Application and Absentee Ballot and return both to the Board of Elections by 9 p.m. on Election Day at your borough office.