

Comptroller Candidates Count on Voters Taking Notice

by Gail Robinson

Tuesday, September 08, 2009 12:00 AM



What citywide race remains too close to call, involves a post with important powers and features four candidates who have some substantive disagreements?

Many New Yorkers see the mayoral race as all but decided and the office of public advocate, which also is [up for grabs](#), as having few clearly defined responsibilities. The election for [city comptroller](#)

, though features a closely fought race for a post the Times has called "one of the most important jobs" in the city. The four City Council members

[running](#)

-- Melinda Katz, John Liu and David Weprin of Queens and David Yassky of Brooklyn -- all cite experience that qualifies them for the post and have amassed endorsement and raised money. In debates and other appearances, they have offered differing opinions on the city's budget.

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Yet so far the race to replace incumbent [William Thompson Jr.](#) , who is running for mayor, has not attracted much attention. The issues dividing the candidates do not concern hot button issues, tending toward discussions of investment strategies, claw-back clauses, restrictions on discretionary spending, on-line data and audit powers.

Overseeing Billions

The relative obscurity of the comptroller's position can veil the [office's considerable clout](#) . As the city's chief financial officer, the comptroller oversees the city's \$60 billion budget and \$83 billion in pension funds for city workers. Whoever wins will inherit an office with an annual budget of about \$70 million and a staff of about 700. The winner will have to approve every government contract -- and the contracting process itself -- will conduct audits of government activities and report on the city's expenditures and revenues. The new comptroller also will have freshly granted authority to review Department of Education spending.

In addition, as one of only three citywide elected officials, the comptroller's audits, reports and pronouncements command attention. Given all this, it's hardly surprising that the current comptroller, Thompson, and his predecessor, Alan Hevesi, both ran for mayor.

The four Democrats seeking the post this year all are two-term members of the City Council who, after the term limits extension, could have opted for another term there.

[Katz](#) , who represents Forest Hills, chairs the council's Land Use Committee and is the only woman running for citywide office this year. [Liu](#) of Flushing heads up the Transportation Committee and is seeking to be the first Asian elected to citywide office in New York.

[Weprin](#)

from eastern Queens has chaired the Finance Committee for the past eight years and been an investment banker working on public finance, while

[Yassky](#)

, a former aide to Sen. Charles Schumer who represents Brooklyn Heights and Greenpoint, is the only Brooklyn resident in the race.

All the candidates have now launched television advertising campaigns in the hopes of emerging from the pack on Sept. 15. If no one captures at least 40 percent of the vote in that election, a runoff between the top two vote getters will take place on Sept. 29 to choose the

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Democratic nominee. That person will then face Republican [Joe Mendola](#) , Conservative [Stuart Avrick](#) and Libertarian [John Clifton](#) in November.

Similarities and Differences

The Democratic candidates agree on a lot. The four refrain from criticizing the current comptroller, who likely will head the Democratic ticket in November. They all pledge to be transparent and a fierce watchdog. By and large, the candidates would seek to [avoid](#) investing in companies that do business in Sudan or Iran and try to put money into companies that invest in New York City. They all say they will look to eliminate waste.

Their public exchanges provide a kind of lesson in campaign courtesy. Liu, however, has been the target of the most damaging charges of the campaign so far -- that he fabricated or exaggerated his accounts of working alongside his mother in a sweatshop when he was a boy. In an [interview](#) with the Daily News, Liu's mother, Jamy Liu, cast doubt on his account leading to [further](#) stories about whether Liu presents his childhood as far more hardscrabble than it was.

Liu has stuck to his version, though, and, at a [rally](#) in Chinatown last month, his mother, Jamy Liu, appeared to back him up. "I was ashamed to talk about this but not anymore," she said. Whatever the real story, the other three contenders have not discussed the controversy, holding back even when Liu, at a Sept. 2 [debate at Baruch College](#) , repeated his accounts of working in the garment factory.

The most vigorous disagreements among the candidates have surfaced on an issue beyond their control -- extension of term limits. At the debate, Weprin challenged Yassky about how, as someone who portrays himself as a "progressive," he could have voted to extend term limits. Katz also voted in favor of the extension; Liu and Weprin opposed it.

"What do you do," a woman complained in the elevator following the debate, "when the differences between them are" and then she held up her thumb and forefinger, a quarter of an inch apart.

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"Then you have to go with your gut," a man responded.

Staking Out Their Turf

The candidates do differ in how they portray themselves, how others see them and on some issues.

On the City Council, Liu has acquired a reputation for speaking out aggressively, to the point where some have accused him of grandstanding. He seizes on this image a bit, promising to be a "bulldog" in looking out for then public's money.

Although he cites his experience working for Price Waterhouse before being elected to City Council in 2001, his slogan says the comptroller's job is "not just about numbers." Expanding on that at a debate, he said, "I will use the office of comptroller to insure that people get delivery of services."

Although ideological differences can be slight in the city's Democratic politics, Liu has carved out a position on the left and has the backing of the Working Families Party. He, for example, has called for an increase in the city income tax on wealthy residents.

In his campaign Liu harks back to his boyhood in what he portrays as a working class immigrant family eager for the American dream. That message seems to be finding support in the Asia community. A number of Asian America groups have backed Liu and, according to a [calculatio](#)
[n](#) by the New York Times, Liu has received more than \$2 million in contributions from Asian Americans.

With experience in the State Assembly and City Council, Katz portrays herself as someone who knows how to get things done. She repeatedly mentions her experience as chair of the Land Use Committee, saying in that capacity she fought successfully to get "great social value" from development projects, such as affordable housing and jobs for city residents.

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Her references to that work, along with campaign contributions from developers, have prompted critics to question whether she is too close to real estate interests. "Melinda Katz sounds like she's running for chair of the City Planning Commission," Weprin has [said](#) .

Katz counters that during her tenure on the committee, some 9,000 blocks in the city were zoned for less, rather than more development.

"The percentage of what was protected versus what we've developed came down clearly on the side of protecting communities â€” and shows I have a balanced approach," she said in an interview.

She added that, while she has taken money from developers, her opponents have as well. While that is true, the Times' [accounting](#) found her getting more money -- some \$700,000 out of a total of \$2.5 million in private contributions -- from real estate interest.

Katz clearly hopes her status as the only woman in the race -- and the mother of a baby son -- will work to her advantage. She highlights endorsements from women politicians and has a television ad in which she recounts how she told a male lobbyist to "stick it" when he told her women could not decide on their own whether they needed to see a gynecologist.

"I'm distressed as a woman that I'm the only one running" for citywide office, she said.

For his part, Yassky seeks to present himself as a bit of a wonk, a candidate with detailed ideas for using the comptroller's office to curtail government waste, close the budget gap and fuel economic development. He has flatly opposed increasing taxes and, unlike his opponents, leaves open the possibility of supporting reduced pension benefits for newly hired city employees, the so-called Tier 5. He also has less union support than his opponents.

Yassky generally is more muted in his criticism of the Bloomberg administration than the others -- particularly when it comes to education. In a similar vein, he alone among the candidate's expressed support for a Bloomberg administration program that gives homeless families a [one-way ticket](#)

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out of town.

Overall, Crain's [said](#) in backing Yassky, "his view of city government is closer to that of the New York business community than the other candidates' positions are."

He does, though, criticize the administration on spending and government productivity. "It's not a pretty picture," he said at the Baruch debate, suggesting that, while spending increased during the Bloomberg years, city workers' productivity did not.

While Yassky, stresses the importance of the comptroller job at a time when the city faces huge economic challenges, some question his commitment to the office. Weprin and Liu, who began this year running for public advocate, have [pointed out](#) that Yassky [mulled](#) a run for Brooklyn district attorney four years ago and [ran unsuccessfully](#) for Congress in 2006.

As chair of the finance committee for eight years and a former state deputy secretary for banking, Weprin stresses his background in finance. A cornerstone of his campaign is his plan to create satellite comptroller's offices in upper Manhattan and the other four boroughs, partly to make the comptroller more transparent and to increase financial literacy.

"People don't really know what the comptroller's office does," he said at a [debate](#) sponsored by Community Newspaper Group. "I want to bring the comptroller's service to the people [and] make the office of comptroller more relevant to them."

His opponents all reject the plan. "The comptroller's office is not the public advocate's office," Katz said at another debate.

Weprin tends to paint the city's fiscal outlook in less apocalyptic terms than the other three, saying, for example that current predictions of a \$5 billion gap for fiscal year 2010 are probably too high. (Yassky think those estimates are too low.) He praises the administration and City Council for using some of the surplus of recent years to pay off debt and public employee health

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benefits.

"We're obviously in so much better shape than the state," he said.

Balancing the Budget

While all four cast themselves as prudent guardians of the public purse, they offer different approaches on how they would do it. Although comptrollers do not actually craft the budget -- that job goes to the mayor and City Council -- they do weigh in on budget matters and conduct analyses of city finances.

To start with, all four would root out waste, homing in on the Department of Education. Now that the comptroller will have [authority](#) to review the department's spending and performance, Katz says she "would make sure the money is going into classrooms." She also would reduce no-bid contracts.

Weprin would look at agencies' use of outside contractors instead of city employees to deliver services, while Liu sees fat in "some of the agencies that are little understood by the general public," such as the [Industrial Development Agency](#).

Yassky envisions the comptroller's office as the city's "in house management consultant" that would go through the city budget line by line seeking ways to cut costs and improve efficiency, such as police overtime and departments' overhead costs. In an interview, Yassky suggested eliminating "spending that is useful but not essential," citing overseas offices promoting New York City tourism and health department anti-smoking ads. "There are a lot of things I like but can't afford," he said.

On the revenue side, Weprin advocates restoring the commuter tax, which requires approval by the legislature and governor. Referring to the city's successful lobbying effort to maintain mayoral control of schools, Weprin said, "If as much effort as was put into school governance was put into bringing back the commuter tax, we might get it."

Despite the city's fiscal plight, none of the candidates call for sharp cutbacks in capital

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spending.

"We should be investing where we can in capital projects to keep people working" Katz said.

Weprin said that the current low interest rates make this a good time to borrow money for needed construction and maintenance work.

Council Matters

Some of the sharpest disagreements of the campaign have arisen over issues the candidates dealt with as members of the City Council: term limits and [discretionary spending](#), also known as member items or pork -- money that council awards directly to a nonprofit group without going through the usual proposal process.

Yassky has called for eliminating all discretionary funding. "Government money should be spent through a competitive process," he has said. Letting council members allocate funds, he said, is "inefficient and distracts the council from the work it should be doing."

His opponents all disagree. "A lot of good things come out of" discretionary, funding, said Weprin, who in fiscal 2008 [led](#) the City Council in the amount of money handed out.

Eliminating the member funds, Liu said, would hurt smaller organizations, particularly those based outside of Manhattan that cannot compete with large organizations with sophisticated fundraising operations.

The Final Days

Despite the mailings, television ads and many appearances, many voters at the city still find it hard to distinguish between the candidates.

A [Survey USA poll](#) released Friday found, that with 20 percent of likely voters in the primary

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still undecided, the race remained close. Liu led at 25 percent, followed by Katz at 24 percent and Yassky at 25 percent while Weprin remained behind at 10 percent. Compared to a [poll](#) taken a week earlier, Katz and Liu has picked up some support, while Katz saw her percentage decline.

A Quinnipiac University [poll](#) taken in late August found 45 percent of registered Democratic still undecided. Liu, Katz and Yassky were virtually tied at 17 percent for Liu and 16 percent each for Katz and Yassky, while Weprin trailed with 5 percent.

In [fundraising](#) , Liu leads the race for private contributions with \$3.2 million but, because much of that money comes from outside the city, lags in public matching funds with slightly more than a million. While Yassky has raised the least in private contributions of the four -- about \$2.3 million or about \$10,000 less than Weprin -- he has received the most in matching funds, so comes in second overall in the money competition with a total of about \$3.7 million. Katz is next with \$3.2 million -- almost \$2.5 million of which was raised privately. Weprin has raised the least money overall, but still managed to take in almost \$2.3 million in private contributions and more about \$800,000 in public matching funds.

According to their Sept.4 filings, Yassky had spent the most -- \$2.7 million -- with the others having spent between \$2.5 and \$2.6 million.

All have some [labor union endorsements](#) , although Yassky has backing only from the Freelancers Union and the American Federation of Musicians, Local 802. Yassky does have the endorsements of the [New York Times](#) .

The United Federation of Teachers, after weighing Katz and Liu, [decided](#) to come out for Liu, who also has support from the Service Employees, Transport Workers, and firefighters, among other. Weprin picked up the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association and some DC 37 locals, while the Building and Construction Trade council, teamsters and retail workers have endorsed Katz.

Public officials have split among the four as well. Former Mayor David Dinkins and former Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer back Weprin. U.S. Rep. Michael McMahon, Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz and former Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger

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are among those supporting Yassky. Former Mayor Ed. Koch and former Rep. -- and Democratic vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferrarro and current Reps. Yvette Clarke and Eliot Engle have come out for Katz. Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer and former U.S. Rep. Major Owens are in Liu's camp as is the Rev. Al Sharpton.