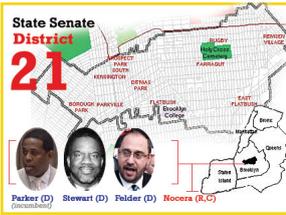


In Flatbush, Running with Baggage

by Giovanni Russonello

Monday, July 14, 2008 12:00 AM



Update: After a three-way Democratic primary, Kevin Parker, the incumbent, clinched just over 10,000 votes to beat out council members Kendall Stewart, who had 2,651 votes, and Simcha Felder with 6,686 votes.

Now that is over, Parker, 41, faces a challenge from Republican [Glenn Nocera](#). Nocera, 33, is a campus police officer at Brooklyn College and was born and raised in Brooklyn.

Parker, according to his [latest campaign finance filings](#), has \$15,803 left in his account. Nocera has \$1,911.

Listening to the funk trio play at the Newkirk Avenue Block Party on a recent Saturday, Mannix Gordon fondly described Flatbush. "We're a very diverse area, and we're open to all views, all walks of life, and we're all about supporting people who have come from all over the world. We're about supporting diversity," said the [Flatbush Development Corp.](#)'s director of economic development as a group of giggling elementary-school girls -- two black, one white and one Hispanic -- scampered past him.

This fall, residents of Flatbush and the surrounding Brooklyn neighborhoods will choose from a diverse array of Democratic candidates to represent them in the State Senate. Each of the three contestants carries a distinct heritage -- and worrisome baggage.

Three-term incumbent Kevin Parker, an African American who serves as minority whip in the State Senate, once was considered a promising young star among Democrats in Albany. Then Parker's anger management issues became tabloid fodder when he [punched a traffic agent](#) who was ticketing his car in 2005. An [old political rival](#) and a [former aide](#)

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have also alleged that Parker assaulted them, although the senator denies these claims.

Kendall Stewart, the Caribbean-American City Council member who represents parts of Flatbush and East Flatbush in the 45th Council District, [decided to challenge Parker last year](#) , then watched as two of his own staffers became the poster children for the City Council's [slush-fund scandal](#)

. Chief of Staff Asquith Reid and aide Joycynth Anderson face federal charges for allegedly taking \$145,000 in city funds, some of which they purportedly used to pay for Stewart's campaign expenses. Both have pleaded not guilty. Stewart denies any knowledge of the deeds, but the initial momentum that,

[according to the Daily News](#)

, had earned him support from Brooklyn's Democratic establishment seems to have faded.

Then there is Simcha Felder, an Orthodox Jewish City Council member representing Borough Park and Kensington, who surprised almost everyone when he opted [to enter the race](#) for Parker's seat rather than run for city comptroller in 2009. An array of donors who had assumed Felder would run for the high city post helped him

[collect approximately \\$1.5 million](#)

in campaign funds before he announced his Senate candidacy . (Stewart's and Parker's campaigns in January reported balances of

[\\$52,817.25](#)

and

[\\$14,097.83](#)

, respectively.) While Felder has a huge edge in funds, questions persist over whether a relatively conservative white Democrat can win in a district with so many black and Hispanic voters.

Felder and Stewart are among the many City Council members who will be forced out of office by term limits in 2009 and are [seeking seeking other](#) political jobs.

A Race on Race

The candidates agree on some issues but they differ over which of them would best serve the district and what a state senator should focus on. Many observers believe ethnicity could turn out being key.

The black majority -- 57 percent of residents, according to the latest available statistics -- is split

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between African Americans, who Parker says largely support him, and Caribbean Americans, who, based on interviews, appear to continue to back Stewart. Most of the white residents, approximately 22 percent of the district's population, are Jewish. A Hispanic minority of roughly 11 percent and a smaller Pakistani population help to round out the rest.

"At the local level, it takes too long" to learn about the candidates' positions on the issues, Flatbush resident Adrian Roberts said. "Whoever votes probably doesn't know anything about the candidates." What most people vote on, Roberts thinks, is race. "That's the first thing people pay attention to," said Roberts, an African American who has not been following the State Senate campaign.

Millisent Myers, a Jamaican American, says that Stewart will have a fighting chance thanks to the 21st district's Caribbean population. "I'm from Jamaica -- we vote. Black Americans don't vote" as consistently as Caribbean Americans, she said.

Drawing a significant number of votes from a different demographic could be difficult, according to Matt Ides, a Flatbush resident who serves as community liaison and legislative assistant to Manhattan State Senator Liz Krueger. Ides doubts Felder's ability to "reach out" to blacks from Flatbush. "When I saw he was running, I was like, no. He'll sweep his part of the district and that's it," Ides said as he relaxed at the Newkirk Avenue Block Party.

Felder disagrees. "It doesn't matter what [an] elected official looks like or who he prays to. The issue is accountability to the people he represents," he said.

Stewart and Parker could split the black vote, helping Felder. Parker says he's already seen this movie, though, and likes how it ends. "I have run this race before, in 2004, with a Caribbean candidate and a Jewish candidate. In three straight elections people have chosen my leadership," Parker said. He defeated Caribbean-American Wellington Sharpe and Noach Dear, an Orthodox Jew, in 2004.

A District of Immigrants

Ask Flatbush residents to name the political issue that most concerns them, and there is no telling what you'll hear. Leon Garrido said he most wanted to see the government find "jobs for the kids -- the kids need something to do." Gordon, the Flatbush Development Corp. staffer,

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Monday, July 14, 2008 12:00 AM

pointed to "assistance for small businesses."

But the issue of immigration is near the top of many people's lists in a district that, according to Kevin Parker's [Web site](#), includes the country's largest concentration of native Jamaicans, Trinidadians and Guyanese. Parker leads the Immigration Committee in the Senate, and Stewart chairs the Immigration Committee in the City Council.

Stewart, born on the island of St. Vincent, has sponsored successful bills on immigration, such as [Intro 223](#), intended to prevent immigration consultants from exploiting customers, and [Intro 38](#), which mandated that city agencies providing healthcare, food stamps and other services offer translations in six languages, including Spanish and Haitian Creole.

Stewart was not available for comment, but spokesperson Michael Roberts cited immigration as one of the candidate's strong points. In 2002, when Stewart took office, the city allocated \$4 million for community groups and programs dealing with immigration, according to Roberts. "By the year 2003 he was getting \$9 million," Roberts said.

Calling Stewart "a champion of immigrants' rights across the city," Roberts said Parker had not shown the same commitment to this issue. "What has he done in respect to immigration? What legislation has he passed on the state level?" Roberts said.

Indeed, Parker has yet to pass a bill he has written on any issue. But he blames this on being a Democrat in a State Senate controlled by Republicans. "That is a function of the fact that we are in the minority," Parker said, adding that he is "one of [Senate Republicans'] prime opponents." Parker last year introduced an immigration bill similar to Stewart's, requiring that the state issue licenses to consultants who provide assistance to immigrants, and has proposed legislation to grant immigrants who attend high school in New York the state-resident tuition rate at public colleges and universities.

Stewart has angered some Caribbean Americans. In 2003, it became known that an apartment building he owned has 144 violations, ranging from peeling lead paint to a lack of heat and hot water. Stewart blamed some of his tenants. "It's a cultural thing," Stewart said, [according to the Daily News](#).

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"The Haitian folks, because of their poverty, will have five to eight people living in an apartment, and they will break the locks if one doesn't have a key."

Parker is ready to remind voters of the controversy. "Kendall has a problem because Kendall is a slumlord," Parker said. "People will look at his record, and part of his record is how he has behaved and the things he's said in this community."

Felder has not been a leader on immigration issues, but has sided with the City Council's Democratic majority on all votes relating to the issue. Felder said his own résumé extends beyond district-centric legislation. As a council member, he has chaired the Government Operation Committee. He is a primary sponsor of [Intro 777](#), which would streamline the operations of the environmental control board; the bill recently passed the Governmental Operations Committee, but the Council has yet to vote on it. Felder was one of two primary sponsors of [Intro 651-A](#), which tightens restriction on campaign donations from businesses that deal with the city. This bill, which Felder introduced at the mayor's request, became law last year.

State Senator, or Constituent Servant?

Parker paints himself as a reformer in Albany, noting "the things we've been able to change in the state government because of my presence. When I came, the state government had gone 21 years without a budget on time, and after one year we got a budget in on time."

He added, "We have made universal pre-K really universal for every child in the state. We've insured every child in the state. And this year we put more money into public education than ever was done before."

For their part, Felder and Stewart charge that Parker has neglected the more mundane concerns of his district. Parker has "a dismal record of delivering services to the community," said Felder, "and issues of transparency and accountability are certainly lacking." Felder said district residents needed a senator who is "going to pass laws that are going to help them in their everyday lives, not deal with the flooding in China."

Stewart takes a similar tack. A recent campaign flyer that earned [online infamy](#) promised Stewart would focus on "Bringing Home The Recourses" [sic] if elected -- language that,

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besides the misspelling, conjured uncomfortable memories of the slush-fund scandal.

Putting that aside, Roberts said Stewart played a key role in spurring construction of a mall at Nostrand and Flatbush avenues that created "250 jobs for young people."

Gordon thinks Parker could do more to help economic development in the district. "I would say [Parker's level of involvement] is okay ... not outstanding," Gordon said.

Parker, though, said he has served the district. "I'm not a city councilman so it is not my responsibility constitutionally to fill potholes," he said. "But my office does a lot of those things. My office is responsible to address the needs of the district and the city and the state.... You tell me what's more important than education for our children."

Mayor Mike and Questions of Conservatism

The Working Families Party, which frequently endorses Democratic candidates, has thrown its weight behind Parker. Spokesperson Dan Levitan said the senator has proved himself. The United Food and Commercial Workers, Local 1500 labor union agrees; it cites Parker's "strong history of support for working families." Stewart has not nabbed any major endorsements.

Meanwhile, Felder's moderate and conservative leanings on some issues, such as regulating businesses, have helped him win backing -- and money -- from Bloomberg. Felder voted against a bill -- one of a number on which he has been the only Democrat to vote no -- to force grocery stores and large outlets like Wal-Mart to contribute \$2.50 an hour toward employees' health insurance. Bloomberg vetoed the legislation, but the Council overrode him. Felder also said that his religion prevents him from supporting gay marriage or voting for the openly lesbian City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, whom he supports.

Felder brushes aside the suggestion that such occasional conservative leanings could hinder him in the upcoming election. "As Ed Koch once said, pick 12 issues," Felder said in an e-mail. "If you agree with me on nine out of 12 issues, vote for me. If you agree with me on 12 out of 12 issues, see a psychiatrist. I believe with my record on quality of life legislation, campaign finance legislation and sanitation legislation, most of the district would agree with me on nine out of 12 issues."

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Felder touts Bloomberg's backing as an asset. "I think that the mayor's support is invaluable. In fact, he won every [voting] district in this Senate district" in 2005, Felder said. "That's a testament to the fact that whether it's African Americans, Jamaicans, Italians, Jews, people see in the mayor a no-nonsense individual who's determined to do the right thing."

Felder hopes he can connect across racial lines as well. "When I got into office, somebody asked me, 'What is the most critical issue facing the city?' and I said race relations," Felder said. "And that's because [former Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani created an atmosphere where racial tensions were about to explode. The mayor, however, has done the opposite."

Pointing to Felder's opposition to abortion rights and support for parochial school vouchers, Parker calls Felder "out of step with this district.... Look at how much money he's gotten from the mayor on special projects," Parker said. "Simcha is a ... subsidiary of Bloomberg."

Parker has gone so far as to claim that Felder's candidacy is part of a Republican scheme, [suggesting that](#), if elected, Felder would switch parties and sit with Senate Republicans. This is an especially volatile accusation in a year when New York Democrats hope to reestablish a senatorial majority. Felder flatly [denies](#) the charges.

Flatbush resident Pieranna Pieroni says she could care less about the conspiracy theories and ethnic politics. "Here's the question: are they talking to each other, or are they talking at each other?" said Pieroni, the coordinator of College Now Program at Brooklyn College. "We need somebody who can make everybody feel listened to and not somebody who's going to emphasize the differences among us. They should be starting that conversation."

For More Information

[Simcha Felder](#)

[Kevin Parker](#)

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[Kendall Stewart](#)

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