by Susan Reefer
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In four special elections on February 25th, voters in the Bronx and Brooklyn fill two vacant city council seats, in District 18 and District 43 , for the remainder of each term, which is until the end of this year. In addition, two state assembly races are on the ballot also in Brooklyn and the Bronx.

With special elections, the rules that apply to regularly scheduled elections change completely. The nature of a special election changes the dynamics of the campaign process, both for the candidates and for the voters.

TIME MATTERS

Strategists love to say that campaigns have three resources: people (the candidate being the chief among them), money, and time. Of these three, the most valuable is time. It is the only resource that is non-renewable. (As we have seen, sometimes tragically, even candidates can be replaced). A compressed timeframe means a candidate must conduct an entire campaign in the time that under different circumstance might be spent choosing a campaign headquarters, hiring staff and picking out letterhead.

Less time to campaign does not change the ultimate goal: successfully communicating a winning message to persuadable voters. What it does mean is that the message gets shorter, the communication gets louder, and the voters become fewer in number. With less time to test different messages, or try different audiences, candidates are forced to hone in on one basic message, get that message out in a consistent, repetitive, frequent manner, and target it to the most high-interest, highly motivated, likely voters they can identify.

TURNOUT MATTERS

Turnout is the single most important factor affecting the outcome of any campaign. In most campaign surveys, pollsters measure the support a candidate has among the hard-core, "registered to vote on my eighteenth birthday," kind of voters. Then they measure support among the likely, "I try to vote, if I can, I will" kind. Then among the possible, "maybe, I'm not sure," and on and on. Based on the answers they get to the questions asked, they can put

together models that can predict election results if the turnout is 17 percent, or 22 percent, or 31 percent. The only remaining question is who decides to show up. When campaign analysts wring their hands over the weather on Election Day, it is not superstition, it really can change the outcome of a close race.

Of course, none of that matters in a special election, because the turnout is easily predictable. If past elections are any indicator, it will be low. Historically, turnout is highest for general elections in a Presidential election year, next would be general elections in off years (no Presidential contest). On down would be local general elections, then party primaries, and at the very bottom would be a special election to fill a local office. Only the most interested, the most involved, the most dedicated, civic-minded individuals tend to show up to vote.

The two city council special elections are both the result of a council member getting elected to higher office. The contests come at a time when the city faces a number of crises; they also come just a few short months before the next scheduled primary election for all city council members. For both these reasons, the council races are being watched closely; the results could indicate how these most engaged of all voters feel about things right now, and how they may be feeling next fall.

Although low turnout can be discouraging in a democracy, it does mean the collective decision is among the most well-informed, well-educated choice in any election. And for the candidates, it means they can easily classify the pool of voters they need to reach.

LOCAL ISSUES MATTER

In legislative races, local issues are always important. In special elections, this is especially true. Special elections tend to shine a spotlight on the immediate time and place in which the election happens, regardless of the larger issues that might be facing the city, or the state. Whatever crisis or problem has been facing the district most recently will be foremost in the minds of the voters. This can be a good chance for communities to vent grievances; the danger is that the contest may be decided around a passing crisis, rather than the overall needs of the district.

In the assembly race in the 79th assembly district in the Bronx, the reason for the sudden

vacancy may itself be the issue. Assemblymember Gloria Davis confessed to bribery charges, leaving her district with the task of replacing her. Issues of character, ethics, and propriety do not typically dominate a state assembly race, but in the wake of a recent scandal, the character question may be foremost in voters' minds.

NAME ID MATTERS

There are several steps to a winning campaign strategy, and identifying the voting bloc, and a winning message, are both certainly key. But before you can send out your message to those voters, you have to be sure that voters will have something to stick that message to, namely, your name.

In most campaigns, candidates vastly overestimate the importance of name identification. In the course of a normal campaign, by Election Day, both candidates have high name identification ratings among voters regardless of the results. In a special election, name ID actually can play a role. With less time to campaign and more candidates in the mix, voters can get understandably mixed up as they try to sort out multiple names and slogans.

In the special city council election in Brooklyn, there are six declared candidates; in the Bronx, there are three running for city council, although one has been knocked off the ballot. This means that the candidates who are known to voters -- those who have run before, or held office before -- will have a head start in the process of introducing themselves and making their case.

Name identification may very well be a factor in the 55th state assembly race in Brooklyn. The sitting assembly member, William Boyland, announced his decision to step down not long after being re-elected last fall. His son, William Boyland, Jr., is among the candidates vying to replace him in the special election. The Boyland family name is well known in New York politics; more importantly, it is a name that is familiar to voters in the district. In a special election, having a well-known, well-respected family name can be a distinct advantage.

PARTY DOESN'T REALLY MATTER

Although party remains a powerful voting cue in other elections, it plays virtually no role in special elections. Candidates run on specially coined slogans, or banner headings, instead of party labels. The slogans themselves are of little descriptive value, but they do place the burden of choice squarely with the voter, and not with party loyalty.

Special elections are a necessity in order to ensure representation for all city residents during times such as these when interim absences occur. Whatever differentiates them from other elections, they matter a great deal, not only for the ultimate goal of representative democracy, but also for what they can demonstrate to us about the voting process.

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