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related articles:

- â€˜ [Guide To The Ballot Proposals](#)
- â€˜ [Campaign 2003 Primary Coverage](#) (July, 2003)
- â€˜ [Ballot Bumping in New York](#)
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In an election season that newspaper headlines have described with words like "yawn" and "eye-glazing," Robert Newman is excited, in at least three ways.

Newman stays late at subway stops in Brooklyn while volunteers for the Working Families Party urge New Yorkers to vote "no" on Mayor Michael Bloomberg's ballot proposal for [nonpartisan elections](#).

by Gotham Gazette Staff
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A registered Democrat, Newman is also campaigning with the Working Families Party, a small party started in 1998, which has a shot at electing their first member of the New York City Council in Fort Greene this year, in the race to succeed assassinated Councilmember James Davis.

Then there is the fact that Newman, a legal aid lawyer, is himself running for Brooklyn Supreme Court Judge. The Brooklyn judicial system has been plagued with scandal and Newman feels he has a shot. "I think voters are looking for an alternative," he said. "We have a whole slate of candidates."

Non-partisan elections, competitive City Council races, the Brooklyn judges scandal -- there are plenty of reasons to vote on November 4. For those New Yorkers confused by all of the brochures, ballot questions, and judicial and City Council races this fall, we offer the following guide:

- â€ˆ [What Is At Stake?](#)
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WHAT IS AT STAKE?

On November 4, New Yorkers will decide races for City Council, judicial seats, and district attorney. They will also answer "yes" or "no" to five ballot questions dealing with issues like debt, sewers, schools, city elections, contracts, and government administration.

City Council

While many New Yorkers may not be able to name their City Council member, most have

something to say about issues like taxes, trash pick-ups, firehouse closures, or the school system, for which council members are responsible. In the last two years, the City Council has approved increases to the property tax, sales tax, and income tax. Just a few months ago, the council voted on a budget that cut 4,000 city workers and closed six firehouses. Next year, the city is expected to have a \$2 billion deficit, which means that more cuts may be needed.

Judicial Races

The Brooklyn judicial system has been plagued by news reports of scandal and political patronage. Recently Brooklyn Democratic leader Clarence Norman was indicted for allegedly buying and selling judgeships, but many argue that the other boroughs have similar problems. (For more on the judicial scandal, play Gotham Gazette's [Judges Game](#) .)

Ballot Questions

While the ballot questions are written in confusing legal language and take some effort to comprehend, each will affect the future of the city. Should small towns be able to build more sewers or schools? Should the election system be overhauled? Does the city need to give more city contracts to women and minority-owned businesses? Is the government run efficiently? Voters will have to consider each of these questions.

WHO IS RUNNING FOR CITY COUNCIL IN MY DISTRICT?

On Election Day, some voters will find they live in a different City Council district than the last time they went to the polls.

Since the last local election in 2001, the City Council district lines were redrawn to reflect new census data, and so some voters have new representatives. Those who live on the edge of a district or in a neighborhood that has experienced a large change in ethnic make-up are most likely to see a change.

The best way to find your district is to:

1. Go to Gotham Gazette's [Campaign 2003](#) page.
2. Type in your address.
3. Click "Find It!"

4. Click on the Campaign Button in the top right hand column.

On the district page, you will find a list of candidates running, information about their campaign contributions, candidate biographies, and an archive of news stories from the campaign trail.

There is also information on how each council member voted on the dozen most divisive votes of the last two years - like the 18.5 percent property tax increase, the law that banned smoking in bars and restaurants, and a resolution urging the U.S. not to go to war with Iraq.

WHICH CITY COUNCIL RACES ARE COMPETITIVE?

Since Democratic voters outnumber Republicans in New York, most of the City Council elections are in effect decided in the September primary.

The most watched race for the general election has been the [district 35](#) campaign to fill the vacant seat of slain City Councilmember James Davis, who was shot in City Hall in July. Davis's brother, Geoffrey Davis, has been selected as the Democratic nominee. But he is facing a strong challenge from three other candidates - Letitia James, Anthony Herbert, and Abraham Wasserman.

[District 19](#) in Queens is one of the few areas in the city that has elected a Republican to City Council. But in 2001, Democrat Tony Avella beat his Republican opponent, although only by 357 votes. Now a new Republican candidate is trying to win the seat back and is challenging the incumbent on his record on taxes, zoning, and parking.

[District 43](#) in Brooklyn, City Councilmember Vincent Gentile, who has voted to raise several taxes since taking office in the spring, is hoping he can hang on to his seat in an area that has elected Republicans in the past.

For more races to watch, go to [2003 Campaign Coverage](#) .

WHAT QUESTIONS ARE ON THE BALLOT?

On November 4, voters will be asked to answer "yes" or "no" to five ballot questions. (Read [Guide to the Ballot Proposals](#))

The first two questions are amendments to the New York State Constitution that would allow small towns to borrow more money to build sewers and new schools. Although they would primarily affect small counties upstate, all voters in the state - including New York City voters who are not affected - have a say on this proposal because their taxes will pay for the measures.

The last three questions were placed on the ballot by Mayor Michael Bloomberg's charter revision commission and would change the city's laws regarding elections, contracting, and government administration.

Education advocates tried to put a sixth question on the ballot to consider the problem of school overcrowding, but Mayor Michael Bloomberg fought the measure in court and it was removed. (Read more about the [class size ballot initiative](#))

Click on the questions below for a step-by-step guide to each question, with arguments pro and con:

The Five Questions

1. [Paying for Sewage System](#)
 2. [Paying for Schools in Small Cities](#)
 3. [Non-Partisan Elections](#)
 4. [City Purchasing](#)
 5. [Government Administration](#)
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WHAT ARE NONPARTISAN ELECTIONS?

The most contentious question on the ballot this year: Should New York City institute nonpartisan elections?

This proposal would establish a new system of elections for local city offices. The September primary would be open to all candidates and voters, regardless of party affiliation. Candidates can still list their party affiliation on the ballot. The top two vote getters would then compete in the November general election.

If approved, the plan would not take effect until 2009, after Mayor Michael Bloomberg leaves office. Still, the mayor is spending \$2 million of his own money to back the plan.

The mayor and the charter commission say that the ballot initiative will increase voter turnout and minority participation, create better choices for voters, and limit the corruption of party politics.

Critics say studies show that minority representation and voter participation have not increased in cities that have nonpartisan elections, and that this kind of nonpartisan elections has no track record in a city like New York. Some also object to the process by which this question was brought to the voters, and what they consider the mayor's stealth campaign to push it through.

For more information on the ballot proposal, try these Web sites:

Arguments both Pro and Con

â€” [City's Campaign Finance Board Voters Guide](#)

Vote "Yes"

â€” [It Is Time for Non Partisan Elections](#) by Frank Macchiarola, charter commission chair. (Gotham Gazette)

â€” [Vote Yes](#), by Wayne Barrett. (Village Voice)

â€” [City Charter Revision Commission](#)

â€” [Independence Party](#)

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Vote "No"

â€˜ [Crusading for Some Real Reforms](#) by Mark Green. (Gotham Gazette)

â€˜ [Vote No](#) by Tom Robbins. (Village Voice)

â€˜ [New York Public Research Interest Group](#)

â€˜ [Association of the Bar of the City of New York](#)

â€˜ [Citizens Union](#)

â€˜ [Common Cause New York](#)

â€˜ [Women's City Club of New York](#)

â€˜ [Working Families Party](#)

WHERE DO I VOTE?

Registered voters should have received a yellow post card in the mail with the address of their polling place. If you did not, call the Board of Elections at 1-866-VOTE NYC, try the board's poll site locator [web site](#) , or e-mail them at vote@boe.nyc.ny.us with your complete address, and you should receive an email instructing you where to vote.

Polls open at 6:00 a.m. and close at 9:00 p.m. Absentee ballots must be hand-delivered to the Board of Elections by 9:00 p.m.

WHAT IF I ENCOUNTER PROBLEMS AT THE POLLS?

If you have problems at your polling site on Election Day, call the New York Public Interest Research Group Voter Help Line 212-822-0282 to register your complaint.

On their Web site, the [New York Public Research Interest Group](#) also has instructions for how to work the [voting machine](#) and a [Voter's Bill of Rights](#) , which answers basic questions like "Can I bring someone with me to help vote?" and "Can I still vote if the machine breaks?" (The answer to both questions is "yes.")

HOW DO I FIND OUT THE RESULTS?

Television stations and newspapers will cover the ballot questions and City Council races, but some results - like judicial races - are more difficult to find.

Visit Gotham Gazette's [results page](#) on election night and the following days. Remember, a close race can take days or weeks to decide.