

New York City Council Races Get More Competitive

by Rachael Fauss

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With a handful of incumbents having lost in this fall's New York City Council elections, the 2009 elections seemed more competitive than those in 2005, but exactly how much more competitive were they? Successful competitors beat five incumbents in 2009 -- [Maria Baez](#) , [Alan Gerson](#)

,
[Kenneth Mitchell](#)

,
[Helen Sears](#)

and

[Kendall Stewart](#)

-- while in 2005, only

[Alan Jennings](#)

lost his seat after allegedly sexually harassing staffers.

Aside from outright losses, the incumbents who won in 2009 did so with smaller margins of victory than those in 2005. In the primary elections -- which are often tantamount to winning the election in New York given the high enrollment of Democrats -- an incumbent's average margin of victory in a contested race was 29 percent in 2009, rather than 48 percent in 2005. In part, this is because more candidates ran and split the vote. In 2009 an average of four challengers ran against each incumbent, while in 2005, most incumbents faced only one or two challengers. In the general election, incumbents fared as well in 2009 as in 2005, winning with an average margin of victory of 65 percent.

Landslides and Uncontested Races

Overall, incumbents still seem to have a leg up on challengers. The re-election rate for sitting council members -- often cited as exemplifying the power of incumbency -- was still high in 2009 at 88 percent, though down from previous years such as 1997 and 2003 when every single council member who sought re-election won.

Several incumbents had large margins of victory in the primaries, including [Letitia James](#) in District 35 who won by a margin of 67 percent over two challengers, and

[Rosie Mendez](#)

in District 2 who won by a margin of 66 percent over one other challenger. In the general election, there were far more landslide victories. Notable for their wide margins of victory in the general election were Democratic councilmembers

[Maria del Carmen Arroyo](#)

in District 17 and

[Robert Jackson](#)

in District 7, who each obtained over 95 percent of the vote.

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What may have been overlooked in this year's elections are the numerous seats where incumbents ran unopposed in the primary and where victorious primary winners faced no competition in the general election. In the 2009 primary, 19 council members had no opponent, while in 2005, there were 27 uncontested races. In the general elections, there were five uncontested races in 2009, compared to 14 in 2005. Notably, [Simcha Felder](#) was unopposed in both the primary and general elections in 2009. In stark comparison, incumbents

[Alan Gerson](#)

,
[Christine Quinn](#)

,
[David Weprin](#)

,
[Leroy Comrie](#)

,
[Dennis Gallagher](#)

,
[Joseph Addabbo](#)

and Felder all were unopposed in both the primary and general elections in 2005. Overall, incumbents this year had more challengers than in the past, in both the primary and general elections.

Open Races

Contests for open seats continued to be the most competitive and crowded races. There were eight open seats this year, with an average of five candidates running for each. In 2005, an average of six candidates ran for the seven open seats. The average margin of victory for open primary races remained nearly constant from 2005 to 2009, with the margin decreasing from 20 percent in 2005 to 19 percent in 2009. Thus it seems that the incumbent races in 2009 began to approach the level of competition seen in open races, which could be a good sign for voters, but not incumbents.

One open race -- [District 19](#), formerly held by unsuccessful mayoral candidate [Tony Avella](#) -- had both a competitive

[primary](#)

and

[general election](#)

. In the Democratic primary election, six candidates faced off, with

[Kevin Kim](#)

receiving 2,692 votes to win the election with a margin of 6 percent over second place finisher

[Jerry Iannece](#)

, who received 2,139 votes. Kim later lost in the general election to Republican candidate

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[Daniel Halloran](#)

, who won by a 3 percent margin.

Close Calls and Defeat

Several incumbents lost this year, but there were also a few races where incumbents had very narrow victories. In Brooklyn there was a contentious battle for [Diana Reyna's](#) seat in [District 34](#),

where Brooklyn Democratic Party Chair Vito Lopez [supported](#)

challenger

[Maritza Davila](#)

in an effort to unseat Reyna. One other challenger,

[Gerald Esposito](#)

, also appeared on the ballot. Reyna squeaked out a victory in the Democratic primary by a margin of 3 percent, gaining 4,332 votes to Davila's 4,067. Davila remained on the ballot under the Working Families Party line for the general election, which Reyna won by a margin of 28 percent.

Other close races included [District 28](#) where incumbent [Thomas White Jr.](#) won by a mere [four votes](#)

over challenger

[Lynn Nunes](#)

in a six-way race.

Another incumbent with a [smaller-than-expected margin](#) of victory was City Council Speaker [Christine Quinn](#)

in the

[Democratic primary](#)

against challengers

[Yetta Kurland](#)

and

[Maria Passannante-Derr](#)

in

[District 3](#)

. Quinn won by a margin of 21 percent, obtaining 7,178 or 53 percent of the total votes over Kurland's 4,269 and Passanante-Derr's 2,213.

Incumbent [Kendall Stewart](#) did not fare as well in [District 45](#). In the [Democratic primary](#),

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six candidates appeared on the ballot, and

[Jumaane Williams](#)

won by a margin of 11 percent, getting 3,426 votes to Stewart's 2,392. Stewart remained on the ballot for the general election on the Independence Party line, and Williams won by a margin of 60 percent. Stewart's tough election may have resulted from scandal involving the

[indictment](#)

of two of his aides for corruption, as well as his vote to extend term limits.

Reasons for the Competition

Several factors may have worked to increase the competitiveness of the elections along with issues particular to each race. These include the [extension of term limits](#), recent [changes to the city's campaign finance laws](#)

to ease the ability of challengers to earn public matching funds, and the increased role of the [Working Families Party](#)

in Democratic Party primaries. While the relationship of the Working Families Party and its affiliate organizations such as Data and Field Services has come under some

[scrutiny](#)

, its

[efforts in several races](#)

may have played a decisive role.

The term limits extension also played a part. Of the five incumbents who lost, four [voted to extend](#) term

limits (

[Kenneth Mitchell](#)

was elected in a special election after the term limits vote). Councilmembers

[differed](#)

over whether the term limits extension was a factor in the elections, but from the beginning of the campaign term limits seemed

[destined to play a role](#)

. With voter turnout extremely low, theories that incumbents' traditional bases (particularly

[Mayor Michael Bloomberg's](#)

) did not turn out while voters angry over term limits did also gave credence to the argument that term limits influenced the elections.

The city's new [campaign finance program](#) includes a public match for certain contributions.

Hailed as the

["strongest campaign finance system](#)

in the nation," when enacted in 2007, the laws were strengthened to include an increased public match, as well as a ban on certain institutional contributions and limits on contributions from individuals who do business with the city.

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"A very important part of the Campaign Finance Program's mission is to help more citizens conduct competitive campaigns for office without the support of party machines or wealthy backers," said Eric Friedman, the press secretary for the New York City [Campaign Finance Board](#), which administers the law. "The results of this year's election at the council level, while there is still some way to go, show how the program has been successful."

The Campaign Finance Board's [post-election analysis](#) also provides some interesting information regarding the increase in competition this year.

Looking forward to 2013, it remains to be seen what new factors will be at play, though there should be many open seats -- provided there is not another change to the term limits law. Whatever happens, any incumbents seeking reelection should steel themselves for the possibility of a serious challenge.

Rachael Fauss is research and policy associate for [Citizens Union Foundation](#), which publishes Gotham Gazette.