by Gotham Gazette Staff
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Photo by Gail Robinson Congressional candidates David Weprin and Bob Turner faced a raucous crowd at a debate in Howatrd Beach last week.

In May, Democrats pulled off a major upset in New York's 26th Congressional District, winning a special election in a district Republicans had held for more than 40 years.

On Sept. 13, Republicans hope to return the favor and capture the traditionally Democratic seat in Queen and Brooklyn that Anthony Weiner â€“ an outspoken Democrat if ever there was one â€“ had to relinquish after his now infamous text messages.

The race in the Ninth Congressional District offers some big issues -- the president's popularity (or lack thereof), the future of Social Security, U.S, policy toward Israel. The contest, though, has attracted so much attention partly because, for legions of political junkies, 2011 is the dry year, the odd numbered year with no mayoral contest that occurs in New York City politics every four years or so.

A few other races of varying interest also will appear on some ballots in the city Tuesday. There are four special elections to fill vacant Assembly seats: two in Queens, one in Brooklyn and one in Manhattan. The contest to replace Darryl Towns in Bushwick/Cypress Hills has garnered the most attention with three serious candidates each of whom represents a distinct faction in this section of Brooklyn.

Any registered voter in any of those districts or the congressional district can vote in their local contest.

Sept. 13 also is primary day, such as it is this year. This means some voters will get to select their party's nominees for the few positions up for grabs in November's general election â€“ and others will get to select those who serve in party posts.

So what's the bottom line here? No one, regardless of party, in the Bronx or Staten Island gets to cast a vote on Tuesday. After that, it gets more complicated. Our guide to the races, the jobs and the voting rules below.

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Congressional Temp

In the dragon-shaped slice of New York that is the Ninth Congressional District Democratic Assemblymember David Weprin and former cable television executive Bob Turner are fighting very hard for a job that many believe will only last about 14 months

. With New York about to lose two House seats in the redistricting prior to the 2012 election, the ninth seems a likely candidate for elimination.

The political parties, though see this contest as a chance to show their strength -- or, more accurately, the other side's weakness â€“ and have dumped in money and resources. Over the weeks, both candidate seem to have readily adopted the role as their party's standard-bearer. At a recent debate in Howard Beach -- complete with Tea Party hecklers and a pack of noisy Weprin backers in the rear of the church meeting room -- the two epitomized a left/right split.

Weprin embraced a millionaire's tax; Turner opposed it. Weprin demanded the closing of tax loopholes and repeatedly attacked tax breaks for companies that move jobs overseas, while Turner said he never met a tax break he didn't like. (Turner later said he was joking, but in the same answer he also was unable to name a single loophole he would seek to close.)

As a member of the Assembly, Weprin voted for same-sex marriage, which Turner opposes. Weprin said he supported a woman's right to chose and would not vote for anything to curtail it; Turner described himself as "pro-life."

Above all Turner hammered away at the need to cut government spending. When Weprin said he endorsed a jobs bill, Turner told the Howard Beach crowd, "Another jobs bill. Another stimulus. Another trillion in pork. Haven't you had enough?"

Turner paints the need for spending cuts in almost apocalyptic terms. "These budget problems are very real," he said. "I would like to see this country survive in 10 years as it is now." Invoking periods of hyperinflation in Russia and Argentina, Turner said, "It can happen here, and it will happen here."

Weprin insisted be would support cuts in spending by, among other things, withdrawing more troops from Afghanistan and Iraq. "I didn’t say I wouldn't cut any spending â€¦. I would do it with a scalpel, not a hatchet," he said, adding "we also have to have some form of high-end taxation."

Turner has sought to turn the election into a referendum on Obama, who is thought to be unpopular in this largely Democratic district. He got a boost from former Mayor Ed Koch, who though he has characterized Republicans in the House -- whose ranks Turner would bolster -- as "scoundrels" called on district residents to vote for Turner to send Obama and other Democrats a message on Israel.

Weprin, scion of a political family and former member of the City Council, seemed slow to catch on, probably never anticipating that, as an observant Jew who has visited Israel many times, he would find himself under attack by some Jews for supporting same sex marriage, not railing against an Islamic center near Ground Zero or being insufficiently pro-Israel. Never an electrifying campaigner, Weprin made several gaffes, canceling a debate hosted by a powerful civic organization, for one, and underestimating the size of the national debt by a factor of three.

As election day neared, Weprin seemed to find his footing a bit, calling on voters to support him to send another message, one in support of Social Security and Medicare. At the Howard Beach debate, he repeatedly pledged that protecting the programs "will be my top priority" and said Turner could not achieve his goal of cutting government spending by 35 percent without hurting the two programs.

For his part Turner, has tried to distance himself from some Republicans who have attacked Social Security. Instead he called it "a successful program," but added. "the finances are in trouble so much so that the program is in jeopardy."

And Turner fell victim to some gaffes of hos own -- on tax loopholes, for one.

It may, though, be too late for the Democratic to reverse the tide. Late last week, the momentum seem to have shifted solidly in Turner's favor. A Siena Poll found Turner with 50 percent of voters, compared to 44 percent for Weprin, within the statistical margin of error, though just barely, but hardly good news for Weprin.

The key could lie in how many of those voters actually go to the polls on Tuesday. This

weekend, both sides stepped up efforts to make sure their backers did. Turner hoped an endorsement from former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani would galvanize his supporters. Weprin turned to popular Democrats, such as Sen. Charles Schumer and Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

Three-Way Showdown

Photo by Candy Godron Candidates for the 54th Assembly District meet in Cypress Hills to debate.

(Last month David King profiled the race in the 54th Assembly District in Three Candidates vie in a Special Special Election. The following updates that report.)

Most special elections for state legislature in new York City leave little open to question. Since the rules do not call for primaries, party leaders pick their nominee. Given the lopsided party enrollment in most of the city, the Democrat then coasts to victory. In the 54th Assembly District, the party leaders made their choice -- selecting Rafael Espinal to fill the post. But that certainly has not been the end of it.

The question in the special election in Bushwick to fill the Assembly seat vacated by Darryl Towns seems like a simple one. Can 26-year-old Jesus Gonzalez use his skills as a community organizer and excitement around his candidacy to deliver enough voters to the polls to support him?

He now enjoys the endorsements of El Diario and the Daily News . Media reports have focused on his relative independence compared to that of Deidra Towns, sister of Darryl Towns and daughter of Rep. Edolphus Towns, and that of Espinal, who is backed by the Democratic Party leader Vito Lopez and the father-son team of State Sen. Martin Dilan and City Councilmember Erik Dilan.

While Towns can boast of overwhelming name recognition, Espinal has sewn up the Democratic and Conservative lines. As the Daily News endorsement of Gonzalez pointed out, Espinal filled out questionnaires for the Conservative and Working Families Party in completely contradictory ways. For the Conservative Party he stood against same-sex marriage; for Working Families he was for it.

Espinal flouted repeated attempts by the Gazette to speak with him about where he really stands. He canceled scheduled interviews, tried to dictate what questions would be asked and then ran out of a room to avoid an interview.

But with the Democratic and Conservative line and the backing of establishment politicians like Lopez and the Dilans, Espinal has to be considered the favorite. To win, not only will Gonzalez have to turn out his voters but like Towns he will have to educate them to vote on his line -- in Gonzalez's case the Working Families Party Line, in Towns case the Community First Line.

As the campaigns have tried to educate voters, door -to-door, at subway stops, nursing homes and picnics the Espinal campaign has avoided charges that they failed to file campaign finance documents on time and that they doctored a picture. His opponents say the Espinal campaign changed a picture so that protestors who actually carried about a proposed halfway house seemed to bear placards attacking Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Gonzalez said the prospect of real political choice could drive the district's residents, who usually don't show up in large numbers, to the polls. "We need to win people who vote religiously, and we need to get new voters out. But we have to educate them on how to vote for us," said campaign manager Sarah Johnson. "People say this is a low turnout district but when have voters in this district had this kind of choice?"

Following Pheffer

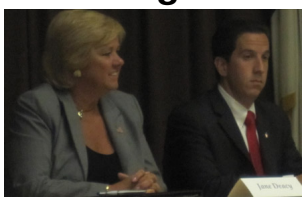

Photo by Gal Robinson Jane Deacy and Philip Goldfeder faced voters in Queens last week.

Although he is only 30, Philip Goldfeder has good political connections -- he's worked for Sen. Charles Schumer, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and two Queens City Council members. That

connection seems to have paid off, as the Democrats this summer anointed Goldfeder as their pick to fill the Assembly seat left vacant when Audrey Pheffer became Queens County clerk. Before he can get to Albany, though, Goldfeder needs to fend off Republican Jane Deacy in the 23rd Assembly District, which includes the Rockaways and Howard Beach.

Goldfeder believes his lifetime in the Rockaways and links to Democrats -- he often ties himself to Pheffer who he praises effusively -- will win him the job. Republicans point to Deacy's resume -- she was one of the first women ever trained as police officer in the city -- and what they see as a GOP trend in the area as giving them a shot.

On many issues raised at a recent debate in Howard Beach, the two agreed. Both, for example, welcome the Racino at Aqueduct Racetrack as a possible source of jobs but urged a greater police presence to prevent crime and preserve the quality of life in the surrounding areas.

Both said they supported have an independent redistricting commission draw district boundaries. While both opposed taxes to raise money for the Metropolitan Transit Authority, such as congestion pricing and the MTA payroll tax , they agree that the authority should provide better bus service in their area.

Notwithstanding Goldfeder's one-word description of himself as "bold," Deacy seemed the more outspoken of the two. On same sex marriage for example -- which Deacy said she opposes -- Goldfeder said he could not say how he would have voted. "I don't know. I haven’t read the bill," he said, prompting at least one member of the audience to shout "bad answer."

When asked whether he would support Democrat David Weprin or Republican Bob Turner -- both of who debated only minutes later in the same room (see above) -- Goldfeder demurred, saying he did not live in their district. And he tried to remain vague on a bill to make English the official language. (Deacy backs it.)

The two did take different stands on hydrofracking for natural gas. Deacy said she wanted a study to determine if the drilling would damage New York City's drinking water. "If health would not be at risk," Deacy said, "and it’s a job creator for New York residents, I'm all for it."

Goldfeder disagreed. "If there's any chance that the New York City water supply is going to be in jeopardy, then the answer is no," he said.

And while Goldfeder backs a millionaire's tax, Deacy opposes it.

In terms of fundraising, 11 days before the election Goldfeder had $109,649; Deacy had $34,791.

Replacing the Boss

The race -- if one calls it that -- for the 27th Assembly seat in Queens offers a textbook example of what some think are shortcomings of democracy in New York.

First Nettie Mayhersohn announced her retirement less than five months after winning reelection. While few could fault the Assembly member for wanting to retire as she neared 87 and after 28 years in Albany, some did question why she step down before Election Day -- when district resident could have chosen her successor.

Then patty leaders picked her longtime aide Michael Simanowitz , as the candidate from the largely Democratic district.
Justin Wax Jacobs
, a former studemt Association president at University of Albany. also wanted to run. Democratis leader, he
has said
, refused to even interview him. Persevering, Jacobs then collected 1,600 signatures (the party's picks don't have to collect even one signature; only those running on their own do).

But Jacobs' effort came to naught when the Board of Elections tbumped him off the ballot, criticizing him for not having the number of the Assembly district on the top of every page of signatures, the Queens Chronicle reported. It doesn't take a conspiracy theorist to think the Democratic Party might have had something to do with that. Party leaders contacted by the Chronicle refused to comment.

Meanwhile, Republican Marco DeSena , a communications consultant and former adviser to Rudolph Giuliani's presidential campaign, still hopes to deny Simanowitz the seat.

If money is a guide, he has an uphill fight. Although the state Board of Elections does not show his report for 11 days prior to the election his July report showed him with $9,463. Early his month, Simanowitz reported $85,052 on hand.

East Side Story

Jonathan Bing had barely stepped down to join the Cuomo administration before it seemed every leading Democrat in Manhattan was touting Daniel Quart as his successor for the Assembly from the 73rd district. A lawyer and member of a community board, Quart is reportedly on good terms with Bing and had backing from U.S. Rep Carolyn Maloney, among others.

Manhattan Republicans though want to put a crimp in Quart's plans, and have nominated Paul Niehaus
, also an attorney, who
lost to Bing
in November.

In recent years hope has sprung eternal among East Side Republicans. Although once a bastion of all but extinct liberal to moderate Rockefeller Republicanism, Democrats in the district now outnumber Republicans three to one. And though Bing's predecessor -- John Ravitz --was a Republican, the Republicans have not won a race there in at least a decade.

Quart's most recent campaign finance filing showed him with a negative balance of almost $35,000. His report filed 32 days prior to the election showed $95,622 in expenditures, including almost $20,000 for polling.

Going into the final stretch, Niehaus reported having $14,479.

To the Polls -- Again

In November Ruben Wills won an election to fill the Queens City Council seat previously held by Thomas White, who died in office . The law requires that Wills go before the voters again this year.

The primary for the seat from the 28th Council District is only the latest turn of events in a section of Queens that has become known for its bizarre politics over the past decade. This is the home turf of former City Councilmember Alan Jennings, who lost his 2005 re-election bid following his censure by the council and a spate of bizarre newspaper advertisements.

Wills has had his own problems. In his unsuccessful 2009 race for council , he allegedly tried to punch Jennings. White won that contest.

After White died, the contest to replace him featured Jennings (again!), Wills and an imam who was investigated for illegal possession of a weapon, as well as Nicole Bell, whose fiance, Sean Bell, was killed by police on the day he was to have married her. Another candidate, Albert Baldeo, rebutted accusations he faked campaign contributions and accused other candidates of various types of skullduggery.

This time around Wills faces, yes, Jennings, along with Michael Duvalle and Clifton Stanley Diaz . Whoever wins will likely go to the council, since there is no Republican candidate.

Wills has accused Jennings of using "questionable loans" to finance his campaign and wants the Campaign Finance Board to investigate. Jennings, according to City Hall, owes the city some $45,000 for previous campaign finance violations.

For his part, Wills faces a trial on Oct. 4 for an unresolved misdemeanor case dating back to 1996. He also has open warrants for failing to pay more than $25,000 in child support payments, the Wall Street Journal reported

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This part of the city has been hard hit by the foreclosure crisis but by most accounts the campaign has featured little serious discussion of that. Wills and Jennings hurl charges and countercharges at one another while Diaz, chair of the Rochdale Village Housing Civic Association , and Duvalle, a small business owner and onetime educator, remain largely silent.

Judicial Contests

The only judicial primaries are two Democratic contests for Civil Court seats. In Manhattan's Third Municipal Court District, Housing Court judge Sabrina Kraus faces Tony Cannataro , a law clerk for a state Supreme Court judge. Brooklyn has a countywide contest between Sharen Hudson of the Red Hook Community Justice Center and Cheryl Gonzales, another Housing Court judge.

All four were approved as qualified by the New York City Bar Association . The Times endorsed Cannataro and Gonzalez.

Proxy Fights

In a number of neighborhoods, registered party members will get to cast votes for district leaders.

District leaders are intermediaries between the major political parties and the community in which they are elected. Together they form the governing bodies of the Democratic and Republican parties within their respective counties. The position is often seen as a stepping-stone to higher office, and many times is held by members of the State Assembly or City Council. Former New York City Mayor Ed Koch started his political career as a district leader.

Each district elects a male and female representative. District leaders serve four-year terms, are not paid and work within the political parties. "The way to think of them is not as a 'block captain,' but as a 'neighborhood captain,'" according to Alex Carabelli, deputy director of

Grassroots Initiative, a non-profit organization that helps community members get elected to local office. "They help coordinate petitioning and local campaigns, and anything else the parties are doing in the community."

District leaders select poll inspectors, clerks, supervisors and translators to fill the various poll worker positions on Election Day. They also serve as ex-officio members of the County Committee Executive Board.

Generally in the city, the heated district leader battles are within the Democratic Party -- in 2008, for example, the fight for control of the Bronx Democratic Party played out partly in a series of District leader contests.

This year, a number of GOP district leader posts in Queens are contested. The seats have reportedly emerged as battlegrounds in the fight for control of the party between the current party leader, Philip Ragusa, and former City Councilmember and frequent candidate Thomas Ognibene. In one such showdown, Bart Haggerty, brother to indicted Bloomberg campaign operative John Haggerty, who goes on trial this week, faces Patrick Gallagher, the son of former Councilmember Denis Gallagher, who had some ethical problems of his own.

In Manhattan Democrats have several district leader contests. In part of the 70th Assembly District in upper Manhattan, three men are vying for the leader's post. The contest, in part, reflects the ongoing rivalry between Assemblymember and county Democtraic chair Keith Wright on one hand and State Sen. Bill Perkins on the other.

Party Politics

Queens Republicans will elect male and female members of the state Republican committee.

State committees are the official party organizations. Most Assembly districts get two members -- one male and one female -- elected by party members in that district. Often these elections, little noticed by many voters, involve larger battles for party control between two or more factions.

In Brooklyn and Queens, Republicans will choose members of the county committee.

Judicial Convention Delegates

Democrats in Manhattan and Brooklyn and Republicans in Queens will cast ballots for posts that some New Yorkers want to eliminate: delegates or alternative delegates to state judicial conventions. Those elected attend a meeting to vote on their party's candidates for state Supreme Court - New York's main trial court. Their action at these meetings tend to be "a formality because the bosses have usually picked the nominees beforehand," Carol DeMare wrote in the Albany Times Union.

Casting a Ballot

The election will be Tuesday, Sept. 13, with polls open from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. All registered voters in the district can vote in the congressional race and the four Assembly contests. The other election are open only to those who have registered in a party at least 25 days before the election . If you have moved within your election district, you can still vote. But if you moved to another election district you must have notified the Board of Elections of your new residence - unless you moved within 20 days of the election. Then you can still vote in your old district.

In primary elections in New York people can vote only in the party in which they are registered.

You should have received a notice in the mail telling you where to vote, or you can go to the Board of Election's poll site locator or call 1 866.VOTE-NYC. This number can provide you with other information as well, such as registration deadlines.

On its web site , the Board of Elections also has instructions for how to work the voting machine, information on absentee voting, candidate lists -- and more.