



IN THE NEWS

Weiner, Gioia and Yassky Look to Staten Island as Key to Primary Wins

Outer-borough appeal could unlock run-off insurance in September

CityHallNews.com

[Dan Rivoli](#)

February 24th, 2009

Back when former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani (R) was out campaigning in the cornfields of Iowa, he often regaled the farmers with stories about Staten Island, that old bastion of conservative small-town family values that gave him his margin of victory in 1993.

But the trope about Staten Island—that the middle class-dominated, sparsely populated borough is full of conservative, Italian- and Irish-Americans that vote Republican—is giving way to new immigrants and outer borough transplants, helping foster a newly robust local Democratic Party.

This has not been lost on several of the citywide hopefuls this year, most notably Council Member David Yassky (D-Brooklyn), Council Member Eric Gioia (D-Queens) and Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-Brooklyn/Queens), who have identified Staten Island as a key to their electoral strategies in September. Where once Staten Island swung the general election for New York, now the borough may well swing the primaries.

“It’s going to be crucial,” said Yassky, who is running for comptroller. “I’m making Staten Island a major focus of my campaign effort.”

Of course, every citywide candidate has spent some time on the island, mainly paying deference to Democratic clubs. But Yassky is going several steps further: he marched in this year’s pride parade, attended a black history month event and addressed congregants at a slew of churches over the past several months, appearing frequently there and on the Upper West Side to expand his base beyond his brownstone Brooklyn home.

Gioia has been keeping pace. In the years he has been campaigning for public advocate, he has studiously attended numerous Staten Island Democratic Party dinners, house parties, fundraisers and parades.

“I think it’s very important,” Gioia said of the borough. “I’m a big believer of going where they are in their living rooms, coffee shops and pizza places—not expecting for people to come to you.”

His stump speech, focused on his personal narrative of growing up the son of outer-borough flower shop owners and mopping floors to put himself through college at New York University, plays particularly well in Staten Island, as does his Italian last name.

“It may sound cliché and it may sound simple, but the people out here vote the person, particularly in local



IN THE NEWS

rices,” said Assembly Member Michael Cusick (D-Staten Island), who recently spent an afternoon with Gioia handing out carnations at senior centers on Valentine’s Day.

“Candidates from other parts of the city looking for votes out here, they’re not going to get them unless the residents see them and know who they are,” said Cusick, who has received phone calls from many citywide candidates asking for his support.

Given that traveling to Staten Island means driving on congested highways and bridges or embarking on an hours-long commute using public transportation, campaigning in the borough is an investment. But the pay-off can be huge.

In Weiner’s 2005 primary for mayor, he received nearly half of the Staten Island votes, keeping Fernando Ferrer from reaching the 40 percent needed to avoid a run-off. For those looking to make it into run-offs this year—or perhaps get enough votes to avoid one—the abundance of potentially overlooked Democratic votes on Staten Island could prove decisive.

Sure enough, Weiner kicked off his 2009 campaign with a fundraising blitz across the five boroughs, stopping on Staten Island to have beer and pretzels at a house party and making the rounds at Democratic organizations.

Mark Benoit, who managed the campaigns of several citywide candidates including Weiner’s 2005 primary, said Weiner’s outer borough-tailored message was a hit in Staten Island.

“His message resonated for the folks in Staten Island,” Benoit said. “We spent a lot of time in Staten Island.”

Given that Democratic trends have picked up significantly since 2005, campaign stops within the borough will exceed the typical Staten Island Ferry commuter handshaking.

“If you have a map with pins representing each stop, Staten Island would usually have the fewest pins,” Benoit said. “Now, the Democratic vote is larger and [there are] more pins in the Staten Island map. It’s just logic.”

Even though Mayor Michael Bloomberg (Ind.), then a Republican, swept Staten Island in both his mayoral runs, Democrats have increased registration rolls by almost 12,000 voters since 2001. This is double the amount of newly registered Republicans in the borough. With a healthy voter roll, campaign money from Staten Island is flourishing as well. By January, Democratic comptroller and public advocate candidates have raised more from Staten Islanders than their counterparts did over the entire 2001 cycle.

That may mean that newly elected Rep. Michael McMahon (D-Staten Island/Brooklyn) could end up something of a kingmaker in the citywide primaries.

But in order to get his and his constituents’ support, McMahon warned that this year’s candidates will have to look to how Republicans boosted their popularity in the borough in past years. Much as Giuliani and Bloomberg did, they need to advocate for increases in public health care and greater investment in public transportation in



IN THE NEWS

the borough.

“The next successful candidate is going to have to build on that and speak to the issues like lack of Health and Hospitals Corporation services in the borough and lack of real mass transit,” McMahon said. “Those are the next two important issues.”

In the meantime, the borough’s new political clout is already having reverberations into policy. Council Member Melinda Katz (D-Queens), herself a comptroller candidate who has spent some time in the borough, said the borough’s political muscle led the Land Use Committee she chairs to downzone overdeveloped parts of Staten Island.

“The civics, community activists there are strong,” Katz said. “You wouldn’t have half the rezoning there if the community wasn’t so active.”