

# FORWARD

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## Jewish Hopefuls Have Losing Feeling

New York state once led the nation in electing Jews to high office. In 1932, Herbert Lehman was elected governor, served three more terms and then ran successfully for the Senate. Jacob Javits, a Republican Congressman from Manhattan, went on to serve as attorney general and then as a senator. Republican Louis Lefkowitz served as attorney general for more than 20 years, and Democrat Arthur Levitt was state comptroller from 1953 to 1978. Long before Jews were elected from other states. New York had a favorable climate for aspiring Jewish politicians.

But, in recent years, Jewish candidates have lost when running for Statewide office. With four Jewish candidates on ballots this election day, the test is to see which way history will swing.

The decline of Jews within the Democratic Party first became evident in the 1970's when Hugh Carey defeated upstate businessman Howard Samuels in the 1974 gubernatorial Democratic primary and Daniel Patrick Moynihan defeated Bella Abzug (among others) in the 1976 Democratic Senate primary. This trend grew stronger when Mario Cuomo won the 1982 Democratic nomination for governor by defeating Mayor Ed Koch of New York. When Alfonse D'Amato defeated Jacob Javits and Elizabeth Holtzman for Senate in 1980, it was clear that politics in the Empire State had changed.

Jewish candidates have lost - despite the fact that they span the ideological spectrum. In 1994, Democratic nominee Karen Burstein lost to conservative Dennis Vacco for attorney general, while Republican Herb London lost to H. Carl McCall, the Democratic nominee for state comptroller. Ever since Robert Abrams was first elected attorney general in 1978 (and then subsequently re-elected three times), Jews have lost whenever they sought statewide office.

This year the Democratic ticket consists of four men from New York City and one woman from a suburb of Rochester. The Democrats have nominated one Italian, Peter Vallone, the speaker of the City Council who is running for governor; one African American, H. Carl McCall, seeking reelection as state comptroller, and three Jews, Rep. Charles Schumer for Senate, Elliot Spitzer for attorney general and Judith Frankel for lieutenant governor.

By contrast, the Republican ticket consists of three suburbanites and two upstaters. Or, in religious terms, four Catholics and one Jew: Governor George Pataki of Hungarian descent; Mary Donohue, an upstate judge of Irish lineage running for lieutenant governor; Senator Alfonse D'Amato and Attorney-General Dennis Vacco, both Italians, and Bruce Blakeman, the nominee for state comptroller, is a Jewish Nassau county official.

It's important to recognize that Jewish candidates lose not because of their religion but because of the state's changing demography and political geography. Religion was once the political fault line

of New York politics. The Republican Party was an alliance of old Protestant families committed to "good government" values bolstered by rural communities. The Democratic Party was a marriage of Jewish and Irish-Catholic voters in New York City and once-thriving industrial centers like Albany and Buffalo. Today, Italians make up the state's largest single group; the Jews and Irish, while still politically potent, increasingly pursue routes to achievement outside government.

The state's political realignment makes it difficult for liberal Jewish politicians from New York City to move up the state's political ladder. New York City is no longer the dominant source of votes in statewide elections; it casts just 27% of the votes in the entire state. The suburbs surrounding New York City account for 28% of the votes and the remaining 45% come from upstate. Beyond the five boroughs and Westchester County, the Democratic Party is politically invisible and, as a result, candidates solely identified with New York City regardless of religion start out at a substantial disadvantage.

Mr. Schumer, first elected to the state legislature in 1974, has represented largely white districts, initially in the state assembly and then for nine terms in the House of Representatives. Although Mr. Schumer supported David Dinkins rather than Ed Koch in the 1989 mayoral primary, Mr. Schumer's links to minority communities have been constrained because of the racially drawn boundaries of New York's congressional districts. Mr. D'Amato, by contrast, has used his role as chairman of the Senate Banking Committee to forge ties to black and Latino congressional members from New York who depend on federal housing and community development funds. He has even become a strong advocate of Puerto Rican statehood.

Mr. D'Amato, running on the Right-to-Life ticket and opposed by the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, has sought to neutralize his opposition to abortion by aggressively supporting breast cancer treatment and research, and he has even earmarked funds for a new breast care center on Long Island. This may well be an election in which voting-age women demonstrate that they are more concerned about mammograms than abortion.

Although Mr. Schumer has a strong legislative record fighting crime and supporting gun control, these positions have limited appeal in New York state. Upstate voters are more active defenders of the Second Amendment, the right to bear arms, than the First Amendment, the right to free speech. In New York City, where the streets are palpably safer under the Giuliani administration, public safety is considered the province of local government, not Congress.

That's why Mr. Schumer, despite his Jewish roots, cannot take votes for granted. The Jewish vote may yet be decisive in 1998, since turnout in heavily Democratic New York City may be low. Mr. D'Amato has also not stopped raising questions about Mr. Schumer's vote against the Gulf War and his absence from a House Banking Committee vote regarding the claims of Holocaust survivors.

Mr. D'Amato has built a career defeating a series of Jewish opponents - Mr. Javits, Ms. Holtzman, Mark Green and Ms. Abrams - while becoming a champion of Jewish causes. Mr. D'Amato undoubtedly has spent more time in synagogues than most secular Jews. On Rosh Hashana, he was in the Park Avenue Armory along with the displaced members of the reform Central Synagogue, whose magnificent building had been destroyed by fire just a few weeks before the High Holy Days.

Admittedly, some Jews are uncomfortable with Mr. D'Amato's heavy-handed tactics, but those confrontational techniques are what make him effective fighting the enemies of the Jews: Swiss Banks, Crown Heights' rioters and Arab terrorists. For decades, it has been an unspoken rule of Jewish political life not to abandon incumbents who have been responsive to Jewish interests. Why should this year be any different from all other years?

Because New York state is not what it once was. Chuck Schumer, a Brooklyn native, educated at Harvard College and Harvard Law School, has never lost an election. He possesses the paper

credentials that would have once assured political success in the Empire State. If he loses to Mr. D'Amato, the election of 1998 will tell us whether Jewish politicians must move beyond New York City and establish new political alliances and agendas to succeed in the 21st century.

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