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Democracy Later

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Democracy Later

On July 5 2018, I kicked off my political career. I woke up at five am, put on my only suit, and attempted to get my hair and beard under control. By six am I was ready, and stepped out into what was already a brutal, sweltering day.

Armed with only a clipboard featuring the names and addresses of over 600 local voters, I set off under the beating sun. I needed to gather their signatures. I was not, and would never become, clear on how many signatures I needed.

I had only 12 hours.

With no time to waste, I started knocking on doors.

As soon as I began knocking on doors, people began closing them on me. I'd walk up six-story apartment buildings, and hit every apartment on the way down.

"Hi, my name is Da-". And the door would slam.

This happened so many times, I found myself flabbergasted and unprepared for the few people who actually did let me speak to them.

And they were few.

12 hours. From sunrise to sunset. I was drenched in sweat, dehydrated, confused and all-but-certain that I had failed.

12 hours, and only 13 signatures to show for it.

According to Maxine Hirsch, a political activist and college teacher with decades of political experience, this nightmarish experience is hardly unique.

"Party politics are, and have been, designed to keep average people out," said Hirsch, who runs Mockery of a Democracy, a New York-based political nonprofit working to get money out of politics. "It's an incestuous cycle of people, profits, and power. It's so fortified it's become nearly impossible for an average person to navigate."

Hirsch, 90, knows how treacherous politics can be.

“They keep the rules confusing, the requirements unclear, and stack the decks by appointing their people wherever they can,” said Hirsch. “It’s a full-time job to learn, and the average person already has a full-time job. Probably more than one.”

I am an average person. And this is how the Party kept me out.

Jesse Rose believes in Democracy. So much so that despite being a father and an active lawyer, he willingly pours whatever remaining time and energy he has left into political activism.

The New Queens Democrats was Rose’s creation. His way of making politics more accessible to the average person.

The idea came to Rose in 2016, following his involvement in Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaign. Rose had spent the previous five years working at his own employment discrimination firm, just another way for him to help people. “I was taught to help people,” said Rose, who was raised in a heavily religious, southern, household. “That there was an underlying social commitment we had to each other.”

After Sanders announced his campaign in 2015, Rose dove in head-first by tapping his political connections to become a DNC delegate, and even donating his firm’s office space. That same office, located in Astoria, Queens, would soon become the headquarters for Rose’s self-described “insurgent progressive coalition” group, The New Queens Democrats.

After being involved with Sanders’ primary loss Rose was determined to stay involved, and thought he had identified one of the major problems with the progressive movement.

“There is no broad progressive group,” said Rose. “They lack organization and leadership. People are doing it because they wanted the spotlight.”

Rose stepped in. He felt he had to. He knew it wouldn’t be easy, creating a political group from the ground up that could contend with the vast and developed network the establishment Queens Democrats had already put in place.

He officially created the New Queens Democrats in 2016. His group was focused on selecting and supporting candidates in different local political positions all around Queens. So when the 2018 County Committee elections came around, Rose and his 'insurgent' group were ready to run their first candidates.

Which is what made July 24th one of the hardest days of my life. And one of his: "It was one of the shittiest days of my life," said Rose.

But to understand our frustrations and dismay, we have to start at the beginning.

Many of the complexities of the New York political system are well-known. From how early a voter must file their registration information, to difficulties getting ballot access, politics is not a fair game in New York. To use a cliché, it's a party, and we're not invited.

However, as public interest in running for various government positions has blossomed since the 2016 election, it has become increasingly clear to us political newcomers that the inner workings of city and state politics are intentionally shrouded in vagueness and mystery.

"Since the days of Tammany Hall, New York City politics have been structured so that those in power can stay in power," said Hirsch.

"Democratic party insiders have been using money and connections to maintain the status quo ever since."

Hirsch's explanation harkens to the days of Tammany Hall, the democratic political machine that dominated New York City politics from the 1850's to the 1930's, from the election of Mayor Fernando Wood through that of Fiorella LaGuardia. Though Tammany Hall officially collapsed in the 1960's, the insider nature of the democratic party continues to run rampant.

"All of municipal government loves their power. Big money has always dominated New York," said Mick Bucaro, a legislative staffer in Councilmember Keith Power's office. "Big corporations have huge power over bargaining tax breaks and incentives, and that puts city legislature in a tough bind."

There are many examples of how the party continues to maintain control.

As Katie Hawkland, a local political activist and project director for the Working Families Party, explains: “Ballot petitioning sounds like basic democracy: to run for office, you have to get signatures from a certain percent of your potential constituents, effectively demonstrating community support,” says Hawkland. “It’s a ‘Nice, cute, democracy at work’ kind of thing.”

Sadly, as I’ve learned firsthand, it’s never that simple.

Hawkland explains: “Differences in money to spend, and the lack of understanding about petitioning amongst regular folks, gets in the way of the process really being a representation of community support.”

While establishment Democrats have party and lobbyist support and resources to toss around, us average folks are left to fend for ourselves. Even just understanding and following the rules can be dizzying in it’s difficulty: “The devil is in the details, and there are a fuckload of details,” said Hawkland. “Many party rules are counter-intuitive, and change every few years. Those changes are often hard to find out from the BOE, unless you’ve got friends on the inside, or have the money to pay a lawyer.”

As someone who does not have resources to spare, I can attest to just how difficult it was to understand the very rules I was expected to follow. While I had to hit the pavement and acquire my own signatures, the county committee incumbents did not have to work as hard. “Incumbents get the bulk of their signatures from local political clubs, so they save time AND money,” said Hawkland.

Or to simplify it as Rose does: “the Democrats in New York are dominated by backroom deals made by a bunch of old white men.”

Even the process of running for low-level, local office is difficult and trying. “The people in the party make it very difficult for new faces to get involved,” said Hirsch. “They make it so that without those political connections or a ton of money, the average citizen won’t be able to penetrate the party.”

According to Hirsch, the reason for the resistance is fear. “They’re afraid of change. Afraid of grassroots politics. Afraid to lose power and money.”

I would know. I saw all of it unfold from within as a first-time candidate. In the Summer of 2018, I campaigned as a candidate for Queens County Committee. Every step of the process was nebulous, unclear, and puzzling.

At the end of it all, myself, and 60 other candidates who ran alongside me under Rose's New Queens Democrats, had nothing to show for it but disappointment and confusion.

This is the story of Dave, and 59 other candidates, vs The Machine. Spoiler alert -- **as it has since TK since the inception of this current statue quo** -- The machine, unfortunately, wins.

What is Queens County Committee? A little known, entry-level political position. In the city, each borough has its own county committee, which serves as the most local level of party governance. County Committee is often considered the most grassroots level of the Democratic Party. Its intention is to serve as a stepping stone for those who wish to enter the political realm without a legacy, connections, or huge campaign coffers.

After the 2016 election many people were spurred into political action, either through excitement, fear, or rage. Many on both sides of the political spectrum felt a wave of inspiration to get personally involved as they saw the rise of candidates like Trump and Sanders, candidates in whom they saw parts themselves. The reminder that someone like you, a normal person, could do it, was intoxicating.

That message resonated with people all over the country. According to Our Revolution, Sanders' legacy organization, more than 15,000 first-time candidates signed up to run under them for various levels of local office nationwide. I was one of them.

Different groups formed to help potential candidates organize and learn how to navigate the political system. These groups encouraged people to run, or to suggest their friends to run, anything to help increase overall engagement with democracy. Our Revolution alone managed to raise \$1,250,000 for their candidates. Money that was used to try and level the playing field.

When I received a text message from a volunteer affiliated with Our Revolution and the New Queens Democrats, I should have balked. I may

have not known a lot about politics, but I had never heard of a candidate being recruited by text.

Still, the text message asking me if I wished to run for an open County Committee seat in my Assembly District was exciting. I jumped at the opportunity.

I had been pining to get involved in politics since I first heard Sanders speak. It was a confrontation between Sanders and then-Chairman of the Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan in 2003 that really drew me in. Though I was watching it in 2015, the message hit me hard: Politicians don't understand real people, they don't want to understand real people, and they don't know how to help real people.

I had just been unable to figure out how to enter politics. This was my chance. I immediately replied yes, and embarked on my journey to being flattened and politically discouraged.

The first step, was to wait for an email that would explain what the position was, how to make sure I was qualified, and the necessary paperwork for my first-ever political run. The email took a few days to arrive, and went right to my spam folder. Promising start. On July 3, a Monday, I finally received the email. [image below]

Devoid of details about the position itself, or the committee, the email simply provided me with the petitions I needed to fill out. By Thursday, July 5. That gave me 2 days to gather signatures. One day, factoring in my responsibilities and life.

But not just any signatures. The Party requires a candidate to get specific signatures, from the very specific aforementioned list. The list had 630 names total.

How many signatures did I need to get? That was the first problem. No one could answer that question. A series of back and forth emails [pictured] produced no real response. My only advice was not to worry about it.

So, I didn't.

The second problem, is that the list was outdated. At least half of the addresses we visited no longer belonged to the person listed. And the person listed is the only signature that counts.

I took the signatures I had gathered to Rose's office, in Astoria, Queens. As the head of the New Queens Dems, Rose and his office were in charge of collecting our petitions. Since we were all new to politics, they were also in charge of handling our petitions and turning them over to the proper electoral bodies.

Which was the third problem. The New Queens Dems, as a newly-founded fledgling group, rely heavily on volunteers. They relied on a volunteer for handling our petitions and turning them in. Volunteers are typically rich in enthusiasm, but often times light on practical experience. Which was the case with this volunteer. Though armed with the best of intentions, they made made a mistake.

Each County Committee has a certain number of seats available. A person who wishes to run for a County Committee seat can choose an election district in which they will run. They do not actually have to live within the election district to run, it just has to be within their assembly district. If a person is running unopposed for the seat they have chosen, they are automatically elected to that position.

County Committee members meet only once every two years, a fact that Rose had tried to address and rectify as a sitting Committee member previously. Nothing came of his efforts then, and thus the committee has stuck by its biannual meetings. The meetings are sparsely attended, and rather brief. “

As a newcomer to local politics, I initially wanted to believe this was just some sort of honest mistake. That there was no invisible hand tipping the scales. That if I simply regrouped, and tried again next time, things would work out.

But as a journalist, I was curious. So, I set out to learn about the experience of progressive candidates all over the country. Which is how I found “Savage” Joy Mann, a social media-based journalist associated with the Real Progressives group.

Mann has interviewed over 1,200 progressive candidates from the 2016 election through today. Her subjects include progressive politicians such as Bernie Sanders, Ro Khanna, and Nina Turner. Mann has also interviewed countless lower-level politicians and those who aspire to be, like myself, giving her an invaluable perspective on the situation.

Mann confirmed that progressive candidates running for all different types of public office this past year had felt they faced an uphill battle. Candidates running for everything from Congress to Assembly District seats to, yes, County Committee, have expressed their concerns to Mann. While the issues they have faced vary greatly in specifics and complexity, they share one commonality: party resistance.

Issues ranging from trouble receiving funding, not getting on advertisement-inserts they helped pay for, and a general lack of clarity and transparency plagued progressive candidates at all levels. My experience was not unique. My concerns were not conspiracies. I would feel better, vindicated even, but I don't. Because at the end of the day, I still don't have a committee seat.

That's the story of how we got here. But where do we go next?

Rose, like myself, feels beaten but not defeated. In fact, unlike myself, Rose feels downright optimistic.

"The error and outcome were fucking terrible," said Rose. "But they got us attention we never would have had. Suddenly we have the New York Times knocking on our door. They [The Queens Democratic Party] exposed themselves."

As Rose sees it, even if we had won our elections, we would still have lost in a sense. "People would have been jaded," said Rose. "This was always going to be a ten-plus year process. Now we've learned how they play the game."

The New Queen Democrats are ready now. Jesse Rose is ready now. I am ready now. And we have a plan.

Under the leadership of Rose, the New Queens Dems are gearing up to run for every level of Queens county politics. They will organize by Assembly District. They will continue to run candidates for county

committee, myself among them. They will run candidates for District Leader. They will build a big progressive tent and steer clear of what Rose calls “negative politics”. Perhaps most importantly, they will be willing to get muddy.

“We don’t want to get dirty,” said Rose. “But we learned how they operate this time. We’re going to use the rules the same way they did.”

Rose is referring to, among other things, the decision that next time around the New Queens Democrats will immediately challenge the signatures turned in by establishment candidates. This means that the Board of Elections will have to review and verify every signature those candidates provide. “I’m willing to bet under that level of scrutiny, discrepancies will be found on their end as well,” said Rose.

Planning aside, maybe Rose has reason to be optimistic: just this September six progressive candidates managed to unseat incumbents in the New York State senate. With rising-star Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez currently making waves in Congress, progressives like myself are ready to build upon that progress.

In 2020, I’ll be out there alongside Rose and countless others, still trying to open political doors. When we knock on yours, I hope you’ll open it.