

# For presidential campaigns, Empire State a haunted house



Rick Hampson, USA TODAY

5:58 p.m. EDT April 11, 2016



(Photo: Seth Wenig, AP)

NEW YORK — Rarely has a presidential primary with so much national importance had so many local favorites as this state's next week. It's revived a once-lethal political battlefield that in recent decades had sunk into irrelevance.

## 2016 candidates on the campaign trail in New York

Bernie Sanders, who grew up in a small rent-controlled apartment in Brooklyn, is in search of opportunity, taking a New York attitude and accent with him.

Donald Trump, raised in a wealthy enclave in Queens, stayed in the city but moved to Manhattan, transforming his family's outer-borough real estate business into a global luxury brand.

Hillary Clinton, a middle-class product of suburban Chicago, is a carpetbagger — no great liability here — who came to start her career in electoral politics. She bought a house in an expensive suburb and was elected to the U.S. Senate.

Polls show Clinton with a solid lead over Sanders in the Democratic primary. Among the Republicans, Trump has a big advantage over Ohio Gov. John Kasich and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, who has been explaining what he meant by his January GOP debate crack about "New York values."



USA TODAY

What each presidential candidate needs to do ahead of New York's primary

(<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2016/04/06/new-york-primary-cruz-trump-kasich-clinton-sanders/82705576/>)



USA TODAY

Cruz contends with 'New York values' in New York

(<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2016/04/08/ted-cruz-donald-trump-new-york-republican-primary/82785814/>)

Once, New York state was a political dynamo. It produced presidents like Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, and nominees such as Republicans Charles Evans Hughes (1916), Wendell Willkie (1940) and Thomas Dewey (1944, 1948) and Democrat Al Smith (1928). Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon were both living in New York when they were elected.

But until this election cycle, New York's once mighty political tradition had become known more for an afterthought of a primary and failed White House bids (like Gov. Nelson Rockefeller's) or unrealized ones (like Gov. Mario Cuomo's).

Now, though, New York's Democratic and GOP primary voters are poised to possibly choose the next president (and maybe both nominees) from their own ranks.

"This race has returned presidential selection to New York, and we're feeling pretty good about it," says Gerald Benjamin, a Brooklyn native who teaches politics at the State University of New York at New Paltz.



Bernie Sanders holds a rally outside his childhood home in Flatbush on April 8, 2016, in Brooklyn. (Photo: Eric Thayer, Getty Images)

Ninety miles south, New York City is "200% focused" on the election, says Fred Siegel, who's advised former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani. "The circus has come to town!"

In years past, even if the race was still unsettled by the time of its primary, New York had to share center ring with other states. But this year, the state has stood alone, with two big weeks separating it from the Wisconsin primary.

The election's importance — so great, Hillary Clinton's normally fluent husband Bill told a construction trades group, that "I don't have the words to explain it" — has New Yorkers giddy. Especially, says Siegel, because both parties could have contested conventions as a result of what happens here.

New York has lots of delegates (it's still the fourth-most-populous state); campaign donors (it's got Wall Street); and aggressive journalists.

The latter make the primary a test — "like a ring of fire," says John Zogby, a New York State-based pollster. "Can you survive those tabloid headlines that define a politician?"

It's a question Sanders must be considering.

After he was interviewed by the *New York Daily News* editorial board, the tabloid pounded the senator with a front-page headline: "Bernie's Sandy Hook Shame" (referring to his opposition to allowing victims of gun violence, like relatives of those lost in the Newtown, Conn., school slaughter, to sue gunmakers).



USA TODAY

Bernie Sanders under fire for edit board interview

(<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2016/04/05/bernie-sanders-new-york-daily-news-edit-board/82677134/>)

Hillary Clinton, a veteran of statewide Senate races in 2000 and 2006, quickly pressed her advantage. "What you saw in the *Daily News* raises questions for voters," she said, "which is one of my biggest contrasts with Senator Sanders, that he would place gun manufacturers' rights and immunity from liability against the parents of the children killed ..."

Hostilities escalated after one of the Newtown relatives demanded an apology from Sanders. He testily replied that "Secretary Clinton might want to apologize to the families who lost their loved ones in Iraq" — a reference to her Senate vote for the war.

The Clinton campaign also jumped on what some critics viewed as Sanders' fuzzy explanation in the interview of how he'd make good on his promise to break up the big banks.

"What the *Daily News* has done to Sanders, you don't get that in most places," says Siegel.



USA TODAY

N.Y. poll: Bernie as much a New Yorker as Hillary

(<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2016/04/11/ny-poll-bernie-new-yorker-hillary/82900234/>)

Beating up national candidates is a local tradition. In 1912, the comeback Republican candidacy of Theodore Roosevelt was critically damaged when he lost the state's first primary.

In 1988, Tennessee Sen. Al Gore, seeking the Democratic nomination, seemingly made a valuable ally in New York Mayor Ed Koch. But Koch alienated black voters with his strident criticism of Jesse Jackson, one of Gore's rivals. Gore got 10% of the vote and had to drop out.

In 1992, former California governor Jerry Brown, seeking the Democratic nomination, tried to cozy up to former Jackson supporters, even saying he'd consider him as a running mate. This was too much for some of the state's many Jewish voters, who recalled that Jackson once referred to New York as "Hymietown." Brown, who'd been ahead in the polls, lost big to Bill Clinton and never won another primary that year.

In 1996, Pat Buchanan, whose long-shot bid for the GOP nomination had received a boost when he won the New Hampshire primary, was preceded to the original Melting Pot by his reputation for immigration-bashing.

The *New York Observer* found a Buchanan delegate who said he believed in a global Jewish conspiracy. The tabloid *New York Post* reported that Buchanan had a Chilean housekeeper: "AMERICA-FIRST PAT HAS A LATIN MAID." (Buchanan said she was a legal resident.) *Daily News* columnist Mike McAlary wrote that Buchanan is "threatening to become the Ebola virus of Republican politics."

Buchanan came in a distant third and ended his campaign. "They buried Buchanan, dug him up, and buried him again," Siegel recalls.

Even winners get smacked around.

In 1992, while Bill Clinton campaigned in the primary amid reports of a sexual relationship with Gennifer Flowers, the tabloids dubbed him the "LUV GUV." And here he admitted to a local television reporter that he'd smoked marijuana (but never inhaled). "Slick Willie for Once Can't Blow Smoke," blared the *Daily News*.

But New York's time as the haunted house of American politics may be ending, and its very reputation may be exaggerated.

Geoffrey Cowan helped change the Democratic primary system as a young activist in the 1960s, and studied primary system history for his new book, *Let the People Rule*. He says New York no longer enjoys a unique ability to disrupt campaigns — not in an age of super PACs with unlimited TV ad budgets; talk radio, "which can be just as brutal in tone and more extensive in reach as the tabloids"; and 24/7 national cable TV news.

And journalists everywhere have gotten more aggressive, especially in Washington.

Indeed, Trump's biggest political wound this spring — which is saying something — came in an interview with D.C. institution Chris Matthews, host of

MSNBC's *Hardball*. Repeatedly questioned by Matthews about abortion, Trump finally said he thought women who had them should be punished. The comment offended both sides of the abortion debate, and Trump had to backtrack.



Donald Trump speaks during a rally in Rochester, N.Y., on April 10, 2016. (Photo: Tina MacIntyre-Yee, Democrat and Chronicle)

But the city still can surprise.

When Sanders told the *Daily News* he thought the subway took tokens (long, in fact, replaced by magnetized cards), it was a classic gotcha. Clinton jumped. She campaigned on a Bronx-bound subway and recalled that the MetroCard was introduced in her first Senate term.

But around here, little goes exactly to plan. When Clinton tried to rub it in by swiping a MetroCard herself, she swiped ... and swiped ... and swiped. The stile didn't turn.

The scene was re-enacted, to great hilarity, on *Saturday Night Live* — live from New York!



USA TODAY

'Saturday Night Live' mocks Hillary Clinton's subway troubles

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2016/04/10/hillary-clinton-kate-mckinnon-saturday-night-live-subway-bill-deblasio/82863886/>

Read or Share this story: <http://usat.ly/1N4ThAD>