

New York reclaims status as Political power broker

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Gerald Benjamin, State University of New York at New Paltz

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.

Bernie Sanders, who grew up in a small rent-controlled apartment in Brooklyn, left 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 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 crack about "New York values."

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 ( Gov. Nelson Rockefeller's) or unrealized ones ( 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.

Ninety miles south, New York City is "200% focused" on the election, says Fred Siegel, who has 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 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.

Beating up on 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.

The presidential candidacies of Al Gore (1988), Jerry Brown (1992), and Pat Buchanan (1996), all died in New York.

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