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U.S. ELECTION

New York victory crucial for Clinton, Trump after recent losses

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John Kasich ate a slice of pizza with a fork. Hillary Clinton took five tries to get through a subway turnstile. Bernie Sanders was roughed up in an interview with a local tabloid. Ted Cruz got heckled at a campaign stop in the Bronx. And Donald Trump had to admit his own children wouldn't be able to vote for him because they didn't meet state registration deadlines.

The most unusual presidential nominating contest in recent memory has arrived in New York, a state known for tripping up even the toughest political operators and home to a press corps impatient to document every misstep.

For New York's voters, the next several days are a singular opportunity. While New York has long considered itself the centre of the universe, the truth is that when it comes to primary contests, the state is nearly always an afterthought, arriving too late in the political calendar to make any difference in the race.

Not this time. On April 19, when New York holds its primary contest, the front-runners from both parties – Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump – hope to recover from recent setbacks. Mr. Trump lost the most recent Republican primary vote in Wisconsin to Mr. Cruz, while Ms. Clinton has been defeated by Mr. Sanders in the past seven Democratic primaries.

To solidify their grips on their respective party's nominations, Mr. Trump and Ms. Clinton must notch convincing victories in New York. What's more, for both candidates, New York is their home state, the place where voters know them best.

"We've usually been a source of resources, not outcomes," said Gerald Benjamin, a long-time political scientist at the State University of New York in New Paltz, referring to New York's prominence in political fundraising. He said the current situation, where the final outcome of the race remains unsettled in both parties and several candidates have strong ties to New York, is unprecedented.

The most recent polls show Mr. Trump with a commanding lead: In a survey released Wednesday by Siena College, he garnered the support of 50 per cent of likely Republican voters, compared with just 27

per cent for Mr. Kasich and 17 per cent for Mr. Cruz. The same survey showed Ms. Clinton with a healthy margin over Mr. Sanders among Democratic voters, 52 per cent to 42 per cent, although her lead has narrowed in the state in recent weeks.

The margin of victory is critical, not only for bragging rights, but for the scramble to amass delegates. On the Republican side, New York's 95 delegates are awarded largely according to district-by-district results. But if Mr. Trump wins more than 50 per cent of the vote in any given district, he takes all of that district's delegates. And if he wins a majority of the vote in the entire state, he also wins a separate group of delegates.

With stakes like these, it's no wonder candidates have made strenuous efforts to emphasize their ties to New York. Mr. Sanders, a Vermont senator who was born in Brooklyn, left the city as a college student and never returned (though his accent remains instantly recognizable to New Yorkers). On April 8, Mr. Sanders held a rally outside his childhood home, where he fondly recalled hours in the streets playing "punch ball" – a version of baseball using your fist instead of a bat.

If Mr. Sanders is a native son, Ms. Clinton is an adopted daughter: She and her husband, Bill, bought a home in Chappaqua, a wealthy hamlet north of New York, back in 1999. She was elected to two terms as a U.S. senator representing New York. The couple still live in their Chappaqua home, while their daughter Chelsea and her family are not far away in Manhattan.

Mr. Trump, meanwhile, has made his identity as a New Yorker – the brash, wheeling-and-dealing variety – a central part of his brand. He is accustomed to the gloves-off media environment and has long been a tabloid fixture.

Mr. Trump "has had a 10-year head start on most of his competition. He's been in our orbit for quite some time," said Christina Greer, a professor of political science at Fordham University in New York. "For a lot of people, he's aspirational – even in New York."

For Mr. Cruz, New York represents hostile territory. Not only are the state's Republican voters less drawn to his uncompromising brand of conservative ideology, but back in January he attacked Mr. Trump for representing "New York values." Mr. Cruz described such values as socially liberal, pro-abortion, pro-gay marriage and "focused around money and the media."

When Mr. Cruz made a brief campaign stop in the Bronx, the New York Daily News, seized the chance to punch back. Its front-page headline the following day: "Take the F U train, Ted!"

Mr. Cruz's wife, Heidi, a former banker at Goldman Sachs, tried to highlight her own links to New York at a gala in Queens on Monday night. She recalled her early years working in the city, when she rented a small apartment and commuted on the subway. She said she loved the people of New York and its hectic pace. "I love the smell of New York," she enthused.

The attempt to curry favour fell flat. Gothamist.com, a website obsessed with all things New York, tartly noted that Ms. Cruz must love the aroma of "urine and hot garbage."

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