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New York: A Test of Message and Mettle

The New York primary is shaping up to be a make-or-break contest for presidential contenders of both parties.

By [Susan Milligan \(/topics/author/susan-milligan\)](#) | Staff Writer

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Donald Trump is expected to break the 50-percent threshold on Tuesday. Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post via Getty Images

NEW YORK – It should have been a victory lap here for Hillary Clinton, who was twice elected U.S. senator from the Empire State and owns a home in Chappaqua. And it should have been the source of just a bunch of extra delegates for a Republican nominee-in-waiting, building a movement and raising money to take on the Democratic nominee in the fall.

Instead, New York, despite its late-stage primary, is a do-or-(almost) die test for Clinton and fellow New Yorkers Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. And each front-runner has a different audience to satisfy. Clinton is feverishly trying to elicit passion from the Democratic rank-and-file, while Trump is trying to tamp down the negative passion of his party's establishment, which worries that the bombastic real estate magnate will be a weak contender in the fall and cause collateral damage in down-ticket races.

"They don't have to win big," but they have to win on Tuesday, says longtime New York politics-watcher Lee Miringoff, director of the

Marist Institute for Public Opinion in Poughkeepsie. "Trump probably has to run up the score to protect himself with the delegate [race] more than Clinton does. But if both of them run up the score, that's going to put everyone else on their heels," Miringoff adds. "There's a really solid opportunity for both of them to start distancing themselves from their rivals."

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Trump indeed appears poised to reach a critical milestone. If polling numbers are correct, Trump will break the 50-percent threshold for the first time this campaign season, giving him bragging rights with party insiders who wonder if Trump can broaden his appeal within the GOP. After a couple of big losses to Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, Trump could also re-establish himself as the leader in the race, quelling the side of the party hoping to deny him the nomination in Cleveland.

Clinton, meanwhile, has an opportunity to prove her central argument in the nomination process: resume beats rhetoric. While Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont was addressing more than 28,000 people at a raucous get-out-the-vote rally in his native borough of Brooklyn on Sunday, Clinton was in a small hall on Staten Island, reminding voters in the city's Republican enclave of what she had done, post 9/11, for the firefighters and police officers who live there.

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"Part of what we have to do every election is actually look at our problems and figure out how we're going to solve them," Clinton told an exuberant, if intimate, crowd. "It is not enough to diagnose the problem. A lot of people can do that. We need people who are going to roll up our sleeves and get to work on solutions. That is what I tried to do for eight years as your senator," Clinton added.

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Mocking her detractors, Clinton lowered her voice and continued, "They say, 'Oh, there she goes with her plan,'" but "before there was something called Obamacare, there was something called Hillarycare," she added. It was a not-so-subtle jab at Sanders, whom Clinton has cast as someone who makes a lot of promises, such as free college tuition, without having a credible roadmap to achieve it.

The message resonates with Clinton supporters – many of whom say they like Sanders and value the role he is playing in the campaign, but want someone with a stronger and longer track record.

"When someone has been around a long time, you tend to take them for granted. Bernie Sanders is nice. Everyone gets excited" when he gives a speech, says Jackie Picozzi, a 41-year-old health care worker who lives on Staten Island. "But she has a plan."

Maybe Clinton doesn't have the same charm offensive as the fashionably curmudgeonly Sanders does, others note. But "I don't need her to be my friend. I need her to do a good job," says Milena Sherry, 41 and a teacher.

Sanders has consistently been behind in the polls here – by a dramatic 17 points in a recent Marist survey. Sanders points to polls showing them within single digits, hoping for, if not an upset victory that would upend the Clinton campaign, a close second that could keep hope – and his impressive fundraising – alive.

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"Call me optimistic or call me naive, but I really don't believe we have to compromise our principles in order to get things done," says Amanda Palmer, a successful indie singer who has held fundraisers for Sanders. "It's not that I think Hillary Clinton is a corrupt human being, but she has been hanging out in and playing in a corrupted system for so long. She has compromised," Palmer adds.

"We just don't have time for that, to slowly work our way out of this. We need a revolution if we want to save our planet from [environmental] destruction, and I don't think we have to move at a snail's pace," she adds.

That same frustration is motivating voters on the Republican side, where the tough-talking Trump has tapped public anger to take a commanding lead in New York – a state which typically has elected moderate-toned Republicans such as the late Sen. Jacob Javits and former Gov. George Pataki (who notably got no traction in this year's presidential race).

Trump's name, of course, is well-known in New York, aggressively gracing the top of his Trump Tower in Manhattan. And he has long been part of the cultural fabric of New York, with residents and the media possessing the same love-hate relationship with the real estate figure as they do for the city subway system or Page Six, the New York Post's scathing gossip column.

But backers here say it's not about being a hometown favorite but about shaking up a system they feel has not worked for way too long.

"He's the only one who can fix the country. If he can run the country almost like a business, I think it can improve," says voter John Scartozzi, a 50-year-old security worker. And while Scartozzi is a Republican, he doesn't reject all Democrats. "Obama wasn't that bad. He did a lot of good," Scartozzi says. But Clinton, he believes, "is too close to the banks. Bernie Sanders has some good ideas, but he's too radical." Scartozzi is voting for Trump but says if November offers him a choice between Cruz and Sanders, he's voting for the democratic socialist.

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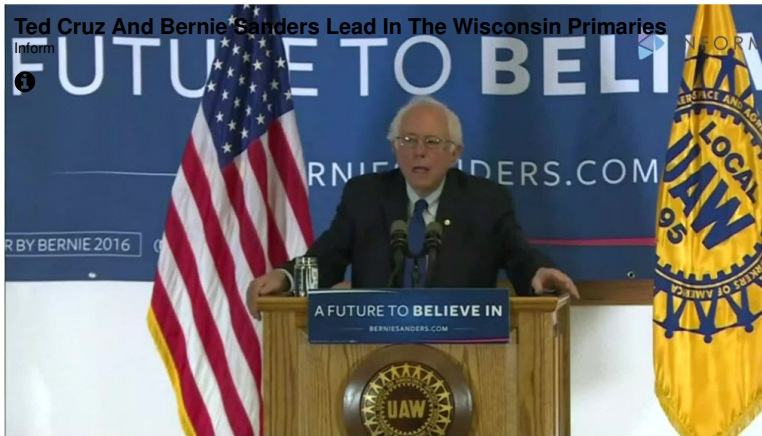
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Trump's antiestablishment message has him up 29 points over Ohio Gov. John Kasich in the Marist polls. But the reality TV star is having

a harder time navigating the actual establishment process necessary to win the nomination. He lost every delegate in Colorado and all but one in Wyoming to Cruz, who learned the complicated delegate selection rules and played them well. That has led to veiled threats from Trump, who has talked about suing over the delegate selection process and warned over the weekend of a "rough July" in Cleveland, where the RNC convention will be held.

Trump has made some smart moves in New York, reaching out to every GOP county chairman and earning the endorsement of about half of them, notes Gerald Benjamin, a State University of New York at New Paltz professor and former head of the Ulster County Republican Party.

But as for those running for state and local office, "the candidates are terrified, especially in the state Senate and close congressional seats," Benjamin adds, noting that party control of the state Senate is in play. "They think Trump at the top of the ticket bodes ill for them." On Tuesday, however, their home state may well help Trump to that very position.



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Susan Milligan is a political and foreign affairs writer and contributed to a biography of the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, "[Last Lion: The Fall and Rise of Ted Kennedy](http://www.amazon.com/gp/redirect.html?ie=UTF8&location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amazon.com%2FLast-Lion-Fall-Rise-Kennedy%2Fdp%2FB002VPEAK8%3Fie%3DUTF8%26s%3Dbooks%26qid%3D1298662719%26sr%3D8-1&tag=usnpoliticsandpolicy-20&linkCode=ur2&camp=1789&creative=9325)." (<http://www.amazon.com/gp/redirect.html?ie=UTF8&location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amazon.com%2FLast-Lion-Fall-Rise-Kennedy%2Fdp%2FB002VPEAK8%3Fie%3DUTF8%26s%3Dbooks%26qid%3D1298662719%26sr%3D8-1&tag=usnpoliticsandpolicy-20&linkCode=ur2&camp=1789&creative=9325>) Follow her on Twitter: [@MilliganSusan](https://twitter.com/MilliganSusan) (<https://twitter.com/MilliganSusan>)

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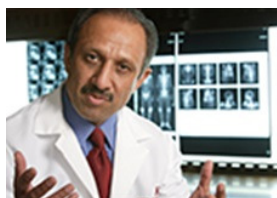
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