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The Next Mayor Will Have to Close a \$2 Billion Gap In The City's \$72 Billion Budget.

By Martha Moore

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It's not hard to spot a Democrat in New York — they outnumber Republicans six to one — but it's been 20 years since one could be found running City Hall.

As New York emerges from Tuesday's contentious primaries, Democrats are favored to win for the first time since Democratic incumbent David Dinkins lost to Rudy Giuliani in 1993. Much of the upcoming general election campaign will likely focus on the legacy of those two decades: a dramatic decrease in crime and the police tactics involved, soaring housing prices and an intense focus on testing to improve schools.

In the volatile Democratic primary, front-runner status shifted regularly. Christine Quinn, speaker of the City Council, ally of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and potential history maker as the first openly gay mayor, sat atop opinion polls for months. Then disgraced former congressman Anthony Weiner leapt into the race, drawing nationwide coverage, and briefly led surveys. Weiner ultimately flamed out with revelations that he had continued to exchange lewd messages with women online even after he had quit Congress over a sexting scandal.

With a well-timed late surge, Bill de Blasio, the city's public advocate, went into Tuesday's voting having eclipsed the field in pre-election polls thanks to an appealing family and an anti-establishment message. The big question ahead of Tuesday's voting was whether de Blasio would take 40% of the vote and win outright or a runoff would be required.

The Republican primary matched experience — Joe Lhota served as budget director for Giuliani and also headed the regional transit agency, responsible for the city's subways, buses and commuter railroads — against money: supermarket mogul John Catsimatidis used his personal fortune to finance his first political campaign.

The winner among Democratic primary voters — the city's most liberal -- will have to pass another threshold test to win the election in November, says Evan Thies, a New York Democratic consultant. In the primary, candidates criticized Bloomberg for focusing on the wealthy at the expense of everyone else: de Blasio, for instance, called New York "a tale of two cities."

Now, Thies said, a Democrat like de Blasio must make a more pragmatic case: "How does he argue that he's fit to manage the city and not just lead a popular revolution?"



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Republicans will argue that a return to Democratic control means a return to high crime. At the center of the debate are street stops by police, which a federal court has ruled are unfairly targeting minorities. Democrats have vowed to rein in the policy; Republicans say it is an important tool in maintaining the historically low crime rate.

"This is a sophisticated city, and they understand that the problems that a lack of a safe city and a secure city would cause for the citizens of this city," says Ed Cox, the state GOP chairman. "And they will vote on that issue."

The next mayor has big shoes, and a big budget gap, to fill. Bloomberg's dozen years in office reshaped the city -- with rezoning, miles of bike lanes and construction at the World Trade Center site. He brought schools under mayoral control and made much of the city off-limits to smoking. But the billionaire mayor also alienated voters who believed he cared only about other rich Manhattan residents, and some of his signature initiatives, including building a football stadium in Manhattan, were blocked by state legislators.

Democratic primary voters were ambivalent about Bloomberg: In an Edison Research exit poll, three-quarters of them said the next mayor ought to move the city away from Bloomberg's policies, and about a third said they were seeking a candidate for mayor who "can bring needed change." But a narrow majority of those voting Tuesday said they approve of the way he handled his 12 years in office.

The next mayor will have to close a \$2 billion gap in the city's \$72 billion budget and negotiate labor agreements with 300,000 city workers, from teachers to cops, whose contracts expired as long as four years ago. Those agreements have historically included retroactive pay hikes – which the city doesn't have money to pay, says Carol Kellermann of the Citizens Budget Commission, a fiscal watchdog group.

So far, candidates have been vague about how they would handle the budget gap and have declined to discuss what they might ask in labor negotiations, "They're hard issues. All the answers that anyone has come up with are going to be tough on someone, so it's understandable why it's avoided," Kellermann says. "Maybe the primary will be regarded as some sort of cathartic expression of frustration and now we can get down to business."