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In New York Suburbs, Plenty of Democrats — Just Not at the Top

By LISA W. FODERARO SEPT. 21, 2017

LARCHMONT, N.Y. — After the presidential election in November, residents here staged an impromptu vigil. Nine days after the inauguration, more met at a local church to form a grass-roots political action group. Postcard-writing events were organized; another one, a “No Democrat Left Behind” postcard party, will be held later this month at The Voracious Reader, a children’s bookstore.

In this picture-book village on Long Island Sound, where owners of the generously proportioned Tudors and Dutch Colonials have long been overwhelmingly Democratic, a sense of political immediacy has clearly taken hold.

But whether this energy filters down to local races remains to be seen.

In November, voters in Westchester County will choose a county executive. Dismayed by Washington and the direction of the Republican Party, many Democrats say they are ready for change. And yet, even in a county where Democrats outnumber Republicans 2 to 1, only two Democratic county executives have led Westchester since the 1930s.

The story is the same in Nassau County, where Democrats slightly outnumber Republicans and yet the Democratic hopeful for county executive, Laura Curran, is also seeking to become the third Democrat to hold that position in 80 years.

With Election Day less than two months away, and both county executive posts up for grabs, Democrats are hoping to capitalize on the growing antagonism to President Trump among progressive voters.

“I’ve gotten active politically in just the past year — this is new for me,” said Farah Kathwari, a mother of two from Larchmont, who founded the liberal group #OurFlag after Mr. Trump’s election. “But I think everything starts locally and works its way up. Donald Trump is not president in a vacuum.”

In Westchester, where 65 percent of voters last year rejected Mr. Trump in the general election, Rob Astorino, the incumbent county executive, faces an electorate that has shifted in recent decades to the left.

“Rob Astorino is a conservative, conservative Republican who has identified with the Trump campaign,” said Michael Edelman, a longtime political commentator who bolted from the Republican Party to become an independent three years ago amid the Tea Party revolution. “So that’s an albatross around his neck.”

Similarly, on Long Island, where the county executive seat in Nassau is open, the Republican standard-bearer, Jack Martins, a former state senator, is running against Ms. Curran, a county legislator who prevailed in the Democratic primary election over George Maragos, the county comptroller who left the Republican Party last year.

While Democrats have only a slight edge in terms of voter registration in Nassau, Mr. Martins can expect to be painted with the broad brush of both President Trump and the current county executive, Edward P. Mangano. A Republican, Mr. Mangano decided not to run for re-election after his indictment last fall on federal corruption charges.

“Martins doesn’t look like a pushover and the Democrats have also had scandals in Nassau,” said Hank Sheinkopf, a veteran New York political consultant. “But the Democratic registration has increased and that should help Laura Curran. So on registration and Trump, she has the edge.”

Still, the Democratic candidates in both Nassau and Westchester concede that voter turnout will be critical to their success. In off election years like this one, without a presidential or gubernatorial race to draw people to the ballot, Democrats tend to stay home.

On primary night in Nassau, for instance, less than 8 percent of registered Democrats voted, fewer than the percentage that cast ballots in the 2013 primary election, dousing confidence in a so-called Trump bump in November. Turnout was similarly low in Westchester.

“Certainly there are people who are motivated by the national scene and the Trump effect could lure them to the polls,” said George Latimer, the Democrat who will oppose Mr. Astorino. Mr. Latimer defeated a county legislator, Ken Jenkins, to win the Westchester primary.

“But many of the Democrats — they really don’t focus on the small towns,” he added. “They commute to the city and come back at night. The village looks nice; there are nice services. The townies tend to vote more.”

Both Republican candidates in the two counties are training their focus on the economy and property taxes. Nassau and Westchester have the dubious honor of competing for the No. 1 and 2 spots on national lists of counties with the highest property taxes in the nation.

Political pundits note that, in fact, the county portion of a homeowner’s tax bill is relatively small — around 15 to 20 percent — while school taxes make up the lion’s share. Mr. Edelman, who counts Mr. Astorino as a friend, nonetheless faulted him for his no-tax ideology. Mr. Astorino boasts that he has shrunk the county work force by 16 percent and cut the county tax levy by 2 percent over his eight years in office.

“He’s a wonderful guy; we play golf,” Mr. Edelman said. “But that’s not the point. The point is math.” About 80 percent of the county property tax pays for expenses that are mandated by the state, giving the county discretion over a small fraction of the tax bill.

“So when you say you are not raising taxes, you are saving a taxpayer who pays 10,000 a year in property taxes \$20 a month,” he added. “And what are you doing to save that? You are cutting social services and co-opting the ability of the county to function financially.”

But Mr. Astorino, who waged an unsuccessful run against Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo in 2014, is unbowed in his commitment to fiscal austerity. While the county government has contracted, some 44,000 jobs were created in the private sector, he said.

“Donald Trump is not running in November and people know who I am and what we have been doing here for eight years,” said Mr. Astorino, 50, whom some political observers predict will again challenge Mr. Cuomo next year. “They are going to vote on pocketbook issues here in Westchester. Taxes, jobs, the economy – that’s what people care about.”

Mr. Latimer, a former county legislator, faulted Mr. Astorino for his fiscal stewardship of Westchester, saying he relied too heavily on borrowing and dipping into reserves. And he criticized Mr. Astorino’s stance on social issues, citing immigration policies and his decision to allow the county’s exhibition center in White Plains to be used for a gun show.

“If you are in an upstate county, where 85 percent of the people have guns, that’s different,” Mr. Latimer, 63, said. “In Westchester, far more people have no guns than own guns. So my attitude is don’t have a show like that; it’s not our lifestyle.”

In Nassau County, taxes have also floated to the top of political debates, with both Mr. Martins and Ms. Curran deploring the burden they place on residents. But ethics – more than property taxes – has dominated the race there.

The supervisor of the Town of Oyster Bay, John Venditto, was charged along with Mr. Mangano, the county executive, and his wife, Linda, in what prosecutors said was a bribery and kickback scheme dating to 2010. The indictments further

Not surprisingly, Mr. Martins, a former mayor of Mineola, has sought to distance himself from the corruption scandals, calling for Mr. Mangano's resignation. He has also proposed a new code of ethics for the county that would enhance the vetting of prospective employees and the review of county contracts to prevent conflicts of interest.

"You need to pay more than lip service to restoring public confidence in government" said Mr. Martins, a 50-year-old father of four whose family has a construction business. "You need to understand that there are checks and balances and accountability and transparency."

Ms. Curran, a former reporter for The Daily News and The New York Post, has her own ethics plan. Among other things, she wants to beef up financial disclosure forms, enact term limits for county officials and strengthen the county's whistleblower law. She has portrayed Mr. Martins as part of the corrupt Republican machine, reminding voters that he attended a fund-raiser for the Senate Republican Campaign Committee that was hosted by Mr. Skelos after his indictment.

"Wherever I go in this county, whether a Republican area or Democratic area, there is a common denominator and that is that people are fed up," said Ms. Curran, a 49-year-old mother of three. "They see their tax dollars being wasted on corruption. My opponent in this race is a product of this failed status quo."

Correction: September 21, 2017

An earlier version of this article misstated the beneficiary of a fund-raiser. The money went to the Senate Republican Campaign Committee, not Dean Skelos.

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