

Free New York!

1535 Hertel Ave.
Buffalo, New York 14216
(716) 566-7720
President
James Ostrowski

FreeBuffalo.org
FreeBuffalo@adelphia.net
cell (716) 435-8918
Executive Director
Paulette Peterson

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Where Have All the Candidates Gone?

Why Mr. Smith is Not Going to Albany

By James Ostrowski¹

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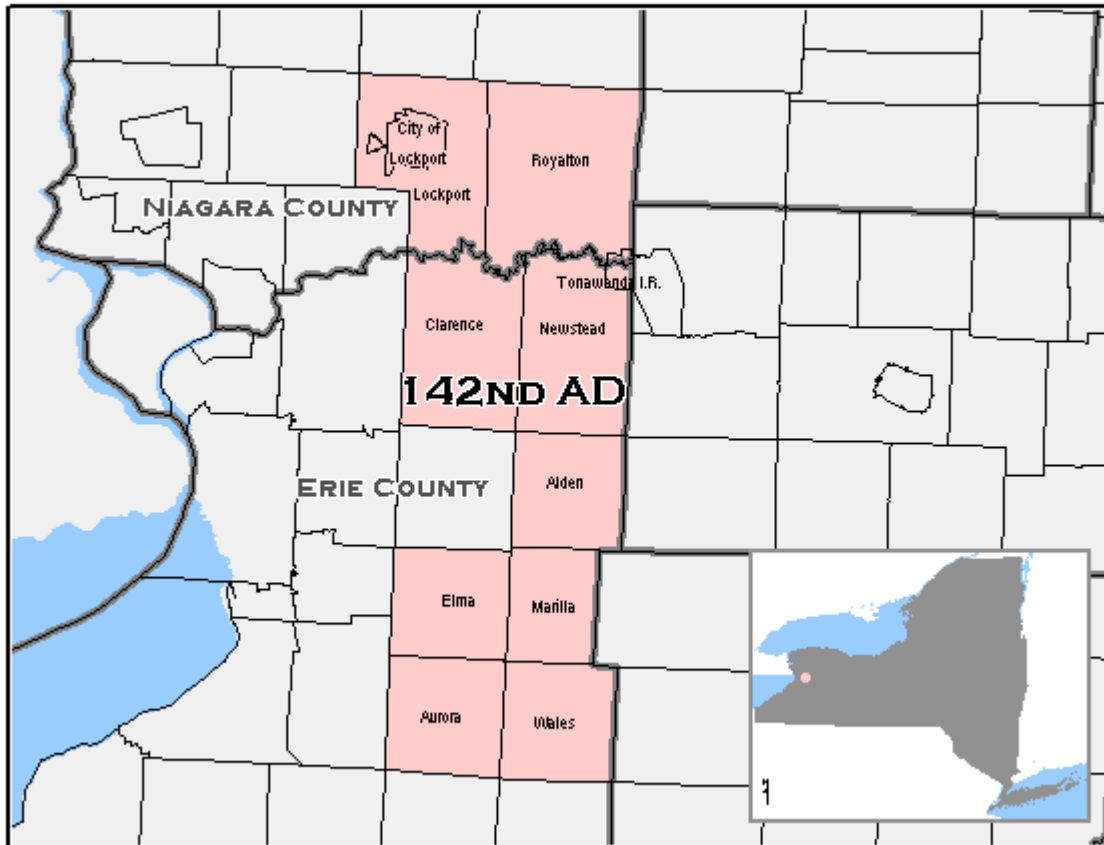
POLITICS, n. A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage.

--Ambrose Bierce

More than halfway through the petition period, it is evident that there are few candidates for state legislature capable of unseating members of the WNY delegation.

¹ The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of Free New York, Inc.

together with dissimilar communities. For example, Dale Volker’s district snakes across the State and several counties without any rational or benign purpose discernable. The effect, however, is clear. No one but a professional politician could possibly maintain ties and contacts with all such communities over a period of years. A challenger might be very popular in his own neighborhood or community but be utterly unknown in other communities far, far away but part of the same gerrymandered district. While gerrymandering *by affiliation* explains why most districts are safe from challenge in November, gerrymandering *by geography* helps to explain why *primary* challenges are so difficult and rare.



142nd Assembly District Democrats Corraling Republicans

Even a first-time candidate endorsed by his or her party or “machine” will have a huge advantage over independent candidates. Every endorsed candidate will be supported by a large and pre-existing party organization of county and municipal chairmen, ward or zone leaders and committeemen at the neighborhood level, ready, willing and able to support his campaign, carry petitions, donate money, distribute literature and get the vote out. The majority of these operatives have received, are receiving or expect to receive some tangible reward for their services paid for directly or indirectly by the taxpayer. The classic example is the proverbial summer “job” for the

kids at the local park. Thus, the forces of the status quo use the taxpayer's money to prevent average citizens from gaining a foothold in their own government.

There are of course other reasons why primary challenges are so difficult. Voters in primaries tend to be those with a stake in maintaining the status quo. They are heavily drawn from the ranks of those whose income depends on government or politics. In primaries, the political machine's extended family goes out to vote. The lower the turnout, the better incumbents do. When your economic livelihood depends on the election of certain candidates, you have a very strong incentive to vote in primaries.

Incumbents generally have large campaign war chests. See, Table No. 1. As a prior Free New York report explained, almost all the money donated to candidates comes, not from ordinary citizens, but from special interest groups that seek specific tangible benefits from government, often at the expense of ordinary citizens. Challengers who do not cater to special interest groups have a hard time raising more than a paltry sum.

Beyond special favors for big contributors, the legislators use the state treasury to buy votes from large voting blocks with programs such as education, Medicaid, and economic development. You will see plenty of announcements of such spending right before election time accompanied by large phony checks signed by senator so and so who has mixed up the taxpayer's money with his own personal account. Such campaign tactics prey on the gullibility of many voters, best explained by Frederic Bastiat's aphorism: "The state is the great fiction by which everybody seeks to live at the expense of everybody else." It is a fiction because there are net losers and net winners but politicians, like casino owners, are adept at convincing people that everyone who plays the game will win.

Running for office these days is a full-time job, particularly for a challenger who must use "sweat equity" to overcome the incumbent's advantages in money, campaign workers and name recognition. Yet, most people in today's economy are working fulltime. If they are business owners, they are working the proverbial "24/7".

In sharp contrast, incumbent state legislators are paid \$80,000 to \$120,000 annually with very few mandatory job duties. The legislative session in Albany is over before the peak of the campaign season. For all intents and purposes, they are free to campaign "24/7". They also have large staffs that traditionally spend much of their free time campaigning for their bosses so they can keep their jobs. They can do strange things like "banking comp time" to free up their schedules just before Election Day. They can send out free campaign ads paid for by the taxpayer so long as they are not mailed fewer than thirty days before an election.

The most important factor is money. The naked truth is that incumbents use the power of the government to raise campaign funds by doling out favors to donors at the expense of the general public. This allows them to build up huge treasuries that scare off challengers or defeat those who bother to run. They use the taxpayer's money and their

legislative powers to stay in office against the will of those very same taxpayers. The game is rigged.

Table No. 1

WNY Delegation

Senate

<i>Dist.</i>	<i>Senator</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Enrollment Advantage</i>	<i>cash on hand</i>
<u>57th</u>	Catharin Young	R	13,479	\$230,029.25
<u>58th</u>	William Stachowski	D	63,327	\$14,766.13
<u>59th</u>	Dale Volker	R	20,550	\$180,012.22
<u>60th</u>	Marc Coppola	D	99,301	\$2,787.32
<u>61st</u>	Mary Lou Rath	R	10,388	\$50,635.92
<u>62nd</u>	George Maziarz	R	11,360	\$707,840.36

Assembly

<i>Dist.</i>	<i>Senator</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Enrollment Advantage</i>	<i>cash on hand</i>
<u>138th</u>	Francine DelMonte	D	10,544	\$87,081.13
<u>140th</u>	Robin Schimminger	D	6,811	\$235,283.94
<u>141st</u>	Crystal Peoples	D	61,116	\$904.48
<u>142nd</u>	Michael Cole	R	14,069	\$7.85
<u>143rd</u>	Paul Tokasz	D	22,309	\$269,833.54
<u>144th</u>	Sam Hoyt	D	34, 751	\$160,280.12
<u>145th</u>	Mark Schroeder	D	24,457	\$4,192.96
<u>146th</u>	Jack Quinn III	R	(7,021)	\$8,424.99
<u>148th</u>	Jim Hayes	R	97	\$108,579.29

Thus, we see that in the entire region, there are 106,000 more Democrats but the Republicans who control the State Senate have managed to carve out four Republican districts out of six by gerrymandering. Four of the six Senators have large campaign war chests. The two who don't are special cases. Marc Coppola is brand new to the scene and just had an expensive special election and William Stachowski has not had a serious challenge in many years.

Finally, there is the fear factor. The political machine practices the politics of personal destruction. Those who challenge it can expect to be thoroughly investigated in

all aspects of their adult life and then have those details publicly exposed. Here's the irony. Politicians, who live well at the expense of the taxpayer, rarely have financial problems that may embarrass them. Many have not missed a tax-paid paycheck for decades. Not so for workers in the private sector or the self-employed. Since they carry the political class on their shoulders as a financial burden as well as their own families and businesses, they are more likely to have had financial setbacks that can be thrown up against them in a campaign.

It is understood by people in this area that it's prudent not to challenge the powers that be. Last year, county legislative candidate Joe Kennedy found a note on his car—"you better get out of the race—we are watching you." One way or another, at some time or another, the political machine tends to retaliate. Since they control the legal commands posts of society—the courts, the police and the prosecutors, they certainly have the means to do so. I have documented several instances of such retaliation in my book, Political Class Dismissed.

A photograph of a handwritten note. The text is written in two colors: blue and purple. The blue text reads "you better get out of the race we" and the purple text reads "are watching you". The note is written on a light-colored, slightly textured surface.

These are some of the factors that explain the relative death of primary challenges and serious general election challenges to the WNY delegation this year.

How the Game is Rigged

- Gerrymandering by affiliation
- Gerrymandering by geography
- Incumbents use the state treasury to buy votes
- Incumbents use special interest money to outspend challengers
- Incumbents have the leisure time to campaign
- Incumbents have ready-made troops rewarded with government jobs
- People fear retaliation from the machine

The theory of democracy is that elected officials have the right to rule because they were chosen in free, fair, and competitive elections which offer people a real choice as opposed to different versions of the status quo. In Buffalo, Western New York and New York State generally, that's a "beautiful theory killed by ugly facts."

New York voters face a classic "Catch 22" scenario. To make elections remotely fair, we need to unseat the incumbents who created a rigged system. But we can't do that because the system is rigged.

There is no easy solution to this conundrum. However, the first step in constructing a solution is to understand the nature of the problem in the first place. Term limits would be a good start, but not a panacea by any means.

The public should welcome candidates from the ranks of the retired, college and graduate students and those of independent wealth. For various reasons, they have assets that can overcome some of the machine's natural advantages. The retired and students in the summer have the time to run a campaign. Obviously, they cannot lose their jobs in retaliation for their candidacies. Wealthy candidates can help fund their own campaigns and also not fear economic retaliation. Two of the four reform candidates who were competitive last year spent a sizable amount of their own money on their campaigns.

Above all, *let's stop blaming the victim*—the average citizen struggling to survive in an overtaxed and depressed economy--and focus our attention on the self-serving and greedy political class that has a stranglehold on power in our "democracy."

For those brave hearts who still wish to enter the lion's den, you have until July 13th to file your petitions. Good luck. You'll need it.