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## John DeStefano wins New Haven Democratic mayoral primary after tough fight; Kerekes vows to continue campaign (videos)

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By Abbe Smith, Register Staff  
[asmith@nhregister.com](mailto:asmith@nhregister.com) / Twitter: [@abbegsmith](https://twitter.com/abbegsmith)



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NEW HAVEN — In a historic primary election, three Democrats challenging Mayor John DeStefano Jr. for his job garnered more votes combined than the 18-year city leader.

Ultimately, DeStefano was victorious in a heated contest fueled by voter frustration over rampant gun violence, high taxes and unemployment.

Final results showed DeStefano with 5,716 votes, or about 44 percent of the vote.

Coming in second place, and with far more votes than the other two challengers, was budget watchdog Jeffrey Kerekes, who received 2,895 votes, or 22 percent. Local lawyer Clifton Graves Jr. and former Alderman Anthony Dawson came in third and fourth place, with 2,255 and 2,032 votes, respectively. Graves had 17 percent and Dawson 16 percent of the vote.

DeStefano spoke to a roomfull of supporters at Bar on Crown Street Tuesday night, and said he was proud to accept the Democratic nomination for November. He addressed a cheering crowd that included residents, City Hall and Board of Education staffers and city firefighters.

“All of you worked so hard in the mayor’s races and the aldermanic races, whatever side. This is a good day for democracy,” he said. The mayor acknowledged that the primary revealed a mood for change in the city.

“They voted for change and I’m proud to take that mantle up,” he said.

DeStefano likened the desire for change in New Haven to the anti-incumbent sentiment rippling through the country, largely fueled by the difficult economy.

While this marks the end of the road for Dawson and Graves, Kerekes is registered to appear on the November ballot as an independent candidate. On Tuesday night, Kerekes vowed to continue his campaign all the way to November and hopefully pick up support from residents who voted for Dawson and Graves. His supporters gave him a huge round of applause after he returned from the polls. Noting DeStefano’s taking of 40 percent of the vote, Kerekes pointed out that “60 percent of the people voted against him. They rejected his stewardship of the city.”

He said that rejection had to do with frustration over skyrocketing taxes and crime and the city’s high school dropout rate.

“It’s very clear he lost the Board of Aldermen tonight. He lost control of the city and, come Nov. 8, we’ll have a new mayor,” he said.

Kerekes is running as a political outsider and is a clean elections candidate, meaning he has agreed to abide by the restrictions of the Democracy Fund. To date, Kerekes has raised more than \$33,000, including matching funds and a grant from the Democracy Fund. But he faces a nine-term incumbent who has the backing of Democratic Party leaders and has raised \$426,000. DeStefano did not participate in the Democracy Fund this election cycle.

Kerekes’ campaign vows transparency in government, reduced crime through community policing, better school reform, more spending in the classroom and more jobs. He has vowed not to increase taxes without a vote from residents.

DeStefano has largely refrained from responding to Kerekes’ fiery criticism of him, and rather has stood on his record over the last 18 years. The mayor focuses on education, touting school reform and the New Haven Promise scholarship program he helped launch last year. Economic development is another big talking point, with DeStefano pointing out that New Haven had the biggest population growth of any city of more than 100,000 people in New England in the last census. He also talks about combatting crime by getting drugs and guns off the streets and managing prison re-entry populations.

Dawson and Graves, two pillars of the local black community, garnered much of their support from neighborhoods such as Dixwell, Newhallville, the Hill and West River, the neighborhoods that have seen the majority of this year’s heavy homicide count and where combatting violence has been the top concern of many voters.

Neither candidate could immediately be reached for comment.

Observers say this was the most fiercely contested Democratic primary since state Sen. Martin M. Looney, D-New Haven, squared off against DeStefano in 2001 and lost.

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