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# ANALYSIS | What We Learned From the 2013 Primaries

by **Susan Bigelow**

September 13, 2013, 6:57 am



Another municipal primary season has come and gone. So what have we learned?

New Haven's Democratic primary was the marquee event, and by the end of the night we had learned that **Toni Harp is durable**. The New Haven state senator was out in front of the mayoral pack for pretty much the entire primary season, and she took plenty of heat. Opponents attacked her family's real estate business, and the *New Haven Register* failed to endorse her. Despite her troubles, she scored a decisive win, racking up nearly 50 percent of the vote in a four-way race. Harp remains the odds-on favorite to become New Haven's next mayor.

And yet the race isn't quite over. We also were reminded last night that, increasingly, **New Haven has a two-round election process**. The more frequent presence of primary losers on the general election ballot as independents, like Jeffrey Kerekes in 2011 and now Justin Elicker in 2013, means that the primary itself is usually just a preview of the main event. Since there's no real opposition to Democrats in the general election, there's no reason for willing candidates not to stay in the primary while also petitioning for November. This is a trend we're going to see more and more of in the Democrat-dominated cities.

Now the job of anyone trying to win the primary is to win as decisively as possible, and to make it difficult for other candidates to compete in the general election. Elicker remains on the ballot for November, despite a lopsided loss to Toni Harp in the primary. We'll see if general election voters like him better than Democratic primary voters, but past races suggest they won't.

Harp had a good night, but the state's top Democrat, who had endorsed her candidacy, didn't fare quite so well. We discovered that **Gov. Malloy's endorsement isn't worth too much**, and that he probably should have stayed away from mayoral primaries altogether. Malloy endorsed candidates in two separate Democratic primaries: Harp in New Haven and William Tong in his hometown of Stamford. Harp won by such a wide margin that Malloy's help probably wasn't all that necessary. However, Tong lost in Stamford, which was embarrassing for the governor. Tong almost certainly didn't lose because of Malloy, but it's still worth wondering why Malloy got involved in these primaries at all. Perhaps he's hoping that someone like Harp will be grateful when Malloy needs help next year.

The upset of the night was the defeat in Bridgeport of a slate of Board of Education candidates who had been backed by Bridgeport's mayor and Democratic machine. The victors were challengers who promised to oppose the reform efforts of the mayor and his embattled school superintendent, Paul Vallas. The Working Families Party, which heads up the opposition on the board, crowed that "a slate of progressives backed by a community-led coalition and the Working Families Party swept the Democratic primary for the Board of Education against the 'No Child Left Untested' corporate-funded education 'reform' machine Democrats." This suggests that **the backlash against school reform is real**, and that it's very much alive and kicking. Bridgeport has been ground zero in the fight between reformers and their opponents; a loss for reformers here is a big deal.

Another upset came in Enfield, where a slate of Republicans endorsed by the Republican Town Committee lost to a challenge slate headed up by incumbent Mayor Scott Kaupin. What makes it interesting is that the endorsed slate was campaigning against Republicans who had supported a tax increase and the unpopular addition of guards at the schools, and who had been spurned by the party caucus. They ran a campaign with provocative signs reading "Haven't you been taxed enough?" and "You should have a say," referring to a possible referendum on the armed guards. The stereotypes all suggest that Enfield Republicans should have favored the endorsed slate, but all four challengers won handily. So **moderate Republicans can still win primaries**, it seems, even after crossing the party line on taxes. It's a good sign for anyone who wants to see a healthy two-party system.

Lastly, we and Tom Foley learned that **Primary Day is a bad day to announce your campaign for governor**. Foley, 2010's narrow loser, announced the formation of an exploratory committee for

governor on the same day as a busy, interesting primary election, and the news was promptly buried. He couldn't have waited a day? He was, however, immediately attacked by rival Mayor Mark Boughton of Danbury, so the 2014 primary season seems likely to be full of fireworks.

*Susan Bigelow is an award-winning columnist and the founder of CTLocalPolitics. She lives in Enfield with her wife and their cats.*

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