



# Candidate Questionnaire

Local Candidates Committee

District Attorney Elections 2019

Citizens Union appreciates your response to the following questionnaire related to policy issues facing New York City and our interest in reforming city and state government. **Please return the questionnaire to us as soon as possible, and no later than May 1<sup>st</sup>.** Responses to these questions will be one of several factors Citizens Union uses to evaluate candidates running for District Attorney, and to issue our preference for the Primary and endorsement for the General Election. Please feel free to affix any additional information such as a résumé, campaign brochure, or issue statements.

If you seek our support, we will also need to schedule an interview with you as part of the evaluation process. **Please contact us if you wish to be interviewed.**

We plan to make responses to this questionnaire public on our website, printed voters directory, and other appropriate venues.

We thank you very much for your response.

### Biographical Information

Candidate Name: Melinda Katz

Candidate Cell Phone: 718-354-9871

Party Affiliation(s): Democrat

Age: 54

Education: BA from UMASS JD from St Johns

Office Sought (including district): Queens County District Attorney

Occupation/Employer: Borough President of Queens

### Previous Offices, Campaigns and Community/Civic Involvement:

Currently serving as the Queens Borough President, where I was first elected in 2013. Previously I served on the New York City Council, where I was Chair of the Land Use Committee and prior to that I was a member of the New York State Assembly.

*(Please feel free to affix any additional information such as a résumé, campaign brochure, or issue statements.)*

### Campaign Contact Information

Campaign Manager Name: Jessica Carrano

Additional Staff Contact:

Address: 23-22 Steinway Street Long Island City

Telephone: 917-657-2464

Fax:

Website: melindakatz.com

Email:

Twitter: melindakatz

Facebook: katz4da

### Affirmations

Have you completed required campaign finance filings?

YES / NO

Are you willing to be interviewed by CU's Local Candidates Committee?

YES / NO

*(Please note: interviews are prerequisites of being considered for Citizens Union endorsements.)*

Signature of Candidate:

Date:

## I. CANDIDATE QUESTIONS

Please state your position on the following issues by using the space provided below each question or a separate sheet of paper. You may also provide additional information on any actions that you have taken or plan to take to advance your positions on these issues.

1. What trends do you see in criminal activity that the district attorney's office should address?

I am troubled by the recent rise in gun violence this year and as District Attorney, that is one of the major areas that I want to address, especially in regard to trafficked guns in our community. As Borough President, I've partnered with community groups that run violence prevention programs that have helped reduce shootings in some of our most vulnerable neighborhoods of Queens. We must treat gun violence as a public health issue — investing more resources in programs that help mediate conflicts peacefully, educate the most at risk youth, and change norms in the community. New York has some of the strictest gun laws in the country, but we must limit the flow of illegal firearms in our city.

2. What would your priorities be as district attorney? What would you change in the incumbent's approach to fulfilling the responsibilities of the district attorney?

The current District Attorney's office needs to be reformed in a number of ways, and my top three priorities will be reducing gun violence and getting guns off our streets; ending hate crimes and protecting civil rights; and creating a fairer criminal justice system by ending cash bail and reforming discovery rules. To achieve this, I will expand the approach I have used as Borough President to treat gun violence as a public health issue and partner with community organizations with promote a "cure violence" model of harm reductions. I will end cash bail and reform discovery such that no one is forced to enter into a plea deal without knowing the evidence against them. I will expand usage of meaningful diversionary programs as alternatives to incarceration to better serve justice; and remove impediments that block the formerly incarcerated from being able to move forward with their lives by being able to live, work, and be part of the community.

3. What about your background and approach to the position differentiates you from the others running for district attorney?

My whole life has led me to this point, and I have a unique set of experiences that have prepared me for this job. From a childhood where I lost my mother to someone's illegal act, to my advocacy with insurance companies on my father's behalf as he battled cancer I know what it's like to feel voiceless, and I learned how to fight back. professionally, I've built my career standing up for those who were made to feel voiceless. I wrote and passed laws to protect victims of child sexual abuse by extending the statute of limitations, and to allow women to see their OB/GYN without a referral. I stood up to developers to demand better wages and safer working conditions on construction sites. As Borough President I've stood up to the Trump administration to call out ICE's abusive tactics against immigrants, and helped people seal past convictions and void old warrants. I know the law, I've run a large government agency and delivered real results; I know every community and every corner of this borough and I've laid out an aggressive reform agenda that people can count on.

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4. What role do you think the district attorney plays in anti-corruption efforts and building public trust, and how would you fulfill that role once in office?

I started my political career running against the party establishment, winning in what people told me was an “unwinnable” special election, because I believe that voters deserve a choice. Sadly, many New Yorkers and Americans are all too familiar with politicians using their office for personal gain. Throughout my career, I’ve never been afraid to stand up against powerful political interests, and as District Attorney I will fully investigate and prosecute all allegations of political corruption. Further, transparency will be an important focus of my administration, and my office will put out reports about the demographics of our cases, sentencing requests, and usage of seized assets so the public has a clear picture of how my office is operating and spending funds.

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5. To what extent would your office use the district attorney’s existing authority to investigate and monitor elected officials’ conduct in relation to issues like campaign finance compliance and proper use of government resources and influence?

Again, I will use the office of the District Attorney to investigate and prosecute those individuals who violate campaign finance laws or improperly use government resources or influence. Public Servants and those who campaign to hold elected office must be held to the highest possible standards, and the future District Attorney must use their office to help ensure that public trust is not violated and that nobody is above the law. Any allegations of improper use of campaigns funds will be fully investigated and prosecuted as appropriate.

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6. Do you believe more needs to be done to ease the re-entry of formerly incarcerated persons into society and, if so, what would you propose?

I absolutely believe that more must be done to ease the re-entry of formerly incarcerated individuals into society, which is why, as Borough President, I have assisted individuals with sealing past convictions, and worked with the DA to help people gain forgiveness of long outstanding warrants on minor crimes and violations. There was recent legislation introduced at the federal level, entitled the New Pathways Act, which provides more specific guidance for the Bureau of Prisons to help individuals obtain federal identification documents upon release from prison, such as a driver’s license, birth certificate, Social Security card, photo ID, or work authorization form. I support such legislation and such assistance. Furthermore, I believe we must provide tools for success that include workplace programs, mental health services, drug rehabilitation programs, and more.

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7. Do you think that the number of incidents of police misconduct is a problem? If so, what would you propose to facilitate more effective oversight of police misconduct? What data do you have to support your point of view?

Yes - even a single incident of police misconduct is a problem. Police need to be held to a higher standard than everyone else. They're supposed to serve the public, and when they walk into a courtroom, they're given the benefit of the doubt and believed more than anyone else. So when they lie - whether on the witness stand, in a police report, or anywhere else - they need to be held accountable.

As District Attorney, that's exactly what I'll do. I won't be afraid to prosecute officers for misconduct, and I believe there should be an independent investigation into any police shooting. Additionally, 50-a shouldn't be used to cover up police misconduct. I believe it should be repealed, and we should have standardized and consistent ways to make officer misconduct public so we can effectively hold police to a high standard.

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8. What are your views on the state legislation recently enacted with regard to discovery and use of bail?

I am a strong supporter of the new legislation to improve discovery reform, but I believe we need to completely eliminate cash bail. As DA, I will not ask for cash bail and I prioritize discovery so that every person has enough time with and understands the evidence against them before considering a plea deal. I'm glad that the legislature is taking steps to address criminal justice reform, but when it comes to enacting the policies we need, I will move forward as DA on these issues regardless of what actions the legislature does or does not take.

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9. Do you support requiring police interrogations to be videotaped?

Yes, all police interrogations should be videotaped. There have been far too many examples of false confessions being coerced out of defendants, and as DA I need to know the circumstances under which evidence and confessions were attained to determine if it is credible..

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10. How do you feel about the city's plan to close the Rikers Island complex? What concerns do you have and what are the potential benefits and pitfalls of the plan?

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I strongly support closing Rikers and using borough-based jails as needed. However I believe the most important component must be reducing the prison population - which can be done by expunging marijuana arrests, eliminating cash bail, and supporting and utilizing diversion programs to address addiction, mental illness, among others. Reducing the population will ease the transition into borough-based jails. The current plan has not take community input into account, a critical error that has lead to pushback. Borough-based jails will allow greater access to family, support networks, and legal counsel.

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## II. CAMPAIGN PROMISES MADE TO VOTERS

What are the top five campaign promises you are making to the voters during this campaign?

If elected, Citizens Union will use these promises to evaluate your performance while in office, as well as to evaluate your candidacy in the future.

Please feel free to use additional paper if the space provided is not sufficient, and to affix additional information such as a résumé, campaign brochure, or issue statements. We thank you very much for your response.

### TOP FIVE 2019 CAMPAIGN PROMISES OR GOALS

1. 

Reduce Gun Violence. I will partner with civic organizations, faith organizations and community leaders in all Queens communities to use a cure violence model and an effective public health approach to addressing gun violence.
  
2. 

End cash bail and institute discovery reform. Cash bail truly penalizes the poor and often has no bearing on whether or not someone will come back for court. For someone with a history of failing to return, ankle monitors or other steps can be taken. No one should have to make plea deal with having access to and understanding the evidence against them - that's why I will be instituting open discovery.
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3. Hire a staff that truly reflects the diversity of our borough. Queens is one of the most diverse counties in the country and it important that everyone feels that they are represented and respected by my office. I believe that it is critical that the DA's staff have a vested interest in keeping our community safe, and I will prioritize hiring candidates who live in Queens and represent the diverse communities that make up our county. Additionally, I will ensure that staff members have the necessary language skills so that all who come to our office can get the services they need.
  
4. 

Create a Conviction Integrity Unit and work with defense attorneys and community leaders to determine what cases may demand further review, examine those cases, and make recommendations for exoneration. Wrongful convictions are a nation concern, and new models show the way for it to be done properly to ensure justice is served. Every wrongful conviction not only destroys the life of the individual wrongly convicted and his or her family, but also further undermines everyone's faith in our criminal justice system.
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5. Protect immigrants and workers. In a Borough as diverse as Queens, many employers unfortunately try to take advantage of workers' immigrations status, language barriers, inexperience, and/or financial situation to violate their rights when it comes to wages and workplace safety. This can have deeply tragic consequences, and as our next District Attorney, I will hold employers accountable for their actions and assign an investigator to every worksite accident. This will not only provide justice for victims of workplace safety violations, but will also send a clear message to develops that any effort to cut corners will have severe consequences. As DA, I will do everything possible to keep ICE out of the courts and create an Immigrant Justice Unit dedicated to helping immigrants avoid collateral consequences like deportation and report crimes.

