

Justin Cohen

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District Number	56
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Party Affiliation(s)	Democrat
Age	38
Education	B.A., Yale
Occupation/Employer	Nonprofit leader
Previous Offices, Campaigns and Community/Civic Involvement	Education Policy Committee - Barack Obama 2008 No New Jails NYC Campaign Raise the Age Campaign Founder of #PoliticizeMyDeath
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If elected, which legislative conference will you join (e.g., Republican, Democrat, other)?	Democrat
Have you completed the required campaign finance filings?	Yes
Are you willing to be interviewed by Citizens Union's Local Candidates Committee?	Yes
Signature	

DLCC

1. Replace the Joint Commission on Public Ethics and the Legislative Ethics Commission with an effective and independent enforcement body (S594A/A1282A).

Support

2. Limit outside compensation earned by state legislators and statewide officials to 25% of their salaries and eliminate stipends.

Support

3. Do you support or oppose the following changes to the state's current registration and voting system?

a. No-excuse absentee voting (second passage of constitutional amendment)

Support

b. Election Day voter registration (second passage of constitutional amendment)

Support

c. Re-enfranchisement of people on parole automatically through legislation, without requiring a Certificate of Good Conduct or Relief

Support

d. Automatic voter registration, unless the potential voter opts out

Support

e. Mandating poll sites on college campuses

Support

4. Reform the special election process, utilizing a nonpartisan special election for state legislative seats and eliminate delays in filling vacancies.

Support

5. Reduce the vote threshold to become a registered party back to 50,000 votes and keep the gubernatorial election as the qualifying election, and reduce the petition requirement for independent candidates back to 15,000 signatures.

Support

6. Amend the state's public campaign financing system, approved in the 2021 budget, by

a. Drastically reduce campaign contribution limits

Support

b. Set even lower contribution limits for registered lobbyists and those who do business with the state

Support

c. Move the campaign finance

Support

matching program to be administered by an independent, nonpartisan body outside of the NY Board of Election

d. Simplify the matching system by making both in- and out-of-district donations eligible and by eliminating the three different tiers for matching

Support

7. Require full disclosure of grants and contracts issued by the state, including the budget lines from which the spending is made and reporting on the results of each grant or contract over a certain amount.

Support

8. Provide for effective online disclosure and itemization of spending from elected officials' lump sum appropriations, including reporting on potential conflicts of interest and how the funds are spent.

Support

9. Repeal Civil Rights Law, Sec. 50-a, which shields from public view the disciplinary records of police officers, correction officers, and firefighters.

Support

10. Restructure the state Board of Elections to abolish the strict two-party division of governance and operation and put in place professional, nonpartisan administration.

Support

11. Empower the attorney general to investigate and prosecute election law malfeasance and cases of public corruption.

Support

12. Make mayoral control of city schools permanent, with a governance system that provides for accountability, transparency, parent engagement, and democratic participation.

Support

13. Simplify and consolidate New York State's court system by passing the Chief Judge's proposed constitutional amendment to modernize the courts.

Support

If needed, you may elaborate below on your positions on the previous questions. You may also provide additional information on any actions that you have taken or plan to take to advance your positions on these issues.

On Elections and Voting: The current public health crisis has exposed just how antiquated and anti-democratic our current voting system is. We've seen the Board of Elections scramble to ensure that every voter can participate in the upcoming election cycle, and while we don't yet know the efficacy of this updated system, we can anticipate imperfections. We have the opportunity to create proactive changes to our registration and voting systems that make it clear and easy for citizens to engage in our democratic processes, and a failure to seize these opportunities will further disenfranchise New Yorkers.

On Police Accountability: I have been a strong advocate for state, local, and federal changes to both statute and contracts that lead to greater police accountability and transparency around police violence. Moreover, not only do we support the repeal of Civil Rights Law, Sec. 50-a, we reject the notion that police officers as a professional class ought to be protected under civil rights law.

On Home Rule: We realize mayoral control has been an imperfect governance structure for what is essentially the country's largest school system. In some ways, mayoral control fosters more financial and public accountability as more New Yorkers vote in mayoral elections. That said, because the system is so large, the shift to mayoral control also led to significant challenges to community engagement and parent voice which need to be accounted for if this system is to continue. Ultimately, refining this system should lead to better outcomes than starting from scratch and reinventing the governance of the schools once again.

14. Adopt technological solutions and provisions that will allow the New York State legislature to convene and vote remotely if needed.

Support

15. Provide public access to observe and participate in government proceedings, in meetings that would be public under the New York Open Meetings Law, via live and recorded video available on government websites.

Support

16. Implement immediate programs to facilitate absentee voting for all New York voters as long as the widespread contagion risk of COVID-19 continues, under current state constitutional limitations. This includes electronic submission of absentee ballot applications without a wet signature and a public information campaign.

Support

17. What are your concerns regarding the use of emergency powers during this crisis, and how do you think NY government can maintain public accountability standards at this time?

Our campaign's largest concern about emergency powers relates to the exacerbation of authoritarian policing methods in New York's Black and Brown communities. Communities in Central Brooklyn have strained relationships with the police due to years of aggressive policing that have disproportionately affected communities of color. We already are witnessing disproportionality in the use of force to enforce social distancing orders, and we suspect that these disparities will continue without greater transparency and accountability. New York state, and the NYPD in particular, must embrace transparency around both the practical deployment of force standards, and arrest disparities by race.

Our second biggest concern during this crisis has been the consolidation of executive power by the governor, particularly around issues related to the state budget. We've seen cuts to Medicaid and Medicare, roll backs on bail reform, and no housing relief or plans to cancel rent. As a state assemblyman, I intend to be an active check on gubernatorial power, even if that causes strains within Democratic party leadership.

18. What are the biggest challenges in your district in dealing with the coronavirus outbreak?

District 56 has experienced the brunt of the outbreak, including not only the direct public health impacts of high infection rates and low access to cleaning supplies and protective equipment, but also the economic impact on small businesses, unemployment, and housing. With regards to infection, Black and Brown neighborhoods in NYC experience the highest rates of infection, outside of our

community members incarcerated in the city's jails, prisons, and detention centers. This is no different in Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights. Our neighbors are experiencing high rates of infection and neglect, particularly within District 56's seven public housing developments. Additionally, constituents do not have access to quality healthcare (with in-district Woodhull Hospital overwhelmed and unable to fund PPE for its own staff), or to necessary cleaning and protective supplies, while more affluent neighborhoods just a few zip codes away have bleach and masks stocked regularly in their stores.

Outside of the direct public health issues, the economic impact has hit District 56 hard: Small businesses have closed their doors, and no local Black-owned businesses have received federal grants or stimulus, while large chains receive PPP. Constituents are experiencing high rates of unemployment. These economic impacts mean individuals are struggling to make rent and mortgage payments and secure groceries. We have connected many neighbors with meals and housing advocacy resources, but we know that there will be a lasting impact, even after the outbreak has died down.

19. What are the appropriate roles of city, state, and federal governments in a crisis such as this?

City governments should be reorganizing public infrastructure to address immediate needs. That includes addressing food scarcity issues through both direct service in the public school system and partnership with community based organizations; creating emergency safety procedures in the public transit system; ensuring elevated cleanliness and sanitation standards in public housing; and supporting supply chain gaps that adversely affect public health systems, to name a few issues.

State governments should be making hard decisions about both revenue and expenses, to ameliorate the crisis in the short and long-term. In this particular moment, that should mean examining both sides of the ledger, but our current leadership seems unwilling to identify new sources of tax revenue, even though the wealthiest New Yorkers are still not paying their fair share of the overall tax burden. States also should be actively lobbying the federal government to use its monetary and fiscal authority to create short- and medium-term stimulus programs that can fill gaps in municipal budgets, so that the crisis does not compound and spiral across multiple fiscal years.

Finally, the federal government should use its fiscal powers to essentially print money, and ameliorate short- and medium-term crises in state and municipal budgets. In select cases, federal stimulus investments should be tied to progressive reforms, such as green public infrastructure investments; voting rights infrastructure investments; and public health infrastructure, to name a few.

20. How will you help your future constituents, residents and businesses, access potential funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, or any other future government relief funds?

In this moment, we've seen the efficacy of local networks of neighbors in connecting one another with resources. We cannot pretend that the state government will ever have the bureaucratic capacity to meet the individual needs of state residents during a crisis. Therefore, we must create more partnerships between the state and local aid networks and CBOs in order to more effectively channel resources to those who need them. As a state assemblymember, I will ensure that our constituent-facing staff has significant training in how to assist residents and businesses with applications for federal and state relief funds. Moreover, we will partner with local legal volunteer agencies to provide free legal support around loan applications and closings.

Campaign Promise 1

Housing Justice: Affordability & ending homelessness

In 2019, a full-time worker earning minimum wage cannot afford a two-bedroom apartment in any county—urban, suburban, or rural—in the United States. This hits particularly hard in New York City, where the housing crisis has only been exacerbated by the real estate industry's greed. Bed-Stuy alone had 20,000 entries into homeless shelters in the past year. Meanwhile, there are over a quarter-million empty apartments sitting vacant on the market right now. For Black homeowners in Brooklyn, housing instability comes at the hands of developers whose criminal deed theft pushes long term residents out of their homes and prices them out of their neighborhoods.

With Justin in assembly, we will:

Fight for a homes guarantee and create other policies that envision housing as a fundamental right instead of a privilege for the rich

Enact universal rent control to stem the tide of displacement and gentrification, while implementing a tax on vacant apartments, so developers and landlords are incentivized to build affordable housing

Crack down on deed theft to protect Brooklyn homeowners from deceit and displacement

Make NYCHA state of the arts housing, renovated with updated appliances and stable heat, hot water, and gas service

Campaign Promise 2

Criminal Justice: Safety through abolition

New York's carceral system continues to affect people of color, immigrants and lower-income communities across the state. At the state and local level, leaders have invested 11 billion dollars in new jails and millions in increased policing of the MTA, without actually increasing public safety. Bed-Stuy's incarceration rate is higher than the city as a whole, leaving our community highly impacted by the destructive forces of over policing. Brooklyn should be leading the country in finding new ways to keep ourselves safe without resorting to jails and prisons, but Albany continues perpetuating the idea that public safety improves from punishing and caging Black and Brown communities.

With Justin in assembly, we will:

Dismantle the destructive prison system that is designed to destroy lives and families instead of increase safety

Defend bail reform and end pre-trial detention

Create new pathways for community safety that reduces gun violence and do not rely on putting young people in cages

Divest from carceral systems and invest in systems of restorative justice, including holistic mental health services, non-law enforcement youth programs, and methods to address interpersonal violence and poverty crimes (fare evasion, survival work, and other actions taken for the sake of survival)

Campaign Promise 3

Education Justice: Equitable access to high quality education

Across the nation, in New York City, and specifically in Crown Heights and Bed-Stuy, there are vast disparities in the quality of education. Some of our students sit in spacious rooms and have access to state of the art computer labs, while others sit in over-crowded rooms with not enough supplies. Some of our students have access to mental health care and restorative justice circles, while others have law enforcement and metal detectors. Absenteeism, standardized test scores, and graduation rates are all consequences of the systemic inequities in our schools, and only robust policy interventions can reverse these trends.

While there's no one-size-fits-all solution to improving our schools, we can demand that New York state comply with court-ordered increases to education funding for Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights students.

With Justin in assembly, we will:

Prioritize school-based mental healthcare and restorative justice practices, not policing

Fully support the renovation and technology upgrade for PS243, PS335 and all other schools in the district

Connect with DOE and local food co-ops to ensure that our children have access to healthy foods.

Invest in art education, ESL, civic engagement and other holistic school programming to promote deeper connection and retention in schools

Campaign Promise 4

Immigration Justice: Rebuilding our city of immigrants

Abolish ICE. More than any other city in the United States, New York is rooted in the country's deep history of welcoming immigrants. In District 56 we have an overwhelmingly large population of African diaspora immigrants, but we must ensure that immigrant communities can feel secure by providing pathways to green cards, protecting immigrants from ICE raids and deportation, and celebrating the diversity of cultures in our district.

With Justin in assembly, we will:

Work collectively with the community to hold law enforcement accountable for working with ICE and other federal agencies.

Make New York a true sanctuary state for immigrants and halt all law enforcement cooperation with ICE, including any and all information sharing with ICE.

End the targetted policing of immigrant and Muslim communities

Create access to drivers licenses, state-sponsored healthcare, and civil legal protections.

Fight hard against bill number A09116 which will allow NYS motor vehicles unit to share driver licenses data with ICE.

Ensure that NYPD and DOC do not honor detainers issued by ICE.

Campaign Promise 5

Economic Justice: Reparations and economic mobility

To fully address all of these issues, we must acknowledge that we are on stolen land, and that community liberation depends on dismantling the systemic violence that continues to disenfranchise Black and Brown communities. The enslaved labor of Black Americans built this country. Years after abolition, systemic racism is still woven into every sector of our economy. The finance and real estate industries, engines that drive the hoarding of intergenerational wealth, have perpetuated inequality for generations through red-lining, price-gouging loans, and contemporary nefarious actions, like deed theft.

With Justin in assembly, we will:

Co-create programs that redress our nation's original sin, through building practical frameworks for both reparations and reconciliation.

Hold accountable the toxic industries and failed government policies that perpetuate the wealth gap for Black Americans

Legalize cannabis and use the tax revenue to invest in reparations

Divest from policing and incarceration to invest in infrastructure and social services that promote economic stability and community wellness, including:

Renovating the Marcy and Bedford branch libraries, increasing funding for youth programming and intergenerational learning, and expanding the book selection and research hub to increase access to materials on African-American culture

Renovating the facilities and expanding recreational programming at the

Marcy/Kosciuszko Pool, the recreation areas at the Kingsborough Houses, El-Shabazz Playground, and Jackie Robinson Park

Please feel free to attach any additional information such as resume, campaign brochures, or issues statements.



[JC2020 Palm Card.pdf](#)

Please tell us how you have and would continue to conduct the political affairs of this office in an upright manner, and maintain the public trust.

If there's one consistent theme in our politics since the election of 2016, it is the extraordinary consequences of having elected officials who place their personal interests ahead of the public interest. These challenges are not just abstract moral ones, but rather they have profound consequences for the pursuit of justice and resource distribution. Unfortunately, these themes are not new ones, but rather they have been made more obvious, given the flagrancy with which our current president both flaunts the rule of law and uses his office to advance personal pecuniary interests. We have, unfortunately, seen similar patterns of compromised integrity, graft, corruption, and ethical lapses in our New York state officials for decades.

As a member of the New York State Assembly, I intend to model practices of integrity, accountability, and transparency, while asking the same of both my colleagues and the broader system. I will fight for campaign finance reforms that reduce the influence of large donors in politics, particularly those hiding behind the shell structures of LLCs and non-transparent PACs. I will push our state party to take an active role in fighting these issues at the federal level whenever possible. I also plan to proactively disclose my personal financial interests, and my professional and board governance affiliations.

Moreover, as a grassroots activist and community organizer, I have embraced hyper-local accountability structures that place me as a candidate in constant dialogue with the residents, activists, and neighbors who support my campaign. I intend to govern with the consent of both my constituency, and the grassroots organizers who helped to build this campaign. By embracing hyper-local accountability for my actions as a legislator, I hope to prevent the slippery slope of ethics erosion that seems to plague a disproportionate number of individuals who hold political power in this state and country.

I am running for office as a pragmatic idealist, and I'm not shy about that. I want to be held accountable not just because it's the "right thing to do," but also because, from a political perspective, community accountability is central to my personal interpretation of how progressive change manifests in our political system.