



# VOTER GUIDE: JUDICIAL RACES

Brooklyn Democratic Primary  
June 25, 2019

## About this Voter Guide

While the recent “blue wave” in New York State has brought increased attention to races for State Senate and Assembly seats, judicial elections continue to be a mystery to even the most politically engaged New Yorkers. This year, New Kings Democrats is hoping to shed some light on the process ahead of the June 25 Democratic primary by publishing this voter guide. In the following pages, you will find a brief description of the function of Civil Court and Surrogate’s Court, how judges are elected to these courts, and information about each of the Democratic candidates running for judgeships on these courts in 2019.\* Five of the nine candidates running for these seats completed and submitted questionnaires to NKD, sharing their biographical information, work histories, judicial philosophies, campaign structures, and thoughts about how the courts can address institutionalized racism. For the candidates who submitted questionnaires, we have included excerpts from their answers, as well as links to their complete responses.

New Kings Democrats is a progressive, grassroots political organization committed to bringing transparency, accountability, and inclusionary democracy to the Kings County Democratic Party. While our strategy sometimes involves supporting specific candidates for office, we decided to keep our focus this election cycle - which in most Brooklyn districts will only feature judicial races - in building awareness and engagement around the candidates and the positions they are running for. Nothing in this guide is intended to represent an endorsement of any particular candidate by New Kings Democrats. As you will see, all of the candidates have something of substance to say. We are particularly pleased that this year’s judicial candidates are all women and/or people of color; this level of representation is certainly a step towards the inclusionary democracy New Kings Democrats and its partners are fighting for.

Please e-mail [politics@newkingsdemocrats.com](mailto:politics@newkingsdemocrats.com) to learn more about our work.

\* You may also see candidates for judicial delegate positions on your ballot (if your Assembly District has more judicial delegate candidates than seats). The role of these delegates is to attend the Kings County Democratic Party’s judicial convention (which will be held on August 8 this year) and select the party’s nominees for any vacant State Supreme Court seats. These nominees will go up against other parties’ candidates in the November 2019 general election.

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### The Race: Civil Court – Countywide

The Civil Court of the City of New York handles lawsuits involving monetary claims for damages up to \$25,000. It is a citywide entity split into five divisions corresponding to each of the boroughs. Brooklyn has approximately 38 Civil Court seats. Some of these seats are filled by voters throughout the borough, while others are filled by residents of corresponding municipal districts. (For example, as described below, candidates for the vacant 6th municipal district Civil Court judgeship are elected by residents of the sixth municipal district.) All Civil Court judges perform the same roles, regardless of whether they were elected by residents of the entire borough or those in a specific municipal district. Additionally, candidates for any Civil Court seat may live anywhere in New York City. Brooklyn Civil Court judges may be randomly assigned to serve in another borough, and/or to serve temporarily on one of the City’s Family Courts or Criminal Courts.

There is one vacancy for a Countywide Civil Court seat in 2019.

#### The Candidates

##### Edward King

[Website](#)

[Facebook page](#)

[Twitter](#)

##### Derefim Bernadette Neckles

[Website](#)

[Facebook page](#)



### The Race: Civil Court – Countywide (continued)

**Candidate: Edward King**

**Current Position:** Solo practitioner

**Neighborhood:** Bed-Stuy

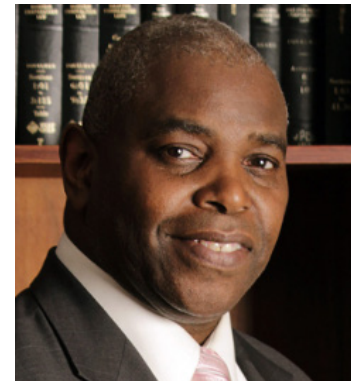
[Link to NKD Questionnaire](#)

#### Highlights from the NKD Questionnaire:

“Too many young people believe that a career in the law is unobtainable due to the lack of exposure and experience. If elected, I would encourage my fellow judges to participate in programs like the “Color of Justice” created by the National Association of Women Judges, where high school girls come together with lawyers and judges to discuss careers in the law.”

“Judges should be role models, exemplifying the best of what it means to be a lawyer and a member of society as a whole.”

“I want to be a judge to uphold the rule of law in our society with fairness and compassion. During my 35 year legal career, I have witnessed too many examples of how this premise has been abrogated resulting in decisions that are unfair and unjust. As a judge, I want to ensure that the citizens in our society receive a just and fair result when resolving a dispute.”





### The Race: Civil Court – Countywide (continued)

#### Candidate: Derefim Bernadette Neckles

**Current Position:** Court Attorney-Referee – Supreme Court, Kings County, Civil Term

**Neighborhood:** East Flatbush

[Link to NKD Questionnaire](#)



#### Highlights from the NKD Questionnaire:

“A judge should have the experience, good character, integrity, compassion, humility, fairness, good temperament, legal scholarship, and intellectual capacity to be able to interpret the law, to apply the law to the facts of the case, and to be able to make clear and concise decisions... The usual and expected method of doing justice – to be diligent, prompt, and well organized – rather than being extreme or peculiar in making judgments, or spectacular or sensational in the conduct of the courtroom.”

“I admire Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, and the late Justice Thurgood Marshall for their intelligence, inspiring work on the bench, relentless optimism, and fight in giving voice to the voiceless.”

“Some ways in which the courts as a community can address issues of institutional racism is by continuing to promote programs that afford indigents better access to justice and programs that raise awareness about the existence of implicit bias and that encourage inclusiveness and diversity within the legal profession and within the court system. As a judge, I will lead by example... I will ensure that every litigant who appears before me gets a fair and full opportunity to be heard and is treated with the utmost respect and dignity regardless to race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion or socioeconomic status and further I will also make accommodations for litigants with a disability to the extent that it does not create a level of unfairness to others.”



### The Race: Civil Court – 6th Municipal District

The residency requirements and roles for the Civil Court seats assigned to specific municipal districts are the same as the residency requirements and roles for Countywide seats; the only difference is who is that only residents of a specific municipal district are allowed to vote in the election to fill that district's seat.

There is one vacancy for a municipal district Civil Court seat this year, and it is in the 6th municipal district, which covers parts of [Park Slope](#), [Prospect Heights](#), [Crown Heights](#), [Flatbush](#), [East Flatbush](#), [Kensington](#), and [Midwood](#).

#### The Candidates

**Tehilah Berman\***

[Facebook page](#)

**Caroline Cohen**

[Website](#)

[Facebook page](#)

[Twitter](#)

**Alice Nicholson\***

[Website](#)

[Facebook page](#)

**Chinyelu Udoh**

[Facebook page](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Website](#)

*\* Please note that this candidate did not complete NKD's questionnaire. We still encourage you to research her through the link(s) we have provided and any other available materials.*



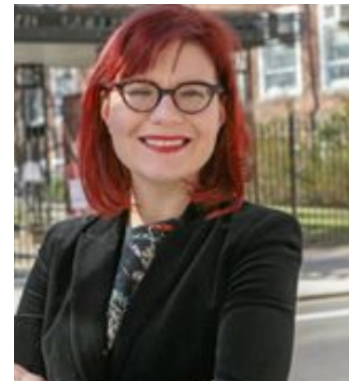
### The Race: Civil Court – 6th Municipal District (continued)

**Candidate: Caroline Cohen**

**Current Position:** Senior Associate at Crumiller P.C.

**Neighborhood:** Flatbush

[Link to NKD Questionnaire](#)



#### Highlights from the NKD Questionnaire:

“Judges must ensure that all litigants and litigators are to be treated equally, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or economic status. I have experience serving on the Court Civility Task Force through which I sought to ensure that women were being treated equally throughout the court system. I believe strongly in enforcing a zero-tolerance policy in order to prevent snide gendered or racialized comments in the courtroom.”

“My mother wanted to be a lawyer, and ultimately a judge, but her father forbade her from attending law school. My mother saw qualities in me that she saw in herself, including determination and leadership, and encouraged me to attend law school. After my mother passed away, I wanted to fulfill her dream, now mine, of becoming a judge. Becoming a judge in many ways is an extension of the love I have for my community, as evidenced by my extensive work as a community activist, and is the next step I can take to be in service of others.”

“Legislators and judges alike need to be cognizant of various reforms such as bail reform, alternatives to incarceration, and raising the age of criminal responsibility. If elected and placed in Criminal Court, I look forward to executing such reforms in my courtroom whenever possible.”



### The Race: Civil Court – 6th Municipal District (continued)

#### Candidate: Chinyelu Udoh

**Current Position:** Law Clerk - Supreme Court, New York County, Civil Term

**Neighborhood:** Bed-Stuy

[Link to NKD Questionnaire](#)



#### Highlights from the NKD Questionnaire:

“I believe the judiciary should reflect the diversity of our Brooklyn communities, and should have the character and ability to render justice with compassion and fairness.”

“I truly admire Lisa S. Ottley, NYS Supreme Court Justice. She is one of the most well-respected members of the judiciary in Brooklyn, across all practices. She is brilliant and compassionate, careful and precise, and consistently fair and justiciable, giving each and every case her utmost care and attention. Her dedication on and off the bench is rivaled by none, she has served since her youth, and continues to serve every community across the borough.”

“Having experienced injustice and discrimination while growing up, I have desired to always fight for fairness and equity, and to always be an active member of my community. I have been fortunate to serve the community in so many ways, not simply in my practice as a litigator protecting the most vulnerable in our New York City communities, but throughout my life as a dedicated public servant committed to volunteerism, building and bridging friendships and families. Becoming a member of the judiciary is the most humbling opportunity to serve the public in law, and I hope to earn the community’s support to continue to serve them in this capacity.”



### The Race: Surrogate's Court

The Surrogate's Court hears cases involving affairs of the deceased, including the probate of wills (such as transferring a property's title from the person who has died to the person's heirs), paying of any taxes owed by the deceased person, determining the validity of a will, or settling any disputes related to a will. The Court also handles family trusts, adoptions, and guardianships. Brooklyn has two Surrogate's Court judges, or Surrogates.

There is one Surrogate's Court vacancy in Brooklyn in 2019.

### The Candidates

**Elena Baron\***

[Facebook page](#)

**Meredith Jones**

[Website](#)

[Facebook page](#)

**Margarita Lopez Torres**

[Website](#)

[Facebook page](#)

*\* Please note that this candidate did not complete NKD's questionnaire. We still encourage you to research her through the link(s) we have provided and any other available materials.*





### The Race: Surrogate's Court (continued)

**Candidate: Meredith Jones**

**Current Position:** Court Attorney-Referee, Kings County Surrogate's Court

**Neighborhood:** Brownsville

[Link to NKD Questionnaire](#)



**Highlights from the NKD Questionnaire:**

“I believe community outreach is a key element to educating the community about the different courts and the role and importance of attorneys in our free society... If elected, I would encourage more attorneys who have not traditionally practiced in the Surrogate's Court to consider this area of law.”

“I believe that having the opportunity to serve as a judge in our community is not an award, but a public trust... I have worked in Surrogate's Court for over 15 years. I have seen what a good judge can do for people who come before the court, and the difference it can make in their lives.”

“I would address issues of institutionalized racism by promoting diversity both in and out of the courtroom. I would advocate for sensitivity training for the court's employees to raise their awareness regarding attitudes, behaviors and judgments which amount to discrimination through indirect prejudices, ignorance, thoughtlessness and stereotyping. I will also confront any instances of racism both blatant and latent whenever it rears its head. It is imperative to do that so that the community can have confidence in its judicial system. I would encourage the hiring of a diverse staff as well as promote diversity in the appointments for which the Surrogate is responsible.”



### The Race: Surrogate's Court (continued)

**Candidate: Margarita Lopez Torres**

**Current Position:** Judge, Kings County Surrogate's Court (running for reelection)

**Neighborhood:** Park Slope

[Link to NKD Questionnaire](#)



**Highlights from the NKD Questionnaire:**

“Having grown up in an economically-challenged household in Brownsville, East New York, and Flatbush, and from my years as a staff and supervising attorney with legal services prior to becoming a judge, I saw the difficulties and challenges pro se litigants face, and acted from a belief that low income individuals not only should be represented, but should also receive professional, quality counsel. As a judge, I have continued to be concerned that the legal needs of so many members of our community go unmet.”

“With over 26 years on the bench, I am the only judge in the City to have presided in the Civil, Family, Criminal, and Surrogate's Courts, and am the most senior Surrogate in the metropolitan region. As such, I have a wide breadth of experience and knowledge of the law, and a record of competence and integrity... I have expertise in sorting out challenging situations and resolving complex legal issues. My decisions demonstrate commitment and respect for legal precedent while satisfying the imperative of doing justice.”

“I have a core belief that we cannot effectively do our job unless we have the respect of those who come before us. We earn that respect, in turn, only by respecting the dignity of those who come before us, and by respecting and fairly applying the laws we are bound to uphold. But, perhaps more importantly, the public must have confidence that judges, once on the bench, are independent, impartial, and blind to partisan or parochial concerns. I bring to the Court my dedication to judicial independence.”