

# DSA candidate concedes Queens District Attorney race

By Josh Varlin  
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Tiffany Cabán, the public defender and “anti-establishment” candidate for the Democratic nomination for Queens district attorney, conceded defeat to Queens Borough President Melinda Katz on August 6 after Katz pulled ahead in a manual recount. Cabán, who was heavily backed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and is a DSA member, had declared victory on election night, June 25, with a 1,100-vote lead.

Katz had originally refused to concede, citing thousands of absentee ballots which could potentially swing the race in her favor—and eventually did, giving the borough president a 20-vote lead. The narrow margin of victory prompted an automatic hand recount.

The recount shifted some votes both ways, ultimately leading to Katz gaining an additional 40 votes for a final margin of 60 votes, 34,920 to 34,860 for Cabán. The primary contest shifted to the courtroom, where the Cabán campaign attempted to get affidavit ballots that had been invalidated reexamined. The campaign also tried to get some Katz votes invalidated and some invalidated Cabán votes counted. However, the Queens Supreme Court only agreed to review a few dozen votes, not enough to swing the race as a whole, prompting Cabán’s concession.

Given the heavily Democratic registration in the New York City borough, Katz is the heavy favorite to win the office of district attorney in November’s general election.

The Queens district attorney race, for all the bluster by Cabán’s camp, was a conflict between two right-wing factions of the Democratic Party. The political strategy of the DSA—to provide a “left” gloss to the Democratic Party by winning a few positions and promoting the illusion that other Democrats can be “pressured” to the left, was articulated in Cabán’s concession speech.

“We terrified the Democratic establishment,” Cabán absurdly claimed, although she was endorsed by the Democratic house organ known as the *New York Times*.

She claimed her campaign “literally change[d] the course of history” because it “pushed candidates to change their positions on prosecuting marijuana, on crime because of poverty, on mental health issues, on substance use disorder.”

Of course, politicians’ “positions” on various issues aren’t worth the paper they’re printed on. There is no doubt that, in office, Katz will prosecute “criminals” as the ruling class requires—as Cabán would have.

The line-up of endorsements illustrates that the district attorney race was between two factions of the same right-wing capitalist party. The DSA itself is a faction of the Democratic Party and a DSA press release on June 26 identified Cabán as a member. Two top Democratic party presidential candidates, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, both senators, as well as Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a DSA member whose district is partially in Queens, endorsed Cabán.

Significantly, Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner, a “progressive” elected with the support of the DSA, also endorsed her. Krasner, in his official role, appealed against political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal’s right to re-argue his case.

A remarkable article published August 12 by *Crains New York* profiles the fundraising for Cabán from sections of the capitalist class, particularly in the tech industry and on Wall Street. By this account, “Cabán attracted \$55,000 in contributions from the wife of Netflix CEO Reed Hastings, \$5,000 from the widow of Apple founder Steve Jobs and \$1,000 from the wife of Zillow and Expedia founder Rich Barton...

“Her campaign collected \$30,000 from Goldman Sachs and Fortress Investment Group alumnus Michael Novogratz, who now helms the cryptocurrency merchant bank Galaxy Digital

from an office on the Lower East Side. The daughter of Renaissance Technologies co-founder James Simon

contributed \$38,000, while her husband—who heads the family-investments manager Medley Partners—donated \$20,000. Paloma Funds and New China Capital Management founder Donald Sussman contributed \$10,000, as did David Roberts, senior managing partner of the investment firm Angelo Gordon. The son of TPG Capital founder David Bonderman chipped in \$38,505. Capital markets lawyer Antonia Stolper, who represents a host of Latin American financial institutions for the Manhattan-based firm Shearman & Sterling, provided \$5,000.”

The distribution of votes is also worth noting. Despite national attention, fewer than 90,000 voters, out of 760,000 eligible Democrats, voted. Queens has over 2,300,000 people, making it one of the largest counties in the US by population.

The Cabán campaign did well in gentrifying neighborhoods close to Manhattan like Astoria and Long Island City, whereas largely African-American and Hispanic working class and middle class neighborhoods like Jamaica went for Katz. Katz overcame her election-night deficit through absentee ballots, particularly from elderly voters. Far from representing an insurgent, working class movement against the Democratic Party, the Cabán campaign was backed largely by sections of the upper middle class and the light overall turnout indicates neither camp (nor the five other candidates) was able to mobilize significant numbers of voters.

Moreover, despite the Cabán campaign’s references to the candidate’s identity as a Hispanic lesbian—Cabán would have been the first Latina and the first openly gay Queens district attorney—the DSA member’s votes were concentrated in the less ethnically diverse neighborhoods in western Queens.

The DSA-affiliated *Jacobin* magazine, when it appeared that Cabán had won, gloated: “DSA-sponsored events accounted for thousands of the signatures needed to get Cabán on the ballot, and DSA members also contributed significantly to non-DSA petitioning events. And DSA members helped lead key parts of her campaign, especially her field operation. Dozens of DSA members devoted their lives to GOTV (get out the vote) operations throughout Queens from the Thursday before election day until polls closed on Tuesday night.”

On the other hand, Katz had the backing of the Queens Democratic Party as well as New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and many unions. Cabán was criticized by the *New York Post* and the *New York Daily News* for her

position on decriminalizing sex work.

While the rhetoric between the two camps got somewhat heated during the recount process—with insinuations on both sides of voter suppression or even fraud—the conflict was carried out within the confines of electoral politics, the courts and a common loyalty to the Democratic Party. Cabán was not seeking to build a mass movement against the Democratic Party; she built a bourgeois election campaign.

The fact that she conceded defeat without much of a fight has set her up to run for another office, potentially one where she receives the backing of the Democratic Party establishment as a whole.

The *Nation*, in its postmortem of the Cabán campaign, hinted at this, predicting that “2020 and 2021 will witness a boom of insurgent campaigns in the Cabán and Ocasio-Cortez mold. The city council, particularly in Queens, is likely to shift further to the left.”

Politico reported that the DSA “is talking to roughly 10 people about possible challenges to local incumbents in Queens, said a source who would only speak on background about political challenges that have yet to be decided.” At least two former Cabán volunteers have announced challenges to Democratic congressional representatives with districts partially or completely in Queens.

*The author also recommends:*

The Democratic Party politics of the “Democratic Socialists of America”

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