BRIEF I OF IV

The Mailer–Breslin "51st State" Campaign, 1969

Verified Results and Aftermath

THE PLATFORM · THE PRIMARY OF JUNE 17, 1969 · THE LONG ECHOES

RESEARCH BRIEF · VERBATIM EVIDENCE QUOTES · SHARED CITATION LEDGER

The campaign, its platform and provocations,
the verified primary results of June 17,
and the long afterlife of the 51st-state idea.

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The ticket and the idea

In the 1969 New York City Democratic mayoral primary, novelist Norman Mailer ran for Mayor with columnist Jimmy Breslin as his running mate for City Council President, on a platform called "New York City: the 51st State." The two entered the race formally on May 1, 1969 [2], seven weeks before the primary, with Mailer announcing under the slogan "No more bullshit" [51]. The core proposal: the five boroughs should secede from New York State and become the 51st state of the Union, with each neighborhood becoming its own municipality under the banner "Power to the Neighborhood" [1][56]. When a reporter asked what the new state would be called, Breslin said the city deserved to keep "New York" and that upstate should be renamed "Buffalo," after its largest city [56].

The field they joined was a fragmented, five-candidate Democratic primary: City Comptroller Mario Procaccino, former mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr., Bronx Borough President Herman Badillo, Congressman James H. Scheuer, and Mailer [1]. On the Republican side, incumbent Mayor John V. Lindsay lost his own primary to State Senator John Marchi and only survived the November general election by running on the Liberal Party line [2].

The platform planks

The campaign literature, adapted in the platform summary below [1], included:

- Statehood/referendum — New York City would be split off from New York State as the 51st State; Mailer proposed that the first step, following his election, should be a citywide referendum on the question of statehood for the city [1].
- Taxes/fiscal flow — In 1969, city taxpayers paid the state and federal governments $14 billion and got only $3 billion back; the 51st State would correct this imbalance and bring about $2 billion in additional revenue to the city [1]. (The Gotham Center account gives the campaign's own framing differently: in 1968 the five boroughs provided $2.5 billion to Albany's coffers, of which only $1.385 billion returned, implying roughly $1 billion in net savings [2].)
- Casino — a casino would be built on either Randall's Island, Roosevelt Island, or Coney Island, with tax revenues going directly to the City-State [1].
- Car ban / transportation — All private cars would be banned from Manhattan Island; a monorail around Manhattan's circumference would serve parking lots built outside Manhattan; publicly owned bicycles would be free to all [1][52].
- Sweet Sundays — monthly vehicle-free Sundays; in the campaign's more vivid descriptions, "absolutely all mechanized transport, including elevators, would be shut down" [1][51][52]. The elimination of private cars, the platform claimed, would reduce Manhattan pollution by 60% [1].

— Neighborhood control — neighborhoods would run their own schools, police, sanitation, parks, and rent-controlled housing [1][2].

Campaign stunts and quotes

The two writers campaigned as provocateurs. At the Village Gate, Mailer joked: "I'm running on a platform of 'Free Huey Newton and floridation... We'll have compulsory free love in those neighborhoods that vote for it, and compulsory attendance in church on Sunday in those that vote for that" [52]. Of his rivals, Breslin quipped: "the reason we got into politics is that we knew the one thing we could do better than the other politicians is to lie. At least that's what we thought. But we found out we were hopeless amateurs" [2]. Of Lindsay, Mailer said: "If you give the Honorable John two more years... there will be only two things left standing in New York – a photographer and the Honorable John, posing for pictures with his hair blowing in the wind" [2]. In a Time interview published four days before the primary, Mailer called himself a "left conservative" and said that if he won, "a small miracle would have happened" [1]. A planned neighborhood stickball World Series was among the campaign's nostalgia-infused stunts [2].

Results: June 17, 1969 Democratic primary

New Yorkers went to the polls on June 17, 1969 [2]. Verified results, citywide, for Mayor:

Candidate	Votes	Share
Mario Procaccino (winner)	255,529 (Wikipedia table) / 233,486 (Gotham Center)	~33% ("32.8 percent" per Procaccino's biography)
Robert F. Wagner Jr.	224,464	29%
Herman Badillo	217,165	28%
Norman Mailer	41,288 ("over 41,000"; Gotham Center: 39,209)	5%
James H. Scheuer	39,350 (last)	5%
Total votes cast	777,796	—

Sources: primary table [1]; Procaccino 233,486 / Mailer 39,209 per Gotham Center [2]; Procaccino's 32.8% and five-man contest per [55]. The Mailer–Breslin ticket "finished second to last," with Mailer beating Scheuer by 1,878 votes and outpolling him in Manhattan and on Staten Island [1][52]. Breslin, running separately for City Council President, got 65,659 votes — also second-to-last — while Hugh L. Carey won that nomination with 135,785 votes [2]. Procaccino's win with less than 33% against four opponents "inspired the use of runoffs in future primaries" [1]. Aftermath of the general: Lindsay (Liberal) won with 42 percent, Procaccino (Democrat) 36 percent, Marchi (Republican) 22 percent [55]; journalist Richard Reeves called Procaccino's campaign "the worst political campaign in American history" [55].

Turnout context: total Democratic mayoral primary votes cast were 777,796 [1] — but note this table total is inconsistent with the Procaccino totals reported by the Gotham Center (233,486) [2]; the discrepancy is flagged below as a gap.

Aftermath and reputation

Contemporaries took the campaign more seriously than the vote share suggests. TIME noted in 1969 that Mailer "revived the idea [of city statehood] in 1969 when he made the 51st state his key campaign issue," that Lindsay himself appointed a commission to study statehood, and that Congresswoman Bella Abzug opened a drive for a November referendum petitioning Congress to admit the city to the Union [57]. Later historians, like the Gotham Center's 2019 retrospective, argue that "in spite of their dismal performance in the polls, Mailer and Breslin changed how some New Yorkers viewed their city's future and potential," offering "a serious and important reconceptualization of what a city was and how it could function" [2].

The idea's later echoes:

- Peter Vallone Jr. (2003–2008) — On February 26, 2003, Council Member Vallone introduced a bill, sponsored by 20 of 51 Council members, for a referendum on secession; it got a hearing and a committee report but little action, and was reintroduced in 2004, 2006, and January 2008 [56][58]. The NYT reported the bill "would create a commission that would examine secession and decide whether to hold a referendum," with a two-year study before going to voters [58]; Vallone's fiscal claim then was that the state "takes $3.5 billion more each year from taxpayers than it returns" [58]. Note: this commission proposal is 2003-era, not 1990s — see Gaps.
- Bloomberg (2008) — After Bloomberg testified in Albany that the city gives the state $11 billion more than it gets back [54][56], he was asked on WABC radio about Vallone's 51st-state push; Bloomberg laughed: "Well, I don't think we're going to secede," adding "You'd require a change to the state constitution, which we'd never get, and we'd require a change to the federal constitution to go from 50 to 51 states... that's not going to happen," while agreeing "the message, that we are exporting our money to the rest of the state and to the federal government, is the right message" [53].
- Staten Island (1993) — a parallel secession strain: 65% of Staten Island residents voted to secede from the city in a non-binding referendum, but implementation was blocked in the State Assembly [56].

Gaps and unverified items

- Vote-total discrepancy [unverified resolution]: Wikipedia's summary text says the ticket got 41,288 votes citywide (5%) [1] and its table lists Mailer 41,288 / Procaccino 255,529 / total 777,796 [1]; the Gotham Center reports Procaccino 233,486 and Mailer 39,209 [2]. The two source sets disagree; both are quoted verbatim above.

— Peter Vallone Sr. 1990s statehood commission [unverified]: the task brief references a 1990s statehood commission under Council Speaker Peter Vallone; searches surfaced only the 1959 Council secession-study committee [57], the 1993 Staten Island referendum [56], and Vallone Jr.'s 2003–2008 bills [56][58]. No 1990s city statehood commission was verified.

— Campaign-day turnout percentage [unverified]: no source gave turnout as a share of registered or eligible voters; only absolute vote totals are verified.

— Precise monorail route / "free bicycles for all" wording varies across retellings [1][51][52]; the platform summary in [1] is the most detailed version.

Research file for the NYC exhibit workspace. Citation numbers refer to the shared ledger (ledger_shared.json). Verification status noted in footer.

CITED SOURCES

[1] New York City: the 51st State - Wikipedia
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[58] Notion of a 51st State Comes Around Again - NYT 2003
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Verification: sources.py verify mailer_breslin.md --evidence --min-coverage 0.5 → *exit 0 ("citations OK"); 65% of prose sentences carry declared provenance (36 cited, 2 marked [unverified]); 10 distinct sources cited, all with verbatim evidence quotes in the shared ledger. Uncited-ledger warnings refer to other subagents' entries in the shared ledger.*