



CITIZENS UNION CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE
NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL – DISTRICT 39: **JOSH SKALLER**
ELECTION 2009

Citizens Union would appreciate your responses to the following questions related to policy issues facing the City of New York that are of concern to Citizens Union and the citizens of the City. We plan to make public your responses to this questionnaire in our Voters Directory, on our website, and in other appropriate venues. Responses to these questions will be one of several factors Citizens Union will use to evaluate candidates who are running for office in order to determine our “Preferred Candidates” for the primary election and “Endorsed Candidates” for the general election. In order to receive Citizens Union’s “preferred” or “endorsed” status, in addition to completing the questionnaire, candidates must participate in an interview with Citizens Union’s Local Candidates Committee.

We thank you very much for your response.

Candidate Name: **JOSH SKALLER**
Age: **40**
Office to Which You Seek Election: **Council District 39 (Brooklyn)**
Campaign Address: **1205 8th Avenue, Basement, Brooklyn, NY 11215**
Campaign Telephone Number: **718-588-9699 FAX (CM): 718-228-5537**
Party Affiliation: **Democrat**
Campaign Manager Name: **Chris Owens** c.owens@skaller09.com
Website & Email: www.skaller09.com community@skaller09.com
Education: **Hampshire College (BA)**
Columbia University (MA)
Occupation/Employer: **Manager, Information Technology / GlobalWorks, Inc.**
Previous Offices, Campaigns and Community / Civic Involvement:

- **Central Brooklyn Independent Democrats (Past President)**
- **Brooklyn For Barack (Field/GOTV Director)**
- **Develop Don’t Destroy Brooklyn (Member, Organizer)**
- **Democracy for New York City / Democracy for America (Director, Organizer)**
- **Kings County Democratic Committee, 44th Assembly District (Member)**

Are you willing to be interviewed by CU’s Local Candidates Committee? **YES.**
Have you completed requisite campaign finance filings? **YES. The Skaller campaign has completed all filings and fully qualified for the maximum amount of matching funds.**

(Please note: Citizens Union can grant its “Preferred Candidate” and “Endorsed Candidate” rating only to candidates we have interviewed. We will make every effort to interview candidates in each race for City Council.)

Signature of Candidate:

Date: **July 17, 2009**



I. CANDIDATE QUESTIONS

Please state your position on the following issues by indicating whether you support or oppose each. You may elaborate in the space provided at the end or on additional paper.

VOTING AND ELECTIONS REFORM

1. What is your position with respect to allowing voters who are registered as independents to vote in party primaries?	OPPOSE ¹
2. What is your position on passage of state legislation that would allow referenda initiated by the City Council and/or the public to appear on the ballot at the same time as a referendum initiated by a charter commission appointed by the Mayor?	SUPPORT ²
3. What is your position on increasing the pay of Election Day poll workers above the current \$200 they are allotted per election event?	SUPPORT ³
4. What is your position on restructuring New York’s current board of elections model to eliminate political party responsibility for overall election administration and replace it with a system that narrows political party involvement to certification of candidate petitions and the actual counting of votes?	SUPPORT
5. What is your position on having an election administration system where there is a local elections executive director appointed by the mayor upon recommendation by a new board that is chosen by the mayor and the city council?	SUPPORT

CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM

6. What is your position on implementing “war chest” restrictions that would prohibit a candidate from transferring funds raised in a previous election cycle into a current campaign committee for a different office?	SUPPORT
7. What is your position on allowing campaign financing for ballot proposals?	SUPPORT ⁴

CITY COUNCIL REFORM

8. What is your position on:	
a. allowing Council committees to function more independently of the speaker than is presently the case?	SUPPORT
b. Should committee staff be hired by and report to committee chairs?	SUPPORT ⁵
c. Should committee hearings and votes be scheduled at the direction of the chairs?	SUPPORT
d. Should committees be able to issue subpoenas by a vote of their members?	SUPPORT



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9. What is your position on:	
a. limiting councilmembers' ability to earn outside income?	SUPPORT
b. making the job of councilmember a full-time position?	SUPPORT ⁶
c. eliminating or limiting stipends for committee chairs and leadership positions?	SUPPORT
10. What is your position on requiring that any future increase in councilmember compensation not affect those serving in the current term of the council and only be applied prospectively to the following term?	SUPPORT!
11. What is your position on consolidating the current City Council committee structure and reducing the number of overall committees?	SUPPORT
12. What is your position on term limits for elected officials?	SUPPORT ⁷
13. What is your position on modifying the City Charter to require that changes to term limits may only be approved by the voters?	SUPPORT!
14. What is your position on the recent extension of term limits for the city's elected officials to three consecutive four-year terms? Please explain your answer. I oppose the recent extension of term limits that our Councilmembers recently granted themselves, the Mayor, the Comptroller and the Public Advocate. I was a member of a coalition formed to promote a referendum on this issue and I have participated in various activities protesting the Mayor-led, City Council-sponsored defiance of New York City voters. This unconscionable move violated the voter's trust in their leaders and may have been illegal. I refer to N.Y. Charter §2604 (b)(3), which prohibits any "public servant" from "using" his or her "position" for any "private or personal advantage." When elected, I will begin my work to restore trust in government by working one day at a time for the people -- not for my own interests or those of wealthy developers or political power players.	OPPOSE!



POLICY ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE

Please state your position on the following issues by indicating whether you support or oppose each, where applicable. Please also use the space provided below each question or on a separate sheet of paper to elaborate on your positions on the questions which require a detailed answer. You may also provide additional information on any actions that you have taken or plan to take to advance your positions on these issues.

<p>15. Knowing that the police department and commissioner retain ultimate authority for determining whether an officer is guilty and penalty, what is your position on transferring power to the Civilian Complaint Review Board to prosecute cases of police misconduct, such as force, abuse of authority, discourtesy, and offensive language?</p>	<p>SUPPORT⁸</p>
<p>16. What is your position on changing the current land use process under ULURP to increase the role of community-based planning?</p>	<p>SUPPORT⁹</p>
<p>17. What is your position regarding the creation of a Charter Revision Commission to review specifically the roles of the various offices of government and how well government has functioned since the 1988 and 1989 charter review commissions?</p>	<p>SUPPORT¹⁰</p>
<p>18. What is your position on reforming the current pension funding structure to create multiple tiers for future city government employees?</p> <p>a. In FY 2008-09, New York City spent \$12 billion on pensions and fringe benefits for City employees out of a total budget of \$62 billion. What would you do to address the growing pension costs borne by the city and New York City tax payers?</p>	<p>SUPPORT CHANGE¹¹</p>
<p>19. What is your position with respect to the City Council passing a resolution calling upon the State Legislature to establish a State Constitutional Convention?</p> <p>a. If support, what are the three most important areas that need improvement?</p> <p>New York State’s Constitution is a disjointed document with specific answers for various irrelevancies but light on specific answers for practical questions – such as leadership succession. A Convention should focus on providing Constitutional methods to solve the problems made by men and women since, as we have come to learn, the men and women in Albany are capable of causing very complicated problems. Such issues include clarifying the selection and tenure of the Lieutenant Governor and establishing a non-partisan approach to the process of creating legislative and judicial districts within the state.</p> <p>I advocate reform that gives the minority party a constitutional place at the table. In 2008, 30 of the 62 Senate districts in New York were represented by Democrats, yet none of these leaders could bring legislation to the Senate floor without the consent of the majority party. The minority party should have the Constitutional right to bring legislation to a vote.</p>	



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I advocate for language that clarifies the definition of an “adequate public education.” As we have seen from the Campaign for Fiscal Equity litigation, the courts have had to provide definitions – thereby interpreting the State Constitution. Let us now take the step of embedding the appropriate standard for the provision of public education within our State’s highest legal authority.

Finally, I suggest giving New Yorkers a Constitutional right to clean air and water. This would put Constitutional weight behind green legislation and confirm our state’s commitment to being responsible stewards of the earth.

b. Do you believe that greater home rule should be granted to the City of New York? **YES.** If so, in what areas should further sovereignty be given?

We are all residents of one state, and we take pride in the diversity and riches that New York State has to offer the world. Yet, most members of the State Legislature hail from upstate or suburban districts with very little in common with New York City. Their constituents often benefit significantly from the enormous revenues generated by New York City, not to mention the millions of jobs within our City’s borders.

Whether or not a city is a creature of State law, municipal governments should have sovereign rights and the nation’s largest municipality does not. Decisions regarding issues such as land use can only be made by those affected – otherwise, large scale projects that bring density to communities will move forward regardless of whether the community consents or benefits, much like what happened with the Atlantic Yards project in my district. This also applies to the usurpation of power by “authorities” per Robert Moses’ vision of trickle-down decision making. New York City needs to have a stronger hand in determining its destiny. The City drives the State; it should not be the other way around.

Accordingly, New York City should have direct input on the MTA (see the following question for more details) and housing issues. It is vital that New York City regain more control over tenant issues and rent stabilization laws from the State. I support full repeal of vacancy decontrol and the Urstadt law, and I believe we must take advantage of the leadership change in the NY State Senate and push hard on this. I have been endorsed by State Senator Eric Adams and will work with him and any and all groups seeking to protect Mitchell Lama housing through changes in State law.

20. Taking into consideration the lessons learned from the debates surrounding congestion pricing and the Ravitch Commission’s recommendations to provide the MTA with long-term funding, what would you propose to address the MTA’s fiscal solvency issues and ensure that the burden for funding the MTA is equitably distributed among all stakeholders?

On June 28, the MTA implemented a 23% increase in bus and subway fares. However, the service cuts have increased overcrowding and congestion on vital subway lines and bus routes, particularly with the B75 and the “F” train in the 39th Council District. These service cuts adversely impact upon thousands of Brooklynites who rely on these lines to get to school and to work each day. (Yet the MTA also sold land to developers for a fraction of their value.)

New York City cannot lurch from transit crisis to transit crisis because mass transit is our economic lifeline. Funding is needed to hold the fare levels down, to maintain and improve



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hardware and software, and to support important expansions and prevent service cuts. Otherwise, the burden will fall squarely on the backs of New York's working families. To achieve budget changes and priority changes, however, New York City residents must have more comprehensive representation on the MTA Board -- and that includes members from or appointed by the City Council.

The proposal put forth by now-Lietenant Governor Ravitch was a thoughtful and thorough one. The politics of the day prevented its full adoption. For economic and environmental reasons, however, we will have to soon put tolls on all bridges and tunnels. We will have to soon adopt region-oriented strategies such as the vehicle weight charge idea put forth by Comptroller Billy Thompson a number of months ago.

21. What would you propose in terms of creating a greater role for the city council in determining and deciding the city budget?

The City Council too often thinks in lockstep – 51 people in a room from districts as different as night and day, but all drawn to the same conclusions. Real reform means being willing to stand up and speak out – particularly when leadership acts contrary to your convictions.

Our city's government has been dominated by two people – the Mayor and the Council Speaker – for too long. The Mayor is elected citywide, but the Speaker represents at best only 1 out of every 51 New Yorkers. The Speaker must include more of the Council in the decision making process. Accordingly, I will advocate for changes in the Council rules to facilitate this. I also call for greater transparency of all working documents and budget items. Negotiations that result in critical policy decisions – such as the budget – must include the disclosure of information utilized in making these decisions.

I hope to become a member of the Budget Committee. I advocate a Committee selection process that parallels systems used by the U.S. House of Representatives – one less dominated by the Speaker and one that allows the members to cast secret ballots themselves. Those of us with the qualifications and desire to serve on this Committee would make our case to our peers for inclusion on the Committee. This new Committee would then be empowered to work as a partner with the Speaker on budget negotiations.

22. What is your position regarding the City's past practice of using surplus tax revenues to pay down future health cost and pension obligations, and the decision not to do so this year?

I support any investment in the people, especially those investments with foresight. When I say "investments," I mean real ones, not politically advantageous ones or member items doled out to political leaders in the district. I mean infrastructure improvements, funding for mass transit, assistance for small businesses, and retrofitting existing buildings to save energy costs and make our City sustainable. I want to use surplus funds for these purposes – spending that may not earn me votes for reelection, but dollars that will make our City a better place for working families and for our children and grandchildren.

That being said, we must acknowledge the role and cost of "obligations." Our economy is cyclical, so we know that the hard times are always ahead. Planning better for those times is a critical component of the City's budgeting. For now, using surpluses to pay down future obligations is necessary. What is also necessary, however, is to reduce the amount of those future obligations (see responses to earlier questions.)



23. What is your view of how the taxes paid by New Yorkers compare to the value that is received in City services? Do you believe that taxes should be raised or lowered? To the extent you believe taxes should be changed, please provide specific proposals about what taxes you would raise and what services you would cut, if you didn't raise taxes, listed in order of greatest magnitude.

New Yorkers do not receive the level of city services that they should based on the taxes they pay. This is due to cronyism and corruption on all levels of city government. One of the reasons I am running for City Council is to shine the light of accountability and transparency into all corners of government so that more of our hard-earned money will be used for its intended purposes. I hope to enact many Citizens Union proposals as part of this work.

I support making the wealthiest New Yorkers contributing a larger share of the tax burden. Let us note that even now in these tough times Wall Street is regaining its economic footing and Goldman Sachs is distributing huge amounts of compensation to its employees. A "Fair Share" approach is a reasonable approach: those who have benefited for years should be footing a greater portion of our bills. I also support restoration of the Commuter Tax as a sensible and just way to increase revenue for the City.

I oppose income tax increases for New York's working families. I oppose sales taxes increases, as these crush middle class New Yorkers, in particular, and may be one of the contributing factors that force them to leave our city for less expensive areas.

Cutting services would help balance the budget. Since *my* goal, however, is to make sure that New Yorkers get the most value for their tax money, I will focus not on cutting services but on reforming government. If some cuts flow from that work, so be it. But greater efficiency without cuts is much more likely.

24. Many policy advocates champion the creation of a more diversified economy, and one that is less reliant on Wall Street. What is your position on such a plan? If you support it, what would you do to diversify the city's economy? How would you adjust spending in New York City to accommodate the anticipated reduction in tax revenue as the tax base shifts to lower paying jobs?

Economic diversity is the key to getting Brooklyn out of our current fiscal doldrums. We have see the dangers in an economy that relies on finance – when the bottom falls out, working families and small businesses pay the price. I will focus on green development, which I believe will be the core of Brooklyn's economy in the future. I have called for green development centers throughout New York City. These centers will be hubs of networking and training to build a workforce that can build and retrofit a more sustainable Brooklyn.

I was among the first leaders to call for an EPA Superfund to clean up the Gowanus Canal, which runs through the heart of my district. This cleanup will bring well-paying green jobs to Brooklyn. I have called for the preservation of some manufacturing zoning in the area around the Canal. I will work to bring federal stimulus money here to Brooklyn, to help small businesses grow and prosper.

25. What would you propose the Department of Education do to increase the ability for parents and teachers to become more meaningfully involved in the education system? What other positives changes can be made to the New York City public school system?

Our education system needs a healthy dose of transparency and accessibility. The schools,



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like the rest of city government, should never operate behind closed doors. The Community Education Councils should have the right to review all contracts made by the school district. School Leadership Teams should have clear and respected roles that empower the Team and require principal collaboration and cooperation wherever possible.

It is localized authority makes our schools more responsive to parents and students – and, in return, boosts parental participation. The locally-elected Community Education Councils should have real input in areas such as school district education priorities, key personnel decisions including Superintendent selection, summer school and extended day programming, and parent engagement.

Additionally, I will work to reduce the emphasis on the endless parades of standardized testing, inject the arts and humanities back into coursework to ensure a well-rounded education, and site more schools to allow the reduction of class sizes.

26. What would you propose to increase the transparency of the Board of Elections in the City of New York's operations and accountability to the city and its voters?

Sadly, partisan politics infiltrate nearly every part of public life. This is a mindset I have campaigned to change. I'm not supported by political bosses, but by grassroots groups and ordinary Brooklynites. As president of the Central Brooklyn Independent Democrats, I worked to foster democracy that focuses on people, not political party bosses, and that is what I will do as a member of the City Council.

Political parties have personal and professional self-interest in running the Board of Elections. The current Board is a veritable market for personal favors and patronage. Political parties should be removed from this process altogether. Elections should be overseen by an independent board appointed jointly by the Mayor and the Borough Presidents, with approval by the City Council. The Council can then assure that this Board is accountable to the people and open about their operations.

27. What would you propose to further enhance transparency regarding the relationships between council members, their families, and nonprofits that receive funding from New York City?

In the spring, I submitted a Freedom of Information Act request regarding the Neighborhood Assistance Corporation, a nonprofit group founded by Stephen DeBrienza, the former Councilmember from my district. Sadly, this is just a recent example of the slush fund culture prevalent in city government. It is also sad to note that none of my fellow candidates for this Council seat would join me in my effort to address this issue. This is consistent with what I find to be true elsewhere – I am willing to be a leader, while others sound incredibly knowledgeable and capable as they follow me.

One of my major goals is to end the "me-first" free for all our leaders have so often adopted. I will set stricter guidelines on non-profits that can receive city funds and require audits be performed on all organizations -- not just umbrella organizations -- that receive member items from the City Council.



Additional Comments:

¹ **QUESTION 1:** As a Democrat, I do not want to see my Party pulled “to the right” by those whose agendas may be inconsistent with the principles of the Democratic Party. Membership has its privileges. As a reformer, however, I would support a modification of the registration rules that would reduce the time period for changes in party registration to a maximum of 6 months from the date of re-registration. Finally, allow me to point out that there are no “independents” in New York State – there are only registrants who have joined the “Independence” Party or those who have not enrolled in any party (“Blank” registrations). Some people in the latter category decided not to choose a party. Others, however, overlooked the party selection portion of the registration form. This is why I am open to making the party registration rules more flexible. If someone takes the time to look ahead in time by six months, politically, and decides that being a Democrat is in their interest, then they should be empowered to make that change – not on the day of the election.

² **QUESTION 2:** Legislation such as this would contribute to increased voter participation – something that I believe in and have worked hard to achieve.

³ **QUESTION 3:** Reasonable compensation for a 15-to-17-hour work day handled responsibly should be at least \$15 per hour – or at least \$225 for the day. I am also open to changing the method of selecting Election Day workers to reduce the control currently exercised by political bosses.

⁴ **QUESTION 7:** Campaign financing for ballot proposals will lead to the imposition of a cap on spending – leveling the playing field for the participants. Campaign financing would also contribute to increased participation on the part of the electorate, which I support.

⁵ **QUESTION 8:** Each of these three items addresses critical components of a vibrant Council – if independence of the Speaker is made more possible. With regard to Question 8A, however, I do believe that there should also be a check on the Council member creating a political fiefdom. Accordingly, I could see a system where the Council’s central staffing office and each Council member have roles in staff selection.

⁶ **QUESTION 9:** I do not support extra levels of pay for leadership positions, etc. I do believe that the salary level of Council membership should be at an appropriate level to make the Council position a full-time job by law.

⁷ **QUESTION 12:** I am a reluctant convert to term limits. At my core, I believe that the people should decide the tenure of elected officials. The behavior of incumbent officeholders in recent years has led me to conclude that there are circumstances where term limits are acceptable – or even necessary. It is also clear that laws allowing elected bodies to dismiss the public will should also be changed.

⁸ **QUESTION 15:** I am in total support of an empowered Civilian Complaint Review Board. This issue has a long history in New York City, framing municipal elections since 1965. The challenge here is to balance the “outsider” approach with the “insider” understanding so that we hold our police officers accountable for their actions while not dismissing the special challenges involved with their work. Accordingly, I believe that there have to be very transparent Policies & Procedures and there must be a mix of highly qualified individuals serving as CCRB Members.



⁹ **QUESTION 16:** As a community organizer involved with several local development challenges, I am particularly sensitive to the disregard of the community – simply because developers *can* disregard the community. During the past thirty years or more, efforts have been made to empower local communities. It was thought that the development of 197a plans would provide that missing voice for communities. Most of the 197a plans that were developed have remained on shelves. In the 39th Council District, there is much concern regarding traffic issues, the protection of open space (Prospect Park is completely within the 39th District), abandoned developments in Windsor Terrace and Kensington, and the development of an expanded historic district within the Park Slope community. These issues cry out for voices of empowered communities. Instead, as in the case of the Atlantic Yards debacle, community input into planning processes are circumvented and/or ignored. We must have change in this area.

¹⁰ **QUESTION 17:** If “the Tree of Liberty must be watered from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants,” the efficacy of government reforms warrants review. Particularly now, as the weak economy has forced revisions in our thinking about municipal spending, public review is in order. There is even a push to change the costly dynamics of local government outside of New York City, in an effort to better serve the people of New York and to maximize potential cost savings for local taxpayers and for the State of New York.

¹¹ **QUESTION 18:** As you know, our pension funding structure is a victim of demographic trends and changes. What was constructed decades ago to ensure a better quality of retired life is not a great fit in today’s world. I believe that the pension concept is a sound one and the mark of a truly civilized society. Accordingly, I object to those prescriptions that treat our pension funds as “the enemy” of our municipal budget or of ourselves as taxpayers. I am a reform-minded individual, however, and, like our new President, I believe that change is essential for practical and political reasons. I support, therefore, efforts to construct alternative approaches to pension levels and alternative financing methodologies effective for future City employees. I do not support any retroactive modifications.

As stated, our local budget is stretched to the point where even necessary steps such as increased taxes on the wealthy will not solve the problem. Furthermore, our neighbors working in jobs covered by municipal unions deserve our respect and praise and should not evolve into political scapegoats for the bad decisions of others or for situations out of their control. Many ideas have been floated. Here are three that I believe warrant more attention in the short run:

- Increase required employee contributions. Currently, the most common requirement is 3 percent for ten years. In most other systems, employee contributions are larger and last longer. The New York systems should require a higher percentage contribution, and not limit it to ten years.
- Raise the minimum age requirement for retirement. The federal Social Security system has raised its age threshold for full benefits to 67 while keeping the criteria for reduced benefits at 62. For New York City employees, setting 55 for full benefits and 50 for reduced benefits is a reasonable starting point. Even Port Authority employees have a minimum age requirement.
- Base pension benefits on the more standard definition of final average salary. The calculation of base benefits should be based on the most recent five years of salary history and should take into account only base salary, excluding overtime and other supplements.



CANDIDATE ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTIONNAIRE

Citizens Union is adding a new element to its evaluation of candidates running for office. As a candidate who presently does not hold elected office, CU is interested in knowing your top five campaign promises you are making to the voters during this campaign for this position.

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.

We thank you very much for your response. Please feel free to use additional paper if the space provided is not sufficient.

TOP FIVE 2009 CAMPAIGN PROMISES

- 1. Involve the community in all land use decisions and support legislation to institutionalize such involvement. This includes developing new innovative approaches for affordable housing, in particular, approaches that are not dependent upon corporate giveaways or process abuses such as the use of eminent domain for private development and circumventing safety regulations.**
- 2. Reform the budget process by increasing transparency and accountability and using management skills and tools to scrutinize the City's work. As an IT manager, I can provide both transparency AND efficiency.**
- 3. Aggressively pursue changes in the City's education priorities by working for the stakeholders – particularly the children – and decreasing class size, reducing testing, increasing the presence of the arts and science, increasing teacher autonomy.**
- 4. Hold the Mayor accountable for addressing the economic crisis with more than words. We need sensible budget commitments and innovative programming.**
- 5. Work to establish a more credible political system at the municipal level, pursuing reforms in campaign finance and city contracting processes to eliminate corrupting influences and slush funds.**