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A Shift in the Ritual, and Meaning, of Voting

By MIRTA OJITO

Marjorie Severence, from Queens, voted in a primary election yesterday for the first time in her life. She is 67, and said it just felt urgent and relevant to vote now.

But Monica Watson, 29, from Brooklyn, did not go to the polls, because to spend time electing a leader no longer seemed important to her.

David Stypmann, at 63, a lifelong Democrat from Manhattan, was surprised to find himself writing Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani's name on the ballot.

All over the city yesterday, from Forest Hills to Flatbush to SoHo, the decisions New Yorkers made to go to the polls, or not to go, and even whom to vote for, seemed to be fueled by perceptions, attitudes and opinions forged in the last 14 days, since the attack on the World Trade Center that killed more than 6,000 people.

Voting became an act of defiance, a way of saying "this is still who we are," said Margaret Manos, a freelance editor in Battery Park City.

Or it became a painful rite, a way to carry on while everything else, from personal security to economic stability, seemed so uncertain and remote.

> An act of defiance, a way of saying, 'This is still who we are.'

"I still have a lot of questions about this election," said Robin Bergstrom, a lawyer who voted in Park Slope, Brooklyn, shortly before 8 a.m. "But it's important to me to look back at this moment and have the history books report that, despite what happened, New York had one of the biggest turnouts ever. If we've learned nothing else from the attacks, it's that we've taken our freedoms and our right to vote for granted for too long. They really matter."

John Camacho, a consultant on international joint ventures, said he had voted on Sept. 11, but that doing so again yesterday felt more meaningful.

"I have always voted," said Mr. Camacho, 36, "but it has a little bit more meaning now. It's more of a calling now, to continue on, to not let things change, to not panic or heed to the terror."

Even those who voted for the candidate they had chosen before Sept. 11 said that, in sticking to plans they had made before the attack, they were making a political choice. They said they had decided not to allow outside events change their views.

"I don't buy into nationalism or patriotism," said Nina Lavin, a jewelry designer who lives seven blocks north of the World Trade Center.

She saw the towers collapse from her south-facing windows.

"But I do respect our Constitution," she said, "and I'm not going to allow anyone to push the panic buttons for me and tell me the only man for the job is Rudy Giuliani."

Decisions did not come easy yesterday. Some people were anxious. Some were confused. And some were even angry that they were being asked to choose a new leader so soon after the collapse of the twin towers and the devastation in Lower Manhattan.

"I came out early this morning, hoping that showing up would help me make up my mind about who to vote for," said Bonnie

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vote before going to work. "But I still can't decide. I'm just not ready."

Ms. Boyle, a Democrat who lives in the Kensington section of Brooklyn, said she planned to return to the polling place after work, once she has had time to scan news articles about each of the candidates.

"I have a lot of reading to do," she said. "I don't want to just vote for anyone. I want my vote to count."

Still others found themselves making choices that they would never have thought possible two weeks ago.

For almost 30 years, David Stypmann, who owns an antiques shop in SoHo, has voted for Democrats in New York City elections. He says he has little patience for Republican candidates and no tolerance for politically conservative people.

But on Monday, on the eve of the primary election, Mr. Stypmann happened to watch the "Late Show With David Letterman," which he says he never does. One guest that night was Mr. Giuliani, who talked about rebuilding and carrying on. It made Mr. Stypmann cry.

"He was so humble, so human," he said. "I've never been a fan of the man, but I was overwhelmed by his words."

Yesterday, Mr. Stypmann wrote Mr. Giuliani's name on his election ballot.

Anthony Rainey, 39, a graduate student of anthropology who lives in the West Village, was astonished that, for the first time ever, he voted for two people in the same election in the span of two weeks.



Angel Franco/The New York Times

At polling places all over the city, including Public School 84 in Queens, the decisions New Yorkers made were affected by perceptions forged since the attack on the World Trade Center.

On Sept. 11, the day the primary election was supposed to take place, Mr. Rainey voted for Mark Green, a Democrat. When terrorists crashed two passenger planes into the twin towers, Mr. Rainey's wife, a bond trader, lost scores of colleagues. Nothing has been the same since, he said.

So yesterday, wearing a red, white and blue ribbon on the lapel of his jacket, Mr. Rainey went to the polls to write in Mr. Giuliani's name.

"I've been struggling with this decision a lot today," Mr. Rainey said. "It's not something I take lightly and it is not a symbolic gesture. In times of war and crisis, laws ought to be changed for the benefit of the citizens."

Angry about all the talk of a third Giuliani term, Sandra Cergeant woke up early and cast her vote for Mr. Green.

"It's not fair that he would even consider using this tragedy to seek another term," said Ms. Cergeant, 41, a paralegal from Canarsie. "I don't think he's done anything exceptional, besides what is already his job as mayor. He rose to the occasion. That's what leaders are supposed to do. Why should we be asked to change the law to suit one person? That's not democracy. He had his turn. Now it's time for someone knew to rise."

For Liz Savage, 40, a waitress, the election has become an incomprehensible puzzle. She is a New York native who has lived in Greenwich Village for 10 years, but she decided not to vote yesterday because she could not make up her mind. All of a sudden, the job of mayor became so crucial for the city that, she said, none of the candidates were qualified to take it on.

"Rather than make an uneducated guess, I decided not to vote," she said. "Guessing doesn't seem very fair in this particular election."

Jo Ann Morris, a 52-year-old retired manager who lives in the Bronx, said she could not understand people who did not vote in this election, which she considered pivotal for the city. She voted for Fernando Ferrer, the Bronx Borough president.

"We have to keep going," she said. "And I have to have my say."

But in a stark illustration of how torn voters were yesterday, Mrs. Morris said that her husband, a retired correction officer, chose not to

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