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For winner, term limits are fresh air

Say what you will about term limits, but there is something endearing about a law capable of making the City Council an exciting place.

Okay, perhaps "exciting" is going too far. But the Council certainly is bound to become younger and, mercifully, a little less predictable. Thanks to term limits, 38 of 51 seats will be occupied by fresh faces — many of them rookie politicians — and the average age will drop about 20 years. That's quite a change.

Made history

Take the case of John Liu, who at 34 replaces the 81-year-old Julia Harrison as the Council member for District 20 in Flushing.

"I have the honor and the privilege of representing my hometown," he said.

Liu, who had the support of the Queens Democratic Party organization, won 55% of the vote against three opponents to become the first Asian-American elected to a New York City office. Born in Taiwan, his family came to the U.S. when he was 5, and settled in Flushing.



John Liu



"We made history tonight," the Daily News reported him telling supporters the night of the election. "We are in a new era where all the people in New York City will have equal representation."

A financial consultant for PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Liu, who is married and has a 13-month-old son, chooses his words almost as carefully as an old guard politico. Almost, because when asked about the new Council's inexperience, he can hardly contain his enthusiasm.

"Experience is important; but energy and new ideas are also important," he says passionately. "Those who say that there is going to be chaos don't know what they are talking about. The bottom line is that we were elected in competitive elections. How many competitive elections have we had before?"

This may be Liu's first elected position, but as a member of Community Board 7 and president of the North Flushing Community Association, he has a long history of activism.

His campaign revolved around promises to his constituents to reduce crime and traffic congestion and, what he says will be his top priority, clean downtown Flushing.

"It is a mess and needs to be cleaned up right away," he says. "Not only for the people there, but also because it is a source of tension and finger-pointing along racial and ethnic lines."

Counting on him

Yet, he is well aware that Asian-Americans — about 10% of the city's population — expect him to be their voice, no matter if they live in Chinatown, Sunset Park, Brooklyn, or any other area.

"I didn't run to become the first Asian-American elected official in New York, but to work hard for my constituents," Liu says. "But I am, and that means that I have additional responsibilities. It is great to represent a group that did not have representation before."

With more than 20 other newly elected Democratic Council members, Liu is part of the Fresh Democracy Council, a caucus whose goal is to change the rules of the Council to redirect some power away from the speaker and toward committee chairmen.

"I believe that the process has to be opened up; there has to be more discussion in order to make the Council more democratic," he says.

Although he did not support Michael Bloomberg, he was named to the mayor-elect's kitchen cabinet, an advisory committee of 24 elected officials.

"He wants us to advise him on issues, large and small, affecting different areas of the city," Liu says. "We also serve as a sounding board for his ideas."

Liu says he is confident he will "get a lot done" before he is up for reelection in two years.

Let's keep our fingers crossed.

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