

Promptness of a Special Election to Fill a Congressional Vacancy

Fox v. Paterson (David G. Larimer, W.D.N.Y. 6:10-cv-6240),
Rossito-Canty v. Cuomo (Jack B. Weinstein,
E.D.N.Y. 1:15-cv-568), and *Seubert v. Cuomo*
(Frank P. Geraci, Jr., W.D.N.Y. 6:18-cv-6303)

A 2010 federal lawsuit sought an injunction requiring a prompt special election to fill a congressional vacancy. After the complaint was filed, the governor decided to combine the special election with the general election occurring in six months. The district judge determined that the Constitution did not require a special election more prompt than that. A 2015 case filed in another district within the same state concerned a vacancy occurring much more in advance of the regular general election, and the district judge ordered the governor to promptly set a special-election date. A 2018 case with a timeline similar to the 2010 case had a result similar to the 2010 case's.

Subject: Election dates. *Topic:* Enjoining elections.

District judges in New York heard cases on how long the governor could allow a congressional seat to remain vacant before a special election to fill it.

2010 in the Western District of New York

Three voters filed a federal complaint in the Western District of New York on Monday, May 3, 2010, seeking an order requiring the governor to call a special election to fill a congressional vacancy created by a resignation on March 9.¹ With their complaint, the voters filed motions for a temporary restraining order and a preliminary injunction² and expedited hearing.³

Judge David G. Larimer heard the motions on Friday and ordered briefing on venue.⁴ On the following Wednesday, the governor announced that he would call a special election for the day of the general election, November 2,

1. Complaint, *Fox v. Paterson*, No. 6:10-cv-6240 (W.D.N.Y. May 3, 2010), D.E. 1; *Fox v. Paterson*, 715 F. Supp. 2d 431, 432–33 (W.D.N.Y. 2010); see Ray Finger, *Lawsuit Filed for Special Election*, *Elmira Star-Gazette*, May 5, 2010, at A3; Jim O'Hara, *Local Attorney's Suit Seeks Special Election in 29th District*, *Syracuse Post-Standard*, May 7, 2010, at A5; Joseph Spector, *Paterson: Special Election for Massa Seat Not Imminent*, *Poughkeepsie J.*, May 5, 2010, at A9; Jill Terreri, *Lawsuit Seeks Special Election in 29th District*, *Elmira Star-Gazette*, May 4, 2010, at A12; see also Jerry Zremski, *Massa to Resign Southern Tier House Seat*, *Buffalo News*, Mar. 6, 2010, at A1.

2. Motion, *Fox*, No. 6:10-cv-6240 (W.D.N.Y. May 3, 2010), D.E. 3.

3. Motion, *id.* (May 3, 2010), D.E. 2.

4. Docket Sheet, *id.* (May 3, 2010) (D.E. 5) [hereinafter *Fox* Docket Sheet].

In advance of [the hearing], the Court advised counsel by letter that they "should be prepared to discuss whether venue is proper in the Western District of New York in a suit against Governor Paterson, who performs his official duties in, and is therefore deemed a 'resident' of, the Northern District of New York."

Opinion at 3, *id.* (May 13, 2010), D.E. 9 [hereinafter May 13, 2010, *Fox* Opinion].

so that the winner of the special election would serve until January, at which time the winner of the regular election would assume the office.⁵ On Thursday, May 13, 2010, Judge Larimer ruled that venue in the Western District was proper, because the congressional district at issue was wholly within the district and the governor had an office there.⁶

Following a May 25 hearing,⁷ Judge Larimer decided on June 4 against requiring the governor to order a special election in advance of the general-election date.⁸ Judge Larimer determined that the U.S. Constitution required the governor to call a special election, but a decision to hold the special election on November 2 was within the governor's discretion.⁹ In fact, a special election was held on November 2.¹⁰

On April 21, 2011, Judge Larimer denied the plaintiffs a recovery of attorney fees because (1) the motion for fees was not filed promptly after the June 4, 2010, ruling, and (2) the June 4 ruling did not grant the plaintiffs an election earlier than the date the governor had already announced.¹¹

2015 in the Eastern District of New York

A federal class-action complaint filed in the Eastern District of New York on February 5, 2015, by eight voters sought a special-election date to fill a congressional vacancy that arose much longer in time before a general congressional election: January 5, 2015.¹² Judge William F. Kuntz II set the case for hearing before Judge Jack B. Weinstein on February 13.¹³ At the hearing, "Defense counsel contended that the Governor would ultimately issue a proclamation for a special election; they denied that this court could decide timing."¹⁴

5. Fox, 715 F. Supp. 2d at 432–33; May 13, 2010, Fox Opinion, *supra* note 4, at 3–4 & n.1; see Tom Precious, *Vote for Massa Seat Will Be Nov. 2*, Buffalo News, May 13, 2010, at B1.

6. May 13, 2010, Fox Opinion, *supra* note 4, at 6–14; see Ray Finger, *Judge Upholds Special Election Lawsuit*, Elmira Star-Gazette, May 14, 2010, at A3.

7. Fox Docket Sheet, *supra* note 4 (D.E. 18); see Ray Finger, *Decision Delayed on Election Lawsuit*, Elmira Star-Gazette, May 27, 2010, at A3.

8. Fox, 715 F. Supp. 2d at 433; see Jill Terreri, *Judge Upholds Nov. 2 Date for 29th District Election*, Elmira Star-Gazette, June 5, 2010, at A4.

9. Fox, 715 F. Supp. 2d at 442.

10. Opinion at 2 n.1, Fox v. Paterson, No. 6:10-cv-6240 (W.D.N.Y. Apr. 21, 2011), 2011 WL 1549475.

11. *Id.* at 3–9.

12. Complaint, *Rossito-Canty v. Cuomo*, No. 1:15-cv-568 (E.D.N.Y. Feb. 5, 2015), D.E. 1; *Rossito-Canty v. Cuomo*, 86 F. Supp. 3d 175, 182–83 (E.D.N.Y. 2015).

13. Order to Show Cause, *Rossito-Canty*, No. 1:15-cv-568 (E.D.N.Y. Feb. 5, 2015), D.E. 6; *Rossito-Canty*, 86 F. Supp. 3d at 183.

Judge Weinstein retired in 2020 and died on June 15, 2021. Federal Judicial Center Biographical Directory of Article III Federal Judges, www.fjc.gov/history/judges; see Alan Feuer, *At 98, a Judicial Lion Lays Down His Gavel to Pursue New Interests*, N.Y. Times, Feb. 18, 2020, at A19; Laura Mansnerus, *Jack B. Weinstein, Activist Judge Both Revered and Feared, Dies at 99*, N.Y. Times, June 16, 2021, at A22.

14. *Rossito-Canty*, 86 F. Supp. 3d at 183; see Minutes, *Rossito-Canty*, No. 1:15-cv-568 (E.D.N.Y. Feb. 13, 2015), D.E. 19.

On February 16, concluding that the “plaintiffs have made a *prima facie* case for a preliminary injunction,”¹⁵ Judge Weinstein ruled, “Unless the Governor announces the date for a special election on or before noon on Friday, February 20, 2015, or justifies a further delay at a hearing to be conducted by this court at that time and date, this court will fix the date for a special election as promptly as the law will allow.”¹⁶

Judge Weinstein concluded, “Special elections in New York to fill vacant congressional seats must be conducted in the shortest space of time reasonably possible.”¹⁷

There are three categories of critical losses when a seat in our nation’s legislature body is unfilled: *first*, the loss to persons and institutions in the district who forfeit their power to help decide both the nation’s policies at large, and those national decisions that impact the particular needs and views of the district; *second*, the loss to those in the district of a vital, powerful, individual channel to and from the government’s bureaucracy and its benefits—the Congressperson and his or her staff acting as an ombudsperson for those in the district; and, *third*, the loss to the nation as a whole which gives up the input from a unique group of people represented by an individual with the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to national debates and policy and whose views should be available to temper those of colleagues.¹⁸

On February 20, the governor set May 5 as the date for the special election, so Judge Weinstein dismissed the action as moot.¹⁹

2018 in the Western District of New York

Seven voters filed a federal class-action complaint in the Western District on April 17, 2018, seeking an order, by writ of mandamus or otherwise, compelling the governor to schedule a special election to fill a congressional vacancy—which occurred because of a March 16 death—at the same time as a June 26 primary election.²⁰ With their complaint, the plaintiffs filed a proposed order to show cause.²¹

15. *Rossito-Canty*, 86 F. Supp. 3d at 200.

16. *Id.* at 180; see Alexander Burns, *Cuomo Given Deadline to Schedule House Election*, N.Y. Times, Feb. 18, 2015, at A18.

17. *Rossito-Canty*, 86 F. Supp. 3d at 195; see *id.* at 180 (“The right to representation in government is the central pillar of democracy in this country. Unjustified delay in filling a vacancy cannot be countenanced.”).

18. *Id.* at 181.

19. Order, *Rossito-Canty*, No. 1:15-cv-568 (E.D.N.Y. Feb. 23, 2015), D.E. 18; Minutes, *id.* (Feb. 20, 2015), D.E. 20; see Jesse McKinley, *Special Vote Is Set to Fill Seat Vacated by Grimm*, N.Y. Times, Feb. 21, 2015, at A16; see also Alexander Burns, *Staten Island Prosecutor Wins Congressional Seat Grimm Held*, N.Y. Times, May 6, 2015, at A19 (“The victory makes Mr. Donovan the lone Republican from New York City in the House.”).

20. Complaint, *Seubert v. Cuomo*, No. 6:18-cv-6303 (W.D.N.Y. Apr. 17, 2018), D.E. 1; see Will Cleveland & Jon Campbell, *Gov. Andrew Cuomo Sued for Not Declaring Special Election*, Rochester Democrat & Chron., Apr. 20, 2018, at A2.

21. Motion, *Seubert*, No. 6:18-cv-6303 (W.D.N.Y. Apr. 17, 2018), D.E. 2.

Louise Slaughter, the oldest member of Congress, fell in her home and died about a week later.²² The district included Rochester and surrounding suburbs.²³

On April 26, Judge Frank P. Geraci, Jr., ruled, “The Court does not have the power . . . to issue a writ of mandamus compelling a state official to perform a duty.”²⁴

In August, the governor determined that the vacancy would be filled by special election at the same time as the general election on November 6.²⁵

On March 15, 2019, noting that the “Plaintiffs have taken no further action; they have not served their complaint on Defendants and no Defendant has appeared,” Judge Geraci issued an order that the plaintiffs show cause why the case should not be dismissed.²⁶ Noting no response, Judge Geraci dismissed the action on April 19.²⁷

22. See Victoria E. Freile, *Louise Slaughter Hospitalized After Falling in Her D.C. Home*, Rochester Democrat & Chron., Mar. 15, 2018, at A5; Joseph P. Fried, *Louise Slaughter, Liberal Congresswoman in 16th Term, Dies at 88*, N.Y. Times, Mar. 17, 2018, at A24.

23. See Jon Campbell & Steve Orr, *Slaughter’s Seat to Be Filled by Election*, Rochester Democrat & Chron., Mar. 17, 2018, at A14; Jon Campbell & Joseph Spector, *Joe Morelle to Run for Congress*, Rochester Democrat & Chron., Mar. 26, 2018, at A2.

24. Order, *Seubert*, No. 6:18-cv-6303 (W.D.N.Y. Apr. 26, 2018), D.E. 8; see Brian Sharp, *Judge Tosses Lawsuit Over Slaughter Seat*, Rochester Democrat & Chron., Apr. 28, 2018, at A6.

25. See *Date of Special Election for Slaughter’s Seat Set for Nov. 6*, Rochester Democrat & Chron., Aug. 12, 2018, at A17.

26. Order, *Seubert*, No. 6:18-cv-6303 (W.D.N.Y. Mar. 15, 2019), D.E. 9.

27. Order, *id.* (Apr. 19, 2019), D.E. 10.