



Former Marine and co-founder of the Headstrong Project Zach Iscol is running for Mayor. | Sue Kwon

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Zach Iscol wants to be a cross between Bloomberg and de Blasio

He didn't vote for mayor, but now he wants your vote.

By JEFF COLTIN (/author/jeff-coltin) | OCTOBER 23, 2020

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New York City has had 19 mayors since the 1898 consolidation of the five boroughs, and only one of them did not come to the job from the world of politics or government. And that exception, Michael Bloomberg, happened to be a billionaire, whose money could overcome any lack of political connections. Still, there's a long tradition of people trying to enter City Hall without having visited many times first. Most often, they come from the world of business, preaching competence first, but also big ideas – if only the politicians running this city had the mindset that they did! But most of these candidates ended up losing, getting steamrolled by the city's particular political culture.

The latest of these candidates is Zach Iscol, who launched his campaign for New York City mayor on Oct. 19 and plans to run in the June 2021 Democratic primary. Iscol, 42, served in the Marine Corps from 2001 until 2007, and has since led a handful of projects focused on veterans. Among them, he was a co-founder and former chairman of the Headstrong Project, a nonprofit providing mental health care treatment for military veterans, and the founder and CEO of Task & Purpose, a military-focused digital media company and news outlet. In the spring, he was tapped to be deputy director of the temporary hospital inside the Javits Center (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/08/opinions/javits-centers-covid-19-hospital-iscol/index.html>) in Manhattan.

“I am new to politics, but I am not new to public service by any means,” Iscol said in an interview with City & State before his campaign launched. “I have two decades of public service under my belt.”

Iscol's experience in local politics doesn't even extend to voting. New York City Board of Elections records show that Iscol did not vote in any of the past three elections for mayor, either in the primary or general elections. Iscol has lived in New York City since 2009, and has voted in most presidential years and midterm elections since then. And while Iscol said that he has worked on friends' local campaigns, he declined to give any names. Campaign finance records this year show that Iscol donated \$97 to the campaign of Dan Gorman, a military veteran who challenged Assembly Member Richard Gottfried, and \$1,050 to Richard Habersham, a real estate broker who challenged Rep. Adriano Espaillat. Neither candidate supported by Iscol made the primary ballot.

But Iscol has some friends in high places when it comes to national politics. His mother, Jill Iscol, advised Hillary Clinton (<https://nypost.com/2020/07/31/combat-vet-with-ties-to-clintons-considering-nyc-mayoral-bid/>) throughout her career. Zach Iscol grew up in

Westchester County, where Clinton now lives, and said that he has talked to the former presidential candidate about his campaign for mayor. Iscol wouldn't reveal his full campaign team, but he said Joe Trippi, a national political strategist who has recently worked on the campaigns of other military veterans like Reps. Tulsi Gabbard and Seth Moulton, would be working with him. Rachel Brody, who has worked on campaigns for Reps. Carolyn Maloney and Max Rose, is doing communications for Iscol's campaign.

Assembling that campaign team reflects Iscol's confidence in his ability to raise money. He comes from a wealthy family: Ken Iscol, his father, is a cellphone technology entrepreneur, and his mother is a major Democratic political donor, having given more than \$50,000 to federal candidates and committees in the past two years. Zach Iscol lives in NoHo (<https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/meredith-melling-manhattan-loft-beach-house-level-breezy/amp>) and is married to Meredith Melling, co-founder of fashion label La Ligne. Iscol's campaign said he already has more than \$250,000 in pledged contributions.

But Iscol would still have a lot of ground to make up when it comes to fundraising against candidates who have been raising money for years. And he may struggle to stand out in an increasingly crowded field for mayor, featuring political heavy hitters like New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer and Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams. Other contenders include former Citigroup Vice Chair Ray McGuire, former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Shaun Donovan, former New School Senior Vice President Maya Wiley, City Council Member Carlos Menchaca, former city Sanitation Commissioner Kathryn Garcia, former nonprofit CEO Dianne Morales and former city Veterans' Services Commissioner Loree Sutton.

He is a straight, white man running in a city where Democratic primary voters seem eager for demographic and political change. Iscol is also positioning himself as a more moderate Democrat, one who has a better relationship with big business in the city than Mayor Bill de Blasio, but so are more well-known candidates like Adams and McGuire. Some reporters were unimpressed by Iscol's launch video (<https://twitter.com/zachiscol/status/1318282346404155394?s=20>), which repeated some tired political tropes. "Finally, the race for mayor gets a candidate who's never been elected and who cares more about outcomes than special interests," Streetsblog NYC

senior reporter Dave Colon wrote on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/DaveCoIon/status/1318288256425930760?s=20>), dripping with sarcasm.

Iscol isn't even the only veteran running for mayor. Sutton, the former city veterans affairs commissioner and a retired Army brigadier general, is running on her success in eliminating veteran homelessness in New York City (<https://www.cityandstateny.com/articles/policy/housing/nyc-got-homeless-vets-streets-why-cant-it-do-same-everyone-else.html>). Iscol is hoping that he too can tap into the city's community of veterans and their supporters.

But that may be more difficult in a Democratic primary. “Whenever I read of a veteran who runs for office, the narrative is rooted in the perception that veterans are beyond partisan politics,” said Na’ilah Amaru, a Democratic political strategist and Army veteran. That may be true when you’re in active service, Amaru said, but it doesn’t really apply on the campaign trail. “The way our political system operates is: Are you a Democrat or are you a Republican?”

Sutton is forging ahead, running as probably the most moderate candidate (<https://www.cityandstateny.com/articles/personality/interviews-profiles/apolitical-army-vet-loree-sutton-on-jumping-into-the-mayors-race.html>) in the Democratic primary. Iscol seems to be leaning that way as well in his fledgling campaign, avoiding hot-button topics like defunding the police and talking more about his managerial experience.

There’s a substantial community of military veterans in New York, but they’re not a monolith or an easy voting bloc, said Isiah James, an Army veteran who ran for Congress against Rep. Yvette Clarke earlier this year. James ran as a democratic socialist, and said he found “that a lot of the younger veterans who came back to New York, their politics resonated with my politics – not so much the older veterans in their 70s and 80s. Their brand of quote-unquote patriotism was different than mine.”

Veterans have made it to Gracie Mansion before, even though it has been some decades since the last mayor with military experience, former Mayor David Dinkins, was elected. “It’s interesting to look at the number of New York City mayors with military experience,”

Iscol noted. “(Fiorello) La Guardia was (in) World War I. Ed Koch was an infantryman in World War II. David Dinkins served in the Marine Corps. John Lindsay had five battle stars in World War II.”

City & State talked with Iscol about his path to victory, who he supported in the presidential race and the way he felt like a small town mayor in al-Nasr wal-Salam, Iraq. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

On his campaign logo “Zach Iscol for the new NYC”

(<https://secure.actblue.com/donate/zach-for-new-york-4#>):

New York gets an opportunity once every 100 years to reinvent itself. In the early 1800s, you had grain prices skyrocketing, you had real economic issues. New Yorkers got to work and built the Erie Canal. In the 1920s and 1930s, we were facing the Great Depression, the city literally put the entire country to work building the Empire State Building, the Triboro Bridge and other projects around the city. We’re now looking at another 100-year opportunity to reinvent the city and build a city that works better for everybody.

On the relevance of his military service:

The thing that I really took away from my time there more than anything else was my time in Nasr wal-Salam, which is a small city outside the outskirts of Fallujah. I was trained as an infantry officer, but I was doing the job more of a small town mayor, or a City Council member, and certainly a diplomat. And learning that the best way to keep the peace was by listening, by working with local partners, by doing local projects, which is the real focus of a lot of the work that we were doing over there, in addition to some very significant combat operations.

On his path to victory:

I understand it’s a crowded field, but wouldn’t it be nice in a time of a health care crisis to have a candidate that’s actually delivered health care to people? In the time of an economic crisis, wouldn’t it be nice to have somebody in the field who’s actually built a

business from the ground up, who's actually employed people and who's helped thousands of people transition into new careers? And in terms of the crisis of the criminal justice system and the NYPD, I've made life-and-death decisions ... and I understand how to create a culture of accountability within a military or a law enforcement or uniformed service that has tremendous power and authority over other people.

On accepting contributions from real estate developers:

The only way that New York City is going to get through this is by the entire city coming together. So I am willing to work with anybody, I am willing to talk to anybody. But we have to focus on solutions that are actually going to impact people's lives here in New York City. It's not creating these false choices, or figuring out who to blame. I am not ambivalent to taking donations from anybody. I'm just a political outsider, so what do I know, but I'm pretty sure just about everybody is taking donations from real estate. They're just threading the needle in a way that they're saying that they're not. I was sitting down with somebody recently who – I'm not going to name names – somebody from (a mayoral campaign) called him and said, "I need your wife to return her check." He said, "Why?" He says, "She's in real estate." He says, "Well, what about me?" He said, "Well you're not a developer, you don't count." He also works for a real estate company.

So I don't have an issue with it. I feel like everybody is (taking real estate money), just most are not saying that they are.

On "arbitrary cuts" to the NYPD (<https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-the-path-to-smarter-policing-20200717-fwybnhcmx5hofhzjayrxhxwbeu-story.html>):

New York City spends \$95 billion a year. To put that in perspective, that's more than 48 out of 50 states. And I think it's something like as large as the next 12, 15, or maybe even 20 largest U.S. cities combined. So as we're entering this time of fiscal austerity, I think everything is on the table. But we also have to focus on making sure that the dollars that we do have are going to where it's most needed. There's plenty of waste, fraud, abuse and very real corruption that's a starting point for cutting in the city budget.

On his ideology:

I'm very progressive. At the same time though, I'm a progressive who believes in progress, and believes that being a progressive means you have to deliver for the actual people of this city. And I think the city has been failing to do that, and has been failing to do that for years. So in terms of, 'Where do you fall on the political spectrum?' I care about solutions, that's what I care about.

On who he supported in the presidential primary:

I was an early Kamala (Harris) supporter, but I was really just proud of the entire field. I was really sort of proud of who the Democrats had running, and by the time it came to the June primary here in the city, I voted for Joe Biden. I think it was sort of decided at that point, but I was really proud. I loved watching the debates. I thought we had a very broad, diverse group of candidates, and I was excited about a lot of them. I liked Cory Booker, I liked Pete Buttigieg.

On New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio's record:

He doesn't care about the outcomes. We just lost one-third of our small businesses, and you have half a million New Yorkers unemployed, and he hasn't met with the small business task force (<https://www.gothamgazette.com/city/9810-de-blasio-small-business-advisory-council-coronavirus>) in two months. He just does not show up. We need a mayor who's going to show up. And I think it's tragic that we have him still for another 440 days. When you look at the underlying diagnosis of every issue facing this city, fundamentally it becomes an issue of leadership. Whether you're talking about jobs, whether you're talking about health care – COVID, it didn't have to happen. The city is still unable to do contact tracing and still unable to do rapid testing eight months into this. It's inexcusable. I think the city is desperate for a leader who will step up to the plate.

On his vision:

You basically need somebody that believes that we live in two cities, but has Bloomberg's management abilities. Somebody that's going to be able to take the best of those two. Somebody that is going to work tirelessly to make sure people in this city have a better tomorrow. And somebody's who's going to show up, but somebody who also understands that one of the things that de Blasio gets wrong is he plays small politics. He's always looking for people to blame. That's the game that he plays.
