After the Primaries

New York's Mystery General

What, exactly, does the New York State Attorney General do? What should the job be?

In the end, Karen Burstein's victory in Tuesday's Democratic primary probably turned less on her answers to these questions than on her appealing manner and the usual political demographics of geography, sex and ethnicity. Money, for a change, was not the deciding factor. Ms. Burstein, a former state legislator, commissioner and judge, lagged far behind her opponents in campaign spending and fund-raising.

The general election race now pits Ms. Burstein against Dennis Vacco, a former U.S. Attorney in Buffalo. Voters can only hope that the campaign will go beyond the posturing on crime-fighting that dominated much of the primary, to discuss some of the fundamentals of the office.

Like two of Ms. Burstein's primary opponents — Charles Hynes, the Brooklyn District Attorney, and Eliot Spitzer, a former Manhattan prosecutor — Mr. Vacco argues that the office should be more concerned with criminal law enforcement. He is trying to cast the election as a choice between a Republican concerned with citizens' safety and a Democratic "social engineer."

Ms. Burstein, meanwhile, promises a "crusade" against domestic violence and raises questions about Mr. Vacco's law-and-order credentials on the issues of gun control and protecting abortion clinics from violent protesters.

All well and good. But some of the more basic aspects of the job warrant at least as much attention. The Attorney General, as Ms. Burstein has pointed out, is not a district attorney. Who can run a huge legal shop responsibly and who would do the best job of recruiting talented professionals?

Beyond any proposed new dimensions in crime-fighting, the voters need to know how the candidates intend to handle the job's meat-and-potatoes work of defending the state against legal actions, and how they would use the Attorney General's considerable authority to bring lawsuits in the areas of consumer fraud, antitrust violations, price-fixing, civil rights, labor law, and the environment.

Ex "F-2"