

## **Nonpartisan Elections: Still a Bad Idea for the City**

Seven years ago, Mayor Bloomberg attempted to change the New York City Charter by eliminating the role of political parties in city elections. The mayor got the proposal for nonpartisan elections on the ballot that year and 70 percent of the voters rejected it. The mayor's Charter Revision Commission will be issuing a report in September with changes in the Charter for the November ballot.

In a nonpartisan election, candidates listed on the ballot are not identified with any political party. In 2003, New Yorkers didn't accept the mayor's argument that nonpartisan elections would increase voter turnout. This is not just a progressive issue. Last month, *The Wall Street Journal*, a newspaper not known for its left-wing views, published an opinion piece titled "Will Nonpartisan Elections Make for Dumber Voters?" In its view, "...reformers better watch what they wish for: an academic study warns that nonpartisan elections create a **less** informed electorate, resulting in less competitive local elections."

In fact, highly partisan elections have been known to increase interest in the outcome and spur voter turnout. Look at the increase in registration and voter turnout in the highly partisan 2008 presidential election. On the other hand, Chicago, which has had nonpartisan elections since 1995, has had low turnout in subsequent mayoral elections.

### **Party Conveys Information**

A lack of party identification not only reduces voter interest; it makes it more difficult to keep track of candidates' positions on the issues. Voters in nonpartisan elections often have no idea what down-ballot candidates stand for and are more likely to skip voting in those races. In contrast, a party label conveys instant facts to many people, especially in New York where many political parties outside the two-party system are very active. Low-income and immigrant voters are often not able to get easily understood election information from other sources. In New York City, these voters are overwhelmingly people of color.

Political parties have distinctly divergent views on minimum wage, consumer protection, civil rights, gun control, public education, and a number of other issues. Voters know this and use party labels as a guide. The relationship between New York City and Albany and New York City and Washington where hyper-partisanship is the norm also heightens the importance attached to these labels. And in a state where third-party activity is often robust, party labels do matter to the electorate.

In addition, Supreme Court decisions have lifted restrictions on both individual and corporate spending on election campaigns. This has served to further erode a level playing field, especially in nonpartisan elections where candidates are much more likely to finance their own campaigns. This is a particular concern in New York City because of the huge disparity in wealth here and the high cost of media. The result is that candidates of moderate financial means, particularly people of color or immigrants – a large portion of the city's electorate – would not be able to effectively compete.

When Bloomberg first ran for mayor, he had little attachment to any political party, but he had the resources to capitalize on his name recognition and advertise his agenda. This is yet another reason for opposing nonpartisan elections: they only make politics even more of a rich man's game, reducing the number of credible candidates to those who can afford to finance their own election campaigns.

### **Candidates of Color**

Also, the administration's drive for nonpartisan elections comes at a time when African American and Latino officeholders have achieved significant standing in New York City. People of color hold more public offices than at any time in our city's history. They are a majority in the City Council. A primary reason for this is the party system. Since few African American or Latino candidates can bankroll their own campaigns, nonpartisan elections could threaten to undo this accomplishment.

For all these reasons – discouraging voter turnout, weakening the voice of low-income voters, impeding the participation of voters of color, fostering a greater imbalance in campaign spending, deterring candidates of moderate financial means – nonpartisan elections are a bad idea for New York City.

We have a way of doing things in this country. The voters – “the people” – are given a choice of candidates or proposals on the ballot. They vote, and their decisions are accepted. The mayor and his commission ought not to attempt to force a political system in their own image onto New York City by picking another fight on this issue. As with term limits, the people of New York City have spoken and have clearly rejected nonpartisan elections.

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