

The Public Ought to Know: Non-partisan elections damage democratic process

By Corey Bearak

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In many a mayoral election and in discussions about city politics and governance, pols and pundits use a phrase attributed to former Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. Paraphrasing this reformist mayor elected on a fusion ticket, they would say, "There's no Democratic or Republican way to pick up our trash." I often used that phrase. Now Mayor Michael Bloomberg's Charter Revision Commission suggests there's no Democratic or Republican (or Working Family, Conservative or Independent) way to run our city.



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Then-candidate Bloomberg promised the Independence Party to support non-partisan elections. The New York Times reported it. That party's key figure, Lenora Fulani, is considered an anti-Semite. Maybe she arrived at the position on the merits, but Fulani is not someone with whom I'd cut a political deal.

When the mayor appointed his commission, its chairman, much-respected Frank Macchiarola, made clear the commission would place a ballot proposal to change our municipal elections to non-partisan events.

Facing criticism, the mayor recommended and his commission accepted that his proposal not take effect until 2009 when term limits — presuming he runs and wins re-election — require he leave office. Mayor Mike also proposed and the commission also accepted that candidates for municipal office (mayor, public advocate, comptroller, borough president and City Council) may list their party affiliation.

In my July 3 column, I called the charter revision process flawed because Bloomberg's commission focused on the electoral process rather than the substance of government. In August, I looked at its proposal to centralize city contracting. Last week, while addressing gun safety, I noted it's just plain dumb proposal to eliminate the Preliminary Mayor's Management Report, one of two annual service delivery reports. The public ought to know the details of how its government works, and reporting remains essential to ensure effective services.

Non-partisan elections, if passed, do the most damage and certainly merit our scrutiny and rejection by the voters. (The Queens Civic Congress and Citizens Union will present a non-partisan elections discussion, Oct. 20, 7:30 p.m. at the Flushing Library, Main Street and Kissena Boulevard.)

Why? It represents no reform but a subversion of the Democratic process

by elites. It tends to benefit wealthy folks. It allows would-be elected officials to obscure their party affiliation, and party labels do matter, a lot.

New York City mayors use their bully pulpits and command attention as they speak out on a host of issues, including foreign policy in a city with a large population of immigrants and descendants of immigrants. Party labels help voters, especially working folk, to identify candidates they wish to support.

Former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's party label cost him the election as mayor in 1989. With Republicans in the White House, a lack of clarity on issues of concern to many city voters enabled the campaign of former Mayor David Dinkins to identify Giuliani with those Republican policies, including raising a question of his support for a women's right to choose.

Dinkins administration failures, including what happened in Crown Heights and a perception of crime out of control, enabled Giuliani to succeed. He also used his Liberal Party endorsement to clarify his positions for moderate women voters.

Government reformers got the state to impose the existing primary process to take candidate selection away from political party bosses in smoked-filled rooms. If you want your party's nomination for a public office, you need to win the party primary.

A party committee may award you a designation, but it means nothing if someone else, or even a few others, also run. I live in political districts where the incumbent councilman, a Democrat, lost re-election in a 1977 primary, and the party designee for Assembly lost the 1982 nomination to another who then defeated the incumbent Republican.

My friend Councilman Jim Gennaro (D-Fresh Meadows) won office in 2001 after first winning the Democratic primary against the party designee. Queens Democrats supported then-Bronx Assemblyman Roberto Ramirez for public advocate in 1993, but primary voters selected another for the Democratic nomination.

When the Republicans present strong candidates, they overcome the large Democratic edge in enrollment. Candidates besides Rudy and Mike do overcome their party affiliation. Republican Frank Padavan, my state senator, wins handily in a district where Democrats outnumber Frank's party 3-to-2. For years my district elected Republicans to the state Assembly.

The existing system presents voters with a distinct choice. Census trends indicate the emergence of African-Americans, Latinos and Asians, especially in the Democratic Party. This has implications in races for public office. My friends Councilmen John Liu (D-Flushing) and Hiram Monserrate (D-Corona) represent

this trend in Queens, and they represent all constituents, not just their own demographic. Just maybe, non-partisan elections aim to stop a trend.

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