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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Case for Partisanship

By JOHN MOLLENKOPF

On the face of it, New York's Charter Revision Commission makes a good argument. The current system of party primaries, it says, prevents the three out of 10 voters who are not registered Democrats from participating in the primary that nominates the candidate who usually wins the general election. Opening primaries to all voters and candidates, it reasons, would lead to more participation, wider choice and more competition. Who could possibly object?

In fact, there is good reason to worry not only that the commission's proposed changes would not produce the desired results, but that it would also erode the principal virtue of the current system: the way it enhances the influence of minority voters.

First of all, opening the primary to all registered voters will allow the participation of those who are the least attached to a party. But these citizens are also the least likely to vote. Thus there is a strong chance that this change, although it may result in an increase in the sheer number of eligible voters, will lead to a decline in turnout rates, which are already low.

More important, by taking parties out of the primary, the proposed changes would put more emphasis on raising money and devising direct-mail campaigns and less emphasis on a candidate's party history and personal connection to the voters. This will promote the kind of candidate-centered, sound-bite-oriented politics deplored by thoughtful critics.

The biggest problem with the commission's proposed revision, however, is that it removes the only major advantage the system provides to minority voters — one they badly need to offset their many disadvantages. Although non-Hispanic whites account for 36 percent of the city's population, they accounted for 52 percent of votes cast in the last mayoral election. This is because they are more likely to be voting-age citizens, to have good educations and to own property.

But they are much less likely than other city residents to be Democrats. According to my research, 54 percent of non-Hispanic whites but 75 percent of Latinos and 85 percent of blacks are registered Democrats. So the voting public in Democratic primaries looks much more like the city as a whole than does the voting population of general elections. Ending party primaries would seriously erode the influence minority voters have in picking candidates.

Still, the Charter Revision Commission correctly identifies the source of the pathologies in our current political system: one-party dominance.

But if nonpartisanship is not the way to rectify this problem, then what is? The obvious answer — and one to which the commission curiously seems to have given little thought — is for the Republican

Party, or other parties, to put forward genuinely competitive candidates. What New York City needs is not no-party politics, but reinvigorated party competition.

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