

August 12, 2003

## Charter Panel Shaping Up New Design of City Politics

By JONATHAN P. HICKS

**T**he members of the Charter Revision Commission appointed earlier this year by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg have reached consensus on a number of features of a plan that would radically restructure politics.

The most dramatic proposal, which could be presented to voters as soon as November, would eliminate political party primaries preceding a general election, commission officials said. Instead, there would be two rounds of elections. The first one would reduce the field of candidates to the two with the most votes. Those two would then oppose each other in an election in November.

The ballot itself would change significantly. Since there would no longer be Democratic, Republican or any other party primaries, the ballot for both elections would simply list candidates.

The candidates would get on the ballot by filing petitions, but signatures would no longer have to be those of registered party members; instead, any registered voter could sign a candidate's petition.

The commission has not decided whether to recommend that candidates be allowed to identify their political affiliation on the ballot. Mayor Bloomberg has suggested that candidates should have that option. If that recommendation is endorsed by the commission and approved by the voters, there could be a host of candidates from several political parties on the same ballot in the first election.

Further, commission officials say, in the general election in November, the two candidates for each office could be from the same party, since they would have been selected without regard to party affiliation.

After months of hearings by the commission and a public debate that has largely focused on the political ramifications of the shift to nonpartisan elections, it is beginning to appear that what is in store could be not simply a change in elections, but a change throughout the political process.

The commission must vote on the package of proposals by Labor Day, but they could take effect only if approved by voters in a citywide referendum. The commission will decide when that vote will take place.

Commission officials suggest that the panel is likely to recommend that a candidate for City Council be allowed to qualify by obtaining the signatures of registered voters from any part of the city instead of from the specific Council district. Under the current guidelines, candidates for City Council must submit 900 valid signatures from voters registered in their political party. For those running citywide, 2,700 valid signatures are required.

The commission is not likely to recommend significant changes in the number of signatures, but under the proposal being considered, any registered voter in the district could vote in the first round of elections, rather than, as at present, only registered members of a party.

"We're talking about 670,000 people in New York City who are now excluded from voting in any primary," said Alan Gartner, the executive director of the commission. "And there are 1.3 million people in New York

City who can't vote in the Democratic primary because they are not registered as Democrats."

Mr. Gartner added that the commission members were inclined to hold the first election earlier, moving it from September to June, allowing a longer campaign season for the general election.

The State Constitution already states that primary elections should be held in June, but the Legislature was allowed to deviate from that date. Mr. Gartner said the commission was uncertain whether the election could be moved to June without legislative approval.

The proposals appear to be consistent with the wishes of Mayor Bloomberg, who has urged eliminating party primaries and switching to nonpartisan elections as a way of weakening political bosses.

The push has been largely opposed by elected officials, who argue that eliminating major party ties would make it more difficult for black, Hispanic and Asian New Yorkers to win office. They have also argued that it would favor wealthy candidates who finance their own campaigns, like Mayor Bloomberg.

It is not clear how nonpartisan elections would affect candidates who participate in the city's campaign finance program, under which many contributions are matched by public funds by a ratio of four to one.

Nicole A. Gordon, executive director of the Campaign Finance Board, testified at a public hearing that state laws governed the level of political parties' spending in a primary, and that such spending could go unchecked if party primaries are dropped.

"The question arises whether the opportunity to support candidates monetarily would overwhelm the other forms of assistance," Ms. Gordon said.

Mr. Gartner said commission members were determined to find a way to ensure that there are limits to contributions and candidates' spending.

"Nothing in the proposals of the charter commission precludes the Campaign Finance Board from developing a rule to deal with this," Mr. Gartner said. "And we're confident that such rules can and will be developed."

He added that the proposals being considered by the panel would also enable candidates who make it to the November election to benefit by being eligible for two rounds of public campaign funds. He said the current system largely favored Democratic candidates since they are more likely to have opposition in their party's primary.