

Clarence Norman And Non-Partisan Elections

by Susan Reefer

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Earlier this month in state Supreme Court, Brooklyn Democratic leader and New York state assemblyman Clarence Norman faced charges of grand larceny and failing to file business records.

The charges outline a series of alleged misdeeds by the nine-term assemblyman, including failing to report thousands of dollars in campaign contributions, and accepting contributions in excess of the limits allowed by campaign finance law. He is also accused of taking \$5000 from the Democratic Party coffers for personal use, and taking a per diem from the State of New York for travel expenses to and from Albany, while separately billing the county Democratic Party for the same travel related expenses.

Norman, who pled not guilty to all charges and professes his innocence, faces seven years in prison if convicted.

The arraignment of the Democratic Party boss came less than a month before New York City voters are scheduled to go to the polls and decide whether or not to replace the current citywide election system with a series of non-partisan elections. Supporters of the non-partisan election system have suggested there is a need to reduce the influence of political party bosses in the voting process.

These charges, if proven to be accurate, could be seen as an example of the need to change the system. But a non-partisan election system, on its own, won't automatically reduce the influence of political parties in city government. Here's a breakdown of what should, could, and will not change, depending on the outcome of the November 4th elections:

What Should Change

The fact that someone can hold an elected government office and be an elected party official simultaneously is more than an example of the potential for undue influence of a political party; it's an example of the potential for massive conflicts of interest.

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It is an apparent quirk in an otherwise stringent set of financing and electioneering rules. But the body of legislation that encompasses local, state, and federal election law does not prohibit, in the City of New York, a person from holding both a party office and an elected legislative or executive office at the same time.

The law does provide extensive rules for ensuring that elected legislators don't do political work on taxpayer time, or for making sure that political parties and party committees don't collude with campaigns to do their campaigning directly for them. There are firewalls, and disclosure forms, and compliance standards, all to make sure that the work of political parties, and the work of political campaigns, and the work of governing, are all kept separate. As they should be.

But there is nothing preventing the people who are in charge of all those things from actually being the same person. And that should change.

What Could Change

The non-partisan election proposal doesn't actually get rid of political parties. It doesn't outlaw political parties, or take away their ability to organize; it just takes political party labels off of election ballots, and the nomination process out of party hands. The people running for office could still be endorsed by political parties, they could still receive the support of a party organization, they could still be their party's "preferred choice" or standard bearer. But without party primaries to officially determine the nominees, the candidates may not need the party the way they did in the past. They may still want the party's help. They may still court the party members. But they won't need the party. They can get along without the party, if they have to.

And when you go from being the party that chooses the nominee, to the party who is allowed to help the nominee, you've lost statutory authority. It doesn't necessarily follow that you are going to lose influence as well. But it's a possibility. Political parties are the single most important voting cue in New York City right now. And that could change.

What Will Not Change

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If the non-partisan election proposal passes, the law will apply to all citywide elections for city offices. It will not apply to those elected officials who represent part of New York City in other levels of government:

â€˜ It will not apply to U.S. Congressmen and Congresswomen from New York City.

â€˜ It will not apply to state senators from New York City.

â€˜ It will not apply to members of the state assembly from New York City (e.g., it would not apply to Clarence Norman).

And, if the non-partisan proposal passes, it won't prohibit anyone who is a party leader or party official from running for office in a non-partisan election. Under the new law, the same person, in theory, could be a top party official and be elected mayor of New York at the same time.

Whatever happens on November 4th, whether non-partisan elections are voted into law, or the existing system stays in place, there are a number of factors that determine how much influence political parties hold in our election system. And the party primary/party nomination is only one of those factors.

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