

No To Nonpartisan Elections

by Susan Reefer

Saturday, June 01, 2002 12:00 AM -

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Early in June, the mayor proposed a major change in the way the city holds elections. Under the mayor's plan, the city would scrap the current system of primary elections to determine party nominations, followed by a general election. Instead, the city would hold a non-partisan election, with all candidates running together and no party identification on the ballot.

This is not a new idea; many people have proposed making New York's citywide elections non-partisan. Some of the arguments in favor of the idea include: party politics don't work in a municipal setting, party machines wield too much power, too few people have access to the election process, the party primaries are often raucous and ugly.

That last part is, by the way, entirely true.

The proposal's first opponents out of the gate are Democratic party leaders. This is understandable, given they are leaders of the party that enjoys a six-to-one registration advantage in the city.

The current mayor is a Republican, although he switched parties right before the campaign in order to avoid a crowded Democratic primary field. But it is not nearly as simple as saying that Democrats are against this idea and Republicans are in favor of it.

This is a complex issue, and the arguments offered as evidence of why we should change the current system can just as easily be used to defend it.

So one Republican, at least, will go on record as saying this is a bad idea, and here's why:

Argument #1: Partisan politics are inappropriate in a municipal setting. People don't really like partisan politics much anymore. Even the word partisan has a pejorative feel. Bi-partisan, non-partisan, these are good things, or at least better things, most people would agree. And they would say that having a party affiliation (much less a loyalty to a particular party) is considered passe, naive, unenlightened. These days, being politically independent is the "new

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black," and political moderation is the new vogue.

The truth is, partisan politics are a good thing. Parties force candidates to make choices, to take stands, to make commitments to groups of people with long collective memories and high collective standards. It is a form of public accountability, and it provides discipline, continuity, and posterity to public service.

Whether it is at the national, state, or local level, party politics is a systematic way of making choices on behalf of a larger group of people. In a democracy, it is essential that everyone feel as though he is represented, whether or not he ever serves in public office. The party system gives voters a chance to affiliate themselves with a cause; and that cause, whether it is collective bargaining or education spending or land use planning, is bigger than any candidate could ever possibly be.

People love to say, "I don't vote for the party, I vote for the candidate." But that's not really true. You don't vote for the candidate, or at least not just for the candidate. You vote for her, but also for her ideas and her contributors and what she studied in school and where she worked and her family and friends and worldview and philosophy and reasoning ability and opinions and perspectives and hopes and dreams. A candidate is never just a person, he or she is a package deal, and party affiliation is just one part of that package. But at least with a candidate's party affiliation, you know what you are getting up front.

Argument #2: Not enough people participate in party primaries. It is true that not many people vote in party primaries. These are the elections held to determine who will become the party nominee and run in the general election. In New York, under state law, anyone who is registered with a party can participate in that party's primary. The fact is most people choose not to.

The downside is obvious, fewer people participating in the process. But the upside is, those who vote in local party primaries are also the most active, involved, and well-informed of any pool of voters during any election at any level. Party primaries involve smaller numbers of voters with a higher interest in who will represent them. These are the voters who attend debates, read position papers, and follow the campaign with enthusiasm and intensity.

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Not everyone may like the results of a particular primary election, but even detractors must admit that it is a decision made by those who are paying the most attention.

And political primaries are open to anyone who is paying attention. Political parties aren't exclusive, exclusionary organizations; they want more new members all the time. They are constantly trying to register new voters to add to their ranks. Parties thrive when more and more people belong.

Political primaries are already open to anyone who wants to participate. There's no reason to think that drastically changing the system will suddenly increase the level of interest necessary to get people to turn out on Election Day.

Argument #3: Parties wield too much power. Candidates of every kind get elected, essentially, by answering the question, "What would you do differently, or better, or more of once elected?" The answer to that question is a candidate's promise, the campaign platform.

Whether or not a candidate fulfills her campaign platform is going to depend on whether those pledges can be enforced. It's true, the looming threat of the next election can be pretty persuasive to a public official, but even more than that, the political party has a way of forcing those in its ranks to stick to the plan. Political parties have a long-term agenda, and they have to look beyond the next election in order to survive. They have a legacy to preserve, and a reputation to protect. They have an interest in making sure those in their party do what they say they'll do once elected

Political parties have influence, yes, but it can be the kind of influence that works to protect voters and preserve accountability. The good kind.

Argument #4: Party nominations are often raucous and ugly. Party primaries can get ugly, absolutely correct. Last fall's Democratic runoff between Mark Green and Fernando Ferrer is a perfect example. But that is no reason to be casual about eliminating the system that has elected our leaders for the city's history.

Elections of every kind, whether partisan or not, will eventually get ugly. Campaigns in which every candidate signs a pledge to "stick to the issues" will get ugly. Publicly funded campaigns

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overseen by good government groups and monitored by citizen review boards will eventually get ugly. I have worked on campaigns in every part of the country, from Presidential on down, and to this day the ugliest campaign I have ever seen was a non-partisan school board race in a small town in Pennsylvania.

Campaigns can be unpleasant, not because they are partisan, but because they are important. The stakes are high, and the pressure is intense, and the results matter, and sometimes we get carried away. Candidates will say things they shouldn't and do things they wish they hadn't and make decisions that they will live to regret. Not because of their party affiliation, and not because they are evil, but because they are human.

Partisan politics may not gentle. But we wouldn't want it to be.

Although there is something refreshing in any elected official trying to change the system that got him elected in the first place, this idea is not right for New York City. It is an idea that would undoubtedly change things, but to the detriment of the process.

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