

Our One-Party Town

by Susan Reefer

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"Vote, or Liberty is History," the New York City Board of Elections says on its Web site. It's a compelling phrase. The message is clear: voting is more than just a right, it is our responsibility as citizens. The need for voter participation, for civic involvement is an integral part of what maintains our democracy.

But voting rights by themselves do not define a democracy. Lots of dictatorial regimes have held elections, elections where there were no choices and the results didn't really matter.

What makes elections matter is the availability of meaningful choices, and the assurance that the results are counted, counted fairly, counted accurately, counted systematically, and comprehensively, and impartially.

In the wake of last year's contested Presidential election, many states and localities, including New York City, are taking steps to ensure that the mistakes of the past aren't repeated, or the counting mistakes, anyway.

But the other matter, the availability of meaningful choices, remains.

The United States, in spite of various third-party and independent candidacies and movements, is, basically, a two-party system. New York City is, basically, a one-party town. The Democratic Party has been the dominant political force for most of the city's history.

Of course, there are exceptions. The current Republican mayor was re-elected in 1997 with a striking margin of victory. But Mayor Giuliani was elected and re-elected with not just the Republican endorsement, but also the Liberal Party line. His politics were not so much partisan as they were personal, and it was the force of his personality, not the strength of his ideology, that was the mark of his tenure in office.

The proof of this is in the current lineup of candidates seeking to replace him. Several prominent Democrats, no prominent Republicans. Mayor Giuliani may have several lasting

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legacies, but already it is clear that a legitimate Republican presence in the city is not going to be one of them.

There is an argument that the Democratic dominance of city politics is a natural outgrowth of a liberal population. And there is some evidence to support that. In statewide elections, New York City often supports the Democratic candidate with more than 70 percent of the city-wide vote. And most large American cities are solidly Democratic: the long history of the Democratic political machines, dating back to the last century; the demographic make-up of city residents, which statistically tends Democratic; the nature of city issues, many of which tend to favor a big-government approach; all these factors lead to the dominance of the Democratic Party in most American cities.

But New York is not most American cities. New York City, even a single neighborhood in any of the five boroughs, would represent a population more diverse than most Congressional districts anywhere else in the country. The city as a whole surely is unequalled in terms of variety of thought, opinion, background, birthplace, ethnicity, race, religion, age, income level, philosophy, occupation, education, and ideology.

I just don't see why we would expect one political party to represent all those millions of hearts and minds.

Now I suppose it would be possible for one party to be truly representative of a city's character if that party had a significant range of opinions within the organization, which could be resolved during party primaries and conventions. The Democratic primaries do, quite often, represent the most competitive elections in the city.

What they don't represent is any real spectrum of ideology. The Democratic Party in New York doesn't offer voters a choice between conservative Democrats and moderate Democrats and liberal Democrats, it offers them a variety of Democrats, nearly all of whom would be considered to the left of Dick Gephardt.

So goes the vicious cycle: the city is dominated by Democratic politics; which means most people, regardless of ideology, choose to register Democratic in order to vote in the Democratic primary; and the Democratic advantage in registration discourages any Republicans from

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running for office; so the city continues to be dominated by Democratic politics.

Maybe, as I've said, the city is truly of one mind and there is no need for any alternatives.

But I can't help but wonder if some voters have been turned away from the political process in this city because unlike virtually everywhere else in American, here in the nation's largest, most powerful, most diverse, most illustrious city, you get to choose your leader from a field of one.

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