



Saturday, April 24, 2021

Citizens Union 2021 Candidate Questionnaire - City Council

Dear Candidate,

Congratulations on your decision to run for New York City Council!

Citizens Union appreciates your commitment to serve the public.

In the following pages, you will find questions regarding your positions on various reform issues and your plans for office. The form includes five short sections: serving constituent, elections and voting, police accountability, council rules and procedures, and miscellaneous.

Responses to these questions will be one of several factors Citizens Union uses to evaluate candidates running for city offices, and to issue our preference for the June primary. Read more about the method, principles, and criteria of the candidate evaluation process [here](#).

**

If you wish to be considered, please submit the questionnaire by April 17 and no later than 48 before your interview.

If you seek our support, we will need to schedule an interview with you as part of the evaluation process. Given time constraints and the limited capacity of a member-based organization, we may not be able to evaluate all contests or candidates in this election cycle.

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If you cannot complete the questionnaire in one sitting, you can click Save and Continue Later at the bottom of every page.

Once you submit the questionnaire, you will receive a confirmation email with your responses. Citizens Union will not be able to see your answers unless you submit the form. We plan to make responses to this questionnaire public on our website, printed voters directory, and other appropriate venues (your contact information will not be published).

For any questions, please email candidates@citizensunion.org

We thank you very much for your response.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Your Info

Name

Brandon Terry West

Running for Council District number

39

In which primary

Democratic

If elected, which legislative conference will you join (e.g., Democrat, Republican, other)?

Democrat

Age

36

Education

Haverford College, BA, 2007; NYU Wagner School of Public Service, MPA, 2011

Occupation/Employer

most recent position: Campaign Manager for Voting Rights and Democracy at the Center for Popular Democracy

Previous Offices, Campaigns and Community/Civic Involvement

In terms of civic organizations, I was previously involved in "Forth on Fourth Avenue" in 2012, focused on the redevelopment of 4th Avenue. I also was a co-facilitator of the Participatory Budgeting Project for District 33 for 2012-2013 (I lived in the part of Park Slope that was originally in District 33). A significant portion of the projects I worked on within PBP were in the NYCHA complexes. I also have had a leadership role at the Park Slope Food Coop since 2012. I also helped mediate a conflict and participate in conversations between VOCAL-NY and residents of the surrounding blocks (where I live) in 2018 regarding the expansion of a safe injection site at their office on 4th Avenue.

In terms of political organizations, I have been a member of New Kings Democrats for six years, two years as a member of the policy committee, one year as VP of Political Affairs and Policy, one year as VP of Policy, and two years as President. I volunteered on the Local Candidates Committee at Citizens Union from 2011-2015. I was elected co-

chair of my union (CWA-NewsGuild) at my job at CPD last year. I also am an active member of the Central Brooklyn Branch of the Democratic Socialists of America since 2017.

As a member of the Free Black Radicals, I helped organize the Occupy City Hall movement in summer 2020.

Campaign Contact Information

Website

<https://westforcouncil.com/>

Twitter

<https://twitter.com/brandonwestnyc>

Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/brandonwestnyc/>

Affirmations

Have you completed the required campaign finance filings?

Yes

Have you qualified to receive matching campaign finance funds from the CFB?

Yes

Are you willing to be interviewed by Citizens Union's Local Candidates Committee?

Yes

(Please note: interviews are prerequisites for Citizens Union's endorsements)

Signature



SERVING CONSTITUENTS

1. For most New Yorkers, the most important thing that their council members do is provide constituent services. How would you run your

office to serve your community needs? Please give specific examples.

District 39 is a complex and diverse district, and constituent services have to reflect that. My commitment is to serve everyone in my district, not just those with money, power, and access to resources. My work will center marginalized communities and build out from there. A few specific thoughts/ideas include:

–Hiring constituent liaisons with both language fluency for the most common languages in the district (Spanish, Yiddish, Bangla), who also have roots in the community, ideally. Both the language fluency and the relationships to members of those communities feel equally important to engaging constituents and making them feel that this office truly represents them.

–I plan to have monthly neighborhood assemblies in different parts of the district, purposely designed to focus on important issues in the community, but also centered around building civic knowledge and political power for those most marginalized in those communities. So a big part of it will be targeted outreach to people and community groups that have connections with those most in need, and making sure that they turn out in larger numbers. While we are still formulating plans for this, my team and I are thinking through how we can host these assemblies in other languages (rather than in English and translated into Spanish, Yiddish, Bangla etc.) so that members really have a chance to engage and their ideas can be conveyed to me in real time.

–If/when we are in a post COVID-world, I plan to take a page from powerful community organizations like Community Voices Heard, VOCAL-NY, and so on, and host gatherings where we can break bread together, dance, listen to music while also allocating some time to talk about what people are going through and what matters to them. In other words, creating spaces for building relationships - which is a central part of building power.

2. If you served as an elected official, what did you do to help your constituents during the Covid-19 pandemic? Please be specific.

N/A

3. How long have you lived in the district in which you are running for office?

I've lived in Park Slope for over a decade. Before that, I lived nearby in Prospect Heights.

4. If elected, what is the first piece of legislation you would want to introduce?

My first legislative priority in Council would be to reintroduce housing legislation that is desperately needed but this Council has yet to pass. I believe first and foremost that housing is a human right, and so it needs to be decommmodified. While much of the responsibility for this falls to the state and federal governments, the City Council does have an important role, from legislation and budget to the bully pulpit. The highest priority bills for me would: give tenants right-of-first refusal to purchase their building when it is sold, increase the value of CityFHEPS vouchers so people can actually use them, and expand the right-to-counsel in housing court to anyone making less than 400% of the federal poverty level. In a new Council, I am confident I could organize support to get these done quickly.

VOTING AND ELECTIONS

5. How would you describe the relationship between the City Council and the New York City Board of Elections? How will you use your power as a council member to improve the operations of the NYC BOE?

I have worked for years to try and put pressure on and reform the Board of Elections. As President of the New Kings Democrats, I worked to create forums and explainers to try and address the issues about the (mis)management and (dis)function of the BOE. As a Council Member, I will not approve any appointment to the Board that is not truly on merit, and I will work with state legislators to craft legislation to move away from the current format and create a better system of managing our elections. Until that is possible, I will use the insights from current and former employees of the Board to make recommendations about how to improve internal management structures, and will work with local reform-minded District Leaders in the 52nd Assembly District.

6. Do you consider yourself a supporter of Ranked Choice Voting? How will you work to maintain this system and educate voters on how it works?

I am a voting rights advocate, and worked on the campaign for Automatic Voter Registration in Albany, as well as for Ranked Choice Voting here in the city. See this op-ed I wrote in support of Ranked Choice Voting. I absolutely support RCV as a critical opportunity to allow voters a stronger voice in our elections, not to mention saving the City time and money by eliminating contested runoffs. Elections and candidates are complex, our ballot system should reflect that. In addition, as Citizens Union knows better than most, RCV opens the doors of government to more women and people of color, in other words, it strengthens our ability to have a truly representative government. Voter education and civic engagement will be a core part of my constituent engagement. There are a number of ways we can make this happen, including:

- Explainer videos in multiple languages, focusing on different aspects of voting and local government;
- Working with like minded colleagues at the Council, local advocacy groups, and community centers to hold informal teach-ins;
- Doing this outreach and education work all year round, not just in the run-up to an election;
- Working with area middle and high schools to teach soon-to-be voters classes in civic engagement and volunteer opportunities with my office;
- As far as preserving the law, if it is threatened in City Council, I will bring the same commitment and fierceness that I bring to advocacy to protecting this critical new reform.

7. The next City Council will appoint members to the city's redistricting commission and decide whether to approve or reject the commission's districting plans. In doing so, future council members will be responsible for shaping a fair political map for the coming decade. If elected, what would your approach be in proposing or voting to appoint commission members, and in considering proposed district maps?

With respect to any proposals I consider or bring forth to reforming this process, I commit to doing the research and consulting with experts as well as advocates so that I am fully informed. While the City's redistricting process has produced some

significant results in the light of other cities, I believe more can be done to make sure that the districts have less deviation and do not intentionally favor incumbents. A few thoughts to share on this critically important issue:

–Because NYC is largely democratic, the issue less one of partisanship than it is political machines.

Districts must be drawn to ensure they are not favoring any candidate.

–Districts must be truly proportional to the population.

–A commission must reflect the city’s diversity in all aspects. In addition to language and race, as CU points out, there are many other critical aspects of diversity (gender, ability, citizenship) that should be considered to ensure a representative commission.

8. Now that New York City has implemented Ranked Choice Voting, do you support moving to an Open Primary system (eliminating party primaries and establishing a non-partisan election system)?

Yes

Comments

Yes. Closed primaries benefit political parties, not people. I wished this reform came out of the Charter Revision Process in 2010, while I was interning at Citizens Union. After that, I read the book *The Scandal of Reform*, and wrote a grad school paper on non-partisan elections. We need to eliminate what are ultimately just barriers to full participation in elections.

POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY

Citizens Union has been studying police accountability and performance in New York City for more than a decade. In our reports and advocacy efforts we have urged city government to strengthen the accountability of the New York Police Department to the public and create a more cohesive system of police oversight. Previous reports include: [2016 issue brief](#), [2013 position brief on Stop and Frisk](#), [2012 report on the CCRB](#), [2008 policy statement on police misconduct](#). Citizens Union’s 2021 agenda for police reform, [published as a report](#) in March, calls for establishing a Deputy Mayor for Public Safety, allowing the CCRB to appeal the Police Commissioner’s decisions, making the appointment of Police Commissioner subject to advice and consent of the City Council, consolidating agencies with oversight authority, ending qualified immunity, and more.

9. Do you support making the appointment of the Police Commissioner subject to the advice and consent of the City Council?

Yes

Comments

Absolutely. There is no question we must have a police commissioner who is actually accountable to the people, and this would be a big step forward. If the structure was created to insulate them from political pressure, I believe justice is the exact opposite. More than most figures in local government, the Commissioner must have to answer to the community. That said, I want to be clear that ultimately I do not believe the institution of policing can be reformed. The NYPD has always found ways to escape accountability. While these incremental steps will certainly improve things, it will not change the fundamental orientation and incentives of the police. Unless we completely alter the institution of policing and what constitutes community safety, Black and brown communities in this country will never see justice and will never be safe. While this may seem hyperbolic, I think the advent of modern technology and social media has finally revealed how constant and brutal violence against the Black community in particular is in this country.

10. Who do you think should have the final say on discipline in the police department? How would you ensure penalties are imposed on police officers that commensurate with the gravity of their wrongdoing?

With the above caveat of abolition and re-imagining of public safety in mind, I will say that in the short term, the CCRB needs genuine independence from the Commissioner and from City Hall. It is laughable that the NYPD Commissioner has the last word over the “watchdog” agency that is supposed to ensure that he and his staff abide by the law. The CCRB has never been able to be truly effective because of this reason, and I know staff have been frustrated since its inception, knowing that most of their recommendations will be ignored. No agency can police itself. This is why the notion of checks and balances came about in the first place.

Now that 50-A has passed, I will use my platform to ensure that disciplinary records are made public, with full information that the public has a right to know. We also need to put similar pressure on prosecutors, who have largely gotten off the hook in the struggle against police violence, but who play a massive role in the racial injustice and cruelty of our criminal justice system. Records of those with

Brady violations, for example, should be made public. Lives depend on their honesty. Transparency won't solve the problems, but it will be a very powerful first step.

11. Do you support consolidating the three bodies that exercise oversight of the NYPD: the Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB), the Inspector General for the Police Department, the Mayor's Commission to Combat Police Corruption?

Yes

Comments

Consolidation makes sense from the perspective of efficiency and resources. However, whatever the combination of agencies, it is critical they have the independence they require to do their job. We have not seen a Mayor in NYC willing to achieve real accountability with the police, for example. So long as the NYPD exists, we need structures in place to ensure that watchdog groups are able to conduct their business without fear of recrimination or without ultimately seeing their recommendations ignored or suppressed.

12. Do you support giving the CCRB prompt and full access to footage from body-worn cameras, police officers' employment history and disciplinary records and all other document and materials in the possession of the NYPD relevant to its investigations?

Yes

Comments

Absolutely yes. Robust oversight requires all of this.

13. Feel free to add any other policy proposals you support in regards to police accountability, misconduct, and oversight, or to effective policing including functions, training, and community relations.

I don't want to repeat my previous comments, so suffice to say that for many years there has been a commitment to, and belief in, incremental change in criminal justice reform, and the idea that additional training could solve the problem of overpolicing, violence, and sometimes murder of

Black and brown people at the hands of the police. I think it is safe to say that many of us in this country are done trying to reform a fundamentally racist & increasingly militaristic agency, one that we fund with public money. Black people and Black children have the right to be safe and free. I believe only abolition and radically reimagining public safety (rather than “policing”) w/ new institutions will make this right a reality.

HOW CITY COUNCIL WORKS

One of the first items on the next City Council’s agenda will be adopting its rules of proceedings. Those rules will have a substantial effect on the ability of lawmakers to advance their goals, and can send a signal to New Yorkers about elected officials’ commitment to making the Council more representative, deliberative, accountable, and efficient. In the last decade, the Council took important steps to reform its rules, including a 2014 overhaul by then-Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and a 2018 administrative change by Speaker Corey Johnson. These reforms have made the body more democratic, given members a more meaningful role in the legislative process, ensured greater equity in the allocation of discretionary funding, and made drafting procedures more transparent. Still, more work is needed enable members to function more effectively and independently of the speaker, and to increase public participation.

14. Do you support allowing bills with strong support to go through the committee process and put to a vote on the floor without needing the permission of the speaker?

Yes

Comments

YES. There is no justification for the concentration of power w/ leadership in legislative bodies. The whole point of a democracy is to enable shared decision-making that represents the majority. I strongly support this.

15. Do you support reducing the overall number of committees so members can participate more meaningfully in fewer issues?

Yes

Comments

So long as the breadth of important issues are addressed by the Council, I definitely agree the ability of Members to pare down committee assignments and go deep on issues would be a huge benefit to the public.

16. Do you support making all actions designed to influence any City Council outcome, including the choice of speaker, reportable as a lobbying expense?

Yes

Comments

Yes. There are too many channels of influence that remain open despite a robust system of public financing for campaigns. Real estate, for example, remains a reigning power. We need disclosure, disclosure, and more disclosure if we are to reveal the levels of types of influence, and ultimately shut them down.

17. The Council Speaker controls the allocation of a large share of the Council's overall discretionary spending, and in 2020 it was reported that the Speaker used this power to "punish" council members who opposed the 2021 budget. How would you balance control and order in the council with reasonable dissent?

It is definitely critical to chart your course carefully, to not go from zero to 180, as they say, but to determine what is the most strategic and productive way to make change. One of my strengths as a leader is my ability to remain balanced even in high pressure, emotionally charged situations. I am clear about my values, but I also do my homework, making sure to know the facts and understand the issue before I take a position.

Examples such as these, where the Speaker punishes Members who disagree with him, however, demand that individuals stand up and dissent. I would not hesitate to use my platform to speak out about these kinds of political machinations that do such a disservice, ultimately, to New Yorkers, and that have no place in an honest government.

I will also add that my whole career has been a balancing act between maintaining "order and control" with the need to publicly dissent. That was true of my time at New Kings Democrats (see my response in Question 20), when we challenged the Brooklyn political machine, and it was true in my recent role as a union leader of my local chapter of CWA Newsguild. It is a balancing act, there is no question, but if I firmly believe if you are clear on your values you will always be able to find the right path forward.

18. The ability of citizens and advocates to make their voices heard in City Hall has been severely curtailed since the council and city government shifted to work remotely. How would you propose to improve community engagement and public participation while using remote technology (in public hearings, meetings, etc.), particularly to ensure equity in participation?

This is a very important issue. During meetings on the Gowanus Rezoning, discussion was often limited or cut off entirely, so community members couldn't communicate their concerns, questions, or objections. We need a new set of ground rules,

clearly, for running these meetings, and we need to figure out how to address differential access to technology. While this isn't an immediate solution, we need universal broadband. This doesn't solve the issue of access to laptops or other electronic equipment, but it is a start. Also, we need to employ staff who can condense and review hearings and edit them in a way that is easily accessible to a wide variety of people and produce short content at a regular basis. This is what the general populace expect with news, entertainment and sports, there is no reason we can't better share the inner workings of our committee process to more people, especially as more people are home. As far as ground rules, perhaps a non-partisan commission should be created to come up with some guidelines (quickly, not a year long commission) so that we can start to implement them as soon as possible.

MISCELLANEOUS

19. New York City has suffered an immensurable loss from the pandemic and its effects and the city's economy, social life, and culture. What is your path to recovery from this crisis?

In this crisis of epic proportions, we first need borrowing power and new sources of revenue. We had a momentous victory (though still much more to be done) at the State level, finally passing increased taxes on the wealthy via income tax. Since the majority of millionaires and billionaires live in New York City, we must ensure that this tax revenue goes to the communities hardest hit by COVID, and to the kinds of deep investments that start to transform this city: including building deeply affordable, permanent housing, decades overdue repairs and upgrades to NYCHA buildings, repairs and expansion of public transit.

City Council also needs to continue to put the heat on Albany to go further: many of the key reforms called for by the Tax the Rich campaign did not pass, but they must. There is no reason we should not tax stock buybacks, for instance, except that it may impact some public officials campaign coffers. At the local level, the Council can create more and better jobs with the expansion of programs like universal pre-K, investing in human services, and increasing targeted training and opportunities for

workers to make a just transition towards a renewable economy. Bold action at the state level has opened up a world of opportunities and funds for renewable infrastructure. New York City is already suffering from the effects of climate change and we need aggressive action to mitigate the impact. With that aggressive action will come thousands of new jobs, and we must make sure these are well paying, union jobs and that all communities and contractors have the opportunity to be a part of this, not just the well connected. Finally, we also need to continue transform the infrastructure of government to be truly democratic. Increased transparency at the city level, limiting the influence of real estate developers, and upward pressure on Albany to go much further with respect to campaign finance reform. Even at the city level, we can make more changes to the campaign finance system so that it is easier to participate in, and make it more progressive and lower the matching threshold even more.

20. What experience have you had, if any, with good government and reform issues? (e.g. voting and elections, campaign finance, ethics, police accountability, government transparency and oversight). If you've worked to advance these goals, we'd love to hear about it.

As an organizer, an advocate, and a past president of a political club I have been active in all of these areas. These are the issues that brought me to the difficult work of reform. My commitment to a robust democracy and a compassionate society is what keeps me in this work.

Voting Rights: As previously mentioned, I served on the Steering Committee of Let NY Vote, and helped to pass long awaited voting reforms, which culminated the following year in AVR. While at the Center for Popular Democracy, I supported grassroots organizations and coalitions around the country to protect access to the ballot and democracy reform.

Campaign Finance Reform: In 2019, I also worked with the coalition to achieve a statewide system of campaign finance reform, which ultimately came to fruition through a legislative commission. While there is further to go, this was an important first step to breaking the power of money over politics.

Police Accountability: In the summer of 2020, I helped organize the Occupy City Hall protests,

along with other Black organizers. This is some of the work that I am most proud of, both for what we were able to organize and what it signified: masses of people across the city not only fed up with racist police violence, but understanding the direct connection to budget justice. Ultimately City Hall let us down, simply moving money around rather than cutting the NYPD's bloated budget, but the lessons the public learned about the importance of the city budget and that is a process that we all have a right to have a voice in, were invaluable. If elected, I will continue to focus on budget justice.

Elections/Party Politics: I was elected President of the New Kings Democrats, an organization created specifically to challenge entrenched machine politics in Brooklyn - which put me in the political crosshairs throughout my leadership there. At NKD, I led the "Rep Your Block" campaign to encourage people to run for their local County Committee to increase civic engagement and civic power (resulting in more than 500 people running for these spots in one year alone) and setting up spaces for dialogues across communities on how to improve our city.

21. What are the top three campaign promises or goals, and what action will you take to achieve them if elected? Feel free to reference an answer above rather than restate it.

First: Budget Justice: The “cuts” made to the 2021 budget were a joke. In the Council, I would advocate for a budget cut to NYPD of \$3 billion. This should come from headcount, overtime, school safety agents, and capital projects (particularly the most problematic and dubiously legal ones, such as facial recognition software, which was recently used to target a protestor at his own home). I have worked for the City’s Office of Management and Budget as well as the City Council Finance Committee, so I understand the complexities of the budgeting process and know that defunding the NYPD is realistic.

Second: Fully Fund & Desegregate Our Schools: The biggest battles for desegregation are the admission procedures, and adequate funding for the schools in general. Also school choice is very much a contributor to segregation. I will fight for desegregation by advocating for school district rezonings, like the one going on in District 15, that will be a step towards equity. The City Council has very little structural ability to influence what the DOE does or doesn’t do. In a system of Mayoral control, with the State holding legislative power over most areas of education, our power rests in the budget and the bully pulpit. We can and must use our voice to uplift the importance of desegregation. We can prioritize resources for other districts to replicate the work done in D15. We can fund a demonstration program for schools to experiment with whole-school enrichment. We can better financially incentivize academically-integrated schools by changing the weights in the Fair Student Funding formula. Most importantly, we can work to make sure that every school has access to the resources and funding it needs to meet the educational and social needs of its students.

Third: Radically Overhaul the Land Use Process Through Charter Revision: I want to work with the Speaker to create a Charter Revision Commission focused on land use, so that ULURP and the land use process can be radically changed to encourage the decommodification of housing. This would include requiring a Citywide Comprehensive Planning Framework that balances citywide needs with neighborhood priorities. A comprehensive planning framework will outline growth targets and anti-displacement strategies, analyze neighborhood needs, and include necessary siting of public facilities, all while leaving the implementation strategy to a community process. This can mean community and worker-led planning that actually gets implemented, using inclusive, democratic processes that go beyond participatory budgeting to establish neighborhood priorities.

ADDITIONAL INFO

Please feel free to attach any additional information such as resume, campaign brochures, or issues statements.

What else would you like us to know about yourself?

I’m the son of union workers – public school teachers – and from childhood I understood the power of organizing and collective bargaining, and was inspired by it. I’m also a Black man, and my very existence is political and politicized. These realities have inspired me on my career path and ultimately, in my decision to run for office. I have

seen government from the inside and out, I have been in the streets with my community and in City Hall with staff behind the scenes. I understand how the levers of power work, but I also feel a deep responsibility and commitment to changing the game so that we don't have to fight for basic rights and representation.

As a Council Member I will be unabashed and unrelenting about centering the most marginalized, about reimagining our systems, and about governing with information as well as compassion.

Citizens Union has had a profound impact on my life and how I see politics. For my entire life, I knew working to reform and improve democracy was my calling, which is why I went to graduate school, and interned at Citizens Union in 2010. Through that experience, I developed relationships that I still have today with the staff at the time. I even returned during my last year of graduate school and worked on a project through a course and provided CU with recommendations on how to better manage its relationships and programs with its members. That summer I also became a dues-paying member of CU, and joined the Local Candidates Committee, where I volunteered in CU's endorsement process for the next five years. I remember clearly interviewing many current elected officials over the years, and learning so much about how politics works and how we need to change it from the inside. I also was very involved in CU's campaign to support the Constitutional Convention, at a time where it had stiff opposition from other organizations. I look back fondly at the time organizing and trying to find ways to reach people on a real opportunity to bring strong reforms into the state constitution, even though I was the victim of political retribution, and was fired from City Council Finance as a result. Despite this, I believe the work behind the scenes to open up our democracy and be true to the goal of reforming New York in the face of political machines and entrenched interests is very important. That is why I became president of New Kings Democrats, and that is a catalyst for my race for City Council.

Please review your answers by clicking PREVIEW ANSWERS below. You can submit the questionnaire at the bottom of the preview page by clicking SUBMIT.

Once you click SUBMIT, you will receive a confirmation email with your responses. If you don't see the email, please check your spam box.

If you have any further questions, you may contact us at candidates@citizensunion.org.