



**CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK**  
**Testimony before the 2025 City Charter Revision Commission**  
**Public Input Session on Government Reform**  
**February 24, 2025**

Dear members of the 2025 Charter Revision Commission. My name is Ben Weinberg, and I am the Director of Public Policy at Citizens Union. We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony before you again, and commend the Commission, which is focused on housing issues, for holding two hearings on government reform.

Citizens Union is a nonpartisan good government organization dedicated to making democracy work for all New Yorkers. For over a century, we have worked to foster transparency, accountability, and voter participation in local government.

Today, Citizens Union published a report outlining a series of recommended reforms aimed at strengthening democracy, enhancing ethics laws, and improving the system of checks and balances within City government. While this testimony highlights key proposals, we encourage the Commission to review our full report for additional recommendations and welcome any questions on such proposals.

The full is attached below this testimony.

**Strengthening Democracy and Elections**

The accompanying slide illustrates an alarming trend: Voter turnout in New York City elections has been on a steady decline for decades. In the most recent mayoral election, fewer than one in four registered voters cast a ballot—a historic low. Despite successful efforts to make voting more accessible, participation in local elections has not improved significantly. To reverse this trend, we propose two critical reforms:

First, moving city elections to even years. New York City's odd-year election cycle suppresses voter turnout up and down the ballot. That turnout is not only low, but also an older, wealthier, and whiter than New York City as a whole. Research and experience from other jurisdictions show that aligning city elections with even-year federal and state elections would significantly increase participation. The Legislature moved local elections in many parts of the state to even years, and there is an ongoing campaign to amend the state constitution to allow for this change for cities. We urge the Commission to support these efforts and to examine the necessary Charter amendments that would be required should the constitutional change be enacted.

Second, opening our primary system. New York City's closed partisan primaries exclude over one million unaffiliated voters, a number that continues to grow, as the slide presented show. Surveys indicate that these voters are eager to participate in primaries, and we should allow them to take part. To address this issue, we propose adopting a top-two primary system, as successfully implemented in California and Washington. This system would increase voter participation, enhance electoral competition, and reduce political extremism.

### **Enhancing Checks and Balances**

A glaring omission in the City Charter has become increasingly apparent: there is no clear process for removing a mayor under exceptional circumstances involving serious misconduct. Currently, the sole authority for mayoral removal rests with the governor, who wields absolute discretion in this matter. Citizens Union strongly believes the Charter should establish a practical, fair, and balanced removal mechanism.

We acknowledge that it is easier said than done. While impeachment is traditionally a two-part legislative process, New York City's unicameral system presents unique challenges. Recall elections are often use, but those have a mixed history. Additionally, safeguards must be put in place to prevent the process from becoming overly politicized. We are developing a detailed proposal to address these concerns and look forward to engaging with the Commission on this important issue.

### **Improving Ethics and Oversight**

Our report outlines several ways to strengthen New York City's anti-corruption regulatory framework, with a particular focus on bolstering the Conflicts of Interest Board (COIB). Despite its critical role in ensuring ethical governance, COIB has faced budget stagnation and staff reductions at a time when oversight is most urgently needed.

A fundamental issue is that COIB's funding is controlled by the very officials it is tasked with regulating. Similar tensions have led past charter commissions to grant independent or protected budgets to agencies such as the Campaign Finance Board, the Public Advocate, and the Civilian Complaint Review Board. We recommend that the Commission take similar action by providing COIB with an independent budget and a significantly increased allocation to enhance its capacity.

Furthermore, we propose expanding COIB's powers, including transferring lobbying oversight from the City Clerk's office to COIB. This would align the city's approach with that of the state, where ethics enforcement is centralized under a single agency. Additional measures to strengthen COIB's authority are detailed in our full report.

Citizens Union appreciates the Commission's dedication to improving our city's governance and democratic processes. We urge the Commission to give serious consideration to these recommendations and to explore the full range of reforms outlined in our report. We welcome any questions and look forward to continued engagement on these critical issues.