



**CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK**  
**Testimony to the 2025 Charter Revision Commission - Open Primaries**  
**Brooklyn Public Input Session**  
**May 19, 2025**

Dear Members of the 2025 Charter Revision Commission. My name is John Avlon, and I am the Chairman of Citizens Union. I want to thank you for holding these hearings and including election reforms in your preliminary report. I will focus my remarks today on open primaries.

New York has a primary problem. But it is within your power to help us fix it this fall.

It's because too many elections are decided in low-turnout, closed partisan primaries, which are disproportionately dominated by special interests - especially in odd-year local elections.

For decades, our city and state has suffered from falling voter turnout – especially in odd-year local elections. And more than 1 million independent voters in New York City are effectively disenfranchised – because they are barred from participating in the low-turnout, closed partisan primaries where most elections are decided.

This is a prime driver of polarization and hyper-partisanship – it empowers special interests and breeds cynicism on the side.

But in 2025, New Yorkers may have a historic chance to change the game by voting for open primaries – if this Charter Revision Commission puts forward their courageous recommendation to all voters.

It's hard to overstate how this would permanently change New York politics for the better.

Consider this: In 2021, just 9% of all registered voters in New York City cast a ballot for Eric Adams in the Democratic primary for Mayor. Then Adams won the general election over his Republican opponent in a landslide – which means that a small sliver of the electorate effectively chose the next mayor of America's largest city.

But this is business as usual in New York politics. In 2013, less 7% of all registered New York voters cast a ballot for Bill DeBlasio in the Democratic primary, kicking off his 8-year mayoralty.

In fact, voter participation in New York City's municipal elections has been dropping for decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, voter turnout was routinely above 50%. But it hasn't been above 30% since 2009.

This is bad for our democracy. It leads directly to apathy and alienation instead of civic engagement. But it doesn't need to be this way. There is a better way that is tried, tested and true.

In fact, more than 80% of mayoral races in the nation are chosen in some kind of non-partisan election instead of a closed partisan primary – including 42 of America's 50 largest cities. States like California, Washington, Nebraska, and Alaska and several cities in Ohio, including Cincinnati, have recently adopted open primaries and seen more competitive elections, where candidates engage a broader section of the electorate over the whole course of the campaign.

According to the New York City Campaign Finance Board “research shows primary systems that are open to unaffiliated voters or entirely nonpartisan tend to result in higher voter turnout and more representative electorates.”<sup>1</sup> Other studies show that these kinds of reforms lead to less extreme lawmakers.<sup>2</sup>

New York deserves no less. Elections should be fair and open to all citizens. After all, representative elections have representative results.

That's why Citizens Union believes strongly that New York should adopt an open primary system—where all voters, regardless of party, can cast a ballot in the primary, and the top two candidates move on to the general election. Under this system, candidates can still list their party on the ballot, but every voter gets a say.

This will not just complement the Ranked Choice Voting reforms that have been put in place – it will complete them. From the kickoff of their campaigns, candidates would be compelled to reach out to all voters and not just play to the base and cater to special interests.

It will reduce incentives for negative campaigning, prevent “spoiler” outcomes, and promote more diverse, competitive races. Voters would get a clear choice in the general election, and more voices would be heard throughout the process. It's simple—and it works.

Here's another reason to advance this essential reform: New York City's closed primary system currently shuts out nearly 22% of the electorate simply because they're independent and have chosen not to enroll in a political party.

These unaffiliated voters are disproportionately young and diverse. In fact, a 2024 post-election analysis by the New York City Campaign Finance Board found that 49% of registered independent voters are under the age of 40. And their numbers are on the rise: since 2016, independent affiliation has risen 3% while Democratic Party registration fell by more than 2% and GOP registration held flat.

Research shows that nearly 90% of independent voters would participate in primaries if given the opportunity.<sup>3</sup> So if we want increased civic participation, why are we turning them away?

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<sup>1</sup> New York City Campaign Finance Board, 2024 Voter Analysis Report

[https://www.nycfb.info/pdf/2024\\_VoterAnalysisReport.pdf](https://www.nycfb.info/pdf/2024_VoterAnalysisReport.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Jenesse Miller, USC News, May 14, 2020. Top-two and Open Primary Elections Produce Less Extreme Lawmakers <https://today.usc.edu/top-two-open-primary-elections-less-extreme-lawmakers-usc-study/>

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Goff, Common Cause New York. November 2023. Independent State of Mind: The Rise of New York's Unaffiliated Voters. <https://www.commoncause.org/new-york/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Independent-State-of-Mind-The-Rise-of-New-Yorks-Unaffiliated-Voters.pdf>

Now New York has a once in a generation opportunity to fix this broken system. We should seize this historic moment, when frustration with the status quo is high, and place a question on the November ballot proposing a system that opens up our primary system to all voters.

This is not a radical idea but a common sense reform that expands access, strengthens accountability, and gives power back to the people. As former Mayor Fiorello La Guardia famously said, "There is no Democratic or Republican way of cleaning the streets." Now is the time to open up our primaries so all New Yorkers have real and equal say in choosing who leads their city.