



CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Testimony to the 2025 Charter Revision Commission
Manhattan Public Input Session
July 7, 2025

Dear commissioners,

My name is Grace Rauh, and I am the Executive Director of Citizens Union. I am here to comment on the two proposed election reforms in your final report.

First, we appreciate your inclusion of even-year elections and strongly support placing a related ballot question before voters this November. Changing the timing of local elections would be truly transformative. It would bring more New Yorkers into the political process, encourage civic engagement at the local level, and help create a city government that better reflects the people of New York City.

Second, we urge the Commission to listen to the many voices you heard over five months of public hearings and advance a ballot question to open up New York City's primary system. It is time to move away from closed partisan primaries, which exclude more and more independent voters every election cycle. The open primary system we are discussing today would allow all registered voters to participate in a non-partisan primary with the top two vote getters proceeding to a general election.

We'd like to respond to some of the concerns raised by those opposing this reform.

It has been argued that open primaries would reduce the voting power of minority voters, and in particular Black voters. The analysis conducted by voting rights expert Dr. Lisa Handley and former U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch concluded that the open primary top two system would "not diminish turnout among any particular protected class, given that the share of voters from any protected class is roughly comparable" when we look at who would be eligible to vote in a closed primary versus an open one. The analysis also found that open primaries would not make it more difficult for a Black or Hispanic-preferred candidate to win, and in some cases it may even help.

Another argument is that open primaries would hurt progressive candidates and help moderates. It is unfortunate that this basic election reform, which is widely used in major cities across the country, has been politicized and perceived as a tool to achieve a certain electoral outcome. This is really about improving participation and representation. Any speculations about potential partisan impacts rest on faulty assumptions.

Open or nonpartisan primaries have helped elect mayors like Karen Bass in Los Angeles, Michelle Wu in Boston, Brandon Johnson in Chicago, and Tishaura Jones in St. Louis. Meanwhile, New York City's closed primaries have produced a wide range of winners across the political spectrum, including conservatives, moderates, progressives, Republicans, and Democrats.

In fact, Zohran Mamdani's victory in our Democratic mayoral primary was fueled by strong support from neighborhoods that have some of the highest concentration of unaffiliated voters, like Elmhurst, Richmond Hill, Jamaica Hills, Ozone Park, Ridgewood, and Astoria in Queens; Bensonhurst, Bath Beach, and Bay Ridge in Southern Brooklyn; and Westchester Square, Parkchester, and Norwood in the Bronx. This overlap should come as no surprise. Mamdani's primary victory drew significant backing from young voters and Asian voters—two groups that are most likely to be registered as unaffiliated voters.

The point is this: framing this reform as one that benefits or harms any one political faction is wrong and misguided.

A third concern by those opposing this reform is that it comes too soon after the implementation of Ranked Choice Voting and would therefore be confusing. However, the change to the voting experience would be modest. Voting method, ballot design, and tabulation – they will all stay roughly the same. The only difference would be that the June ballot would include party affiliations. In addition, approving this reform in November 2025 gives election officials, campaigns, civic groups, and the media nearly four years to prepare before the next citywide cycle—ample time for voter education.

We are attentive to all these valid concerns about election changes. Yet, we believe the question before the Commission is whether we will continue to exclude one-fifth of our city from participating in the most decisive election of every municipal cycle. Right now there are more than one million New Yorkers shut out of primary elections.

We strongly believe all New Yorkers deserve a meaningful say in choosing their leaders.