

Restoring Public Trust and Cleaning City Hall: What Should the Next Mayor Do?

Cronyism and Conflicts of Interest in Appointments

Our solutions Recruit and maintain professional, best-in-the-field senior officials
Require “revolving door-in” safeguards for incoming officials
Disclose conflicts of interest guidance for high-ranking officials
Commit to never use City legal resources for personal legal matters

Supercharged and Under-Regulated Lobbying

Our solutions Disclose meetings between high-ranking officials and lobbyists
Apply a cooling-off period for campaign consultants-turned-lobbyists
Limit bundling by lobbyists and those doing business with the City
Strengthen lobbying oversight by moving enforcement to COIB

Underfunded and Weakened Watchdog Agencies

Our solutions Fully fund COIB, DOI, CCRB
Commit to providing materials for police and jail watchdogs
Ensure independence and capacity of Campaign Finance Board
Establish a procurement ethics task force

Gutting Transparency Standards at City Hall

Our solutions Improve FOIL reporting and responses across City government
Restore press access to information and space

Power Struggles at the Expense of the Public

Our solutions Commit not to block ballot questions and support Charter reform
Support establishing a mayoral removal mechanism over misconduct
Clean up rules concerning electioneering on the public dime

How to Restore Public Trust and Clean City Hall: Proposals for the Next Administration

When the next mayor steps into Gracie Mansion on January 1st, 2026, he will face a city government in urgent need of reform. The outgoing mayoral administration leaves behind a legacy tarnished by corruption scandals, weakened accountability, and eroded public trust. Restoring integrity to City Hall will require more than a change in leadership - it demands a renewed commitment to honest governance and ethical standards.

Citizens Union has long been a driving force behind efforts to improve government and strengthen democracy in New York City. For over a century, we have championed major reforms in ethics and anti-corruption laws, campaign finance, transparency, and civic engagement. In recent years, [City Hall's failure to uphold public integrity](#) opened the door to misconduct and deepened New Yorkers' cynicism.

The next mayor must reverse this trend and establish a culture of accountability in city government. This report is a roadmap designed to help achieve that goal: concrete steps to rebuild trust, strengthen oversight, and ensure that public officials are held to the highest standards of conduct.

Problem: Cronyism and Conflicts of Interest in Appointments

The next administration must make high-ranking appointments based on merit, not favoritism. This is necessary to reverse a troubling trend seen in the outgoing administration, from the attempted appointment of the mayor's brother as Deputy Police Commissioner to a series of top advisors and officials who were implicated in corruption investigations.

Solutions

- **Recruit and maintain professional, best-in-the-field senior officials**

New York City government should attract the best and the brightest, but a staffing crisis and unprofessional personnel decisions have led many leaders to avoid public service. Appointments of top City Hall officials and senior policymakers set the tone across agencies, signaling the skills and character valued in government. Recruitment, hiring, and retention based on merit, experience, and the public interest will lead to a stronger, more effective city government.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Turn the page on cronyism by appointing top officials based on their experience and commitment to public service.

- **Require "revolving door-in" safeguards for incoming officials**

Incoming public servants must sever ties and divest from companies that do business with the City, but they are not required to recuse themselves from matters involving former business partners, clients, or employers. This loophole was exploited under the current administration, most prominently



by Frank Carone, Mayor Adams' first Chief of Staff. U.S. Presidents required federal appointees to pledge a two-year recusal period for dealing with contracts and regulations related to former employers or clients, and New York State's ethics commission applies a "reverse two-year bar" on conflicts of interest. Citizens Union has drafted legislation to close this "revolving door-in" loophole, and a bill has been [introduced](#) by Council Member Lincoln Restler. This policy has [broad support](#).

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Establish a cooling-off policy for high-ranking incoming officials to prohibit them from working on matters involving former clients or interests.

- **Disclose conflicts of interest guidance for high-ranking officials**

Mayor Adams [reversed](#) a de Blasio-era policy encouraging the disclosure of certain ethics guidance provided by the Conflicts of Interest Board (COIB) to commissioners. Because COIB's advice is confidential, senior officials scrutinized by the media for questionable conduct can—and have—claimed COIB approval or mischaracterized the guidance they received. Some have falsely claimed they are prohibited from disclosing ethics advice to avoid scrutiny.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Require commissioners and high-ranking City Hall officials to disclose COIB guidance (with privacy protections) if they cite it in response to public questioning about apparent conflict of interests.

- **Commit to never use City legal resources for personal legal matters**

Though it is illegal to use City resources for non-City matters, some high-ranking officials have tried to do so. For example, the mayor's counsel [represented](#) him at an OATH hearing concerning rat violations at his private property, and the Corporation Counsel reportedly resigned, in part, [over her refusal](#) to represent him in personal lawsuits. Legal representation for public officials can be nuanced, but some cases clearly fall outside the scope of public service.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Publicly commit to not use the Law Department for legal proceedings unrelated to their public duties.

Problem: Supercharged and Under-Regulated Lobbying

Lobbyists, major donors, and those with business interests before the City receive disproportionate access and influence. The next administration has a chance to govern with a clean slate, unbound by traditional power players and big-money interests.

Solutions

- **Disclose meetings between high-ranking officials and lobbyists**

The Adams administration [reversed](#) a de Blasio-era policy requiring commissioners to disclose meetings with registered lobbyists. Although that policy was poorly implemented, its early reversal



signaled that government influence could remain hidden from public view. A different message must be sent.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Restore and strengthen a City Hall policy requiring disclosure of meetings between high-ranking officials and lobbyists.

- **Apply a cooling-off period for campaign consultants-turned-lobbyists**

Citizens Union has long raised the alarm about firms offering both campaign and lobbying services. Lobbyists can work on a campaign and then immediately lobby the elected official on behalf of clients, turning political relationships into financial gain. Millions are spent on such dual-purpose firms. Council Member Gale Brewer has introduced [legislation](#) to address this conflict.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Prohibit City Hall officials from meeting with lobbyists who worked on the mayor's campaign during the administration's first two years.

- **Limit donation bundling by lobbyists and those doing business with the City**

Registered lobbyists and people with City business can bypass contribution limits by “bundling” donations from others, a loophole that gives those insiders greater access to officeholders. Problems with intermediaries were evident during the 2021 and 2025 campaigns. Legislation to [curb lobbyist bundling](#) has been introduced in the City Council.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Support legislation limiting how much registered lobbyists and individuals doing business with the City can bundle in donations.

- **Strengthen lobbying oversight by moving enforcement to COIB**

Currently, lobbying oversight resides in the City Clerk's Lobbying Bureau, a small unit that performs [minimal compliance](#) work and reports to the City Council—the very body being lobbied. COIB's expertise in ethics oversight makes it a better fit to be a lobbying watchdog. Good government groups widely support this move, which must be accompanied with sufficient budget to sustain this new responsibility.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Support transferring lobbying oversight and enforcement from the City Clerk to the Conflicts of Interest Board.



Problem: Underfunded and Weakened Watchdog Agencies

New York City's independent oversight agencies have been crucial in exposing many of the ethical misconduct cases in recent years and holding powerful officials accountable. But their ability to do so has been hindered by budget constraints, limited access to information, and legal loopholes. This is a critical moment to strengthen the ethical watchdogs that serve as a bulwark against abuse of power.

Solutions

- **Proper funding for the Conflicts of Interest Board, the Department of Investigation, and the Civilian Complaint Review Board**

Under the auspices of cost saving initiatives, these agencies have had budgets frozen or cut, limiting their core functions. Since 2019, DOI has lost more than a quarter of its employees, and COIB's staff has been reduced by 16%, [weakening](#) the anti-corruption agencies. The CCRB suspended certain investigations and closed 1,440 complaints without full review. While long-term solutions include protected budgets for oversight bodies, an immediate first step is restoring adequate funding.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Commit to fully funding the Conflicts of Interest Board, Department of Investigation, and Civilian Complaint Review Board.

- **Commit to providing materials for police and jail watchdogs**

The CCRB has [struggled to obtain](#) timely access to records and materials from the NYPD, impeding its investigations. The current administration has further limited transparency by [blocking](#) the Board of Correction (BOC) from accessing critical footage related to jail conditions. These roadblocks undermine public trust and prevent accountability for misconduct. A more transparent and cooperative approach is needed.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Commit to full cooperation with police and jail oversight bodies, including the timely release of materials needed for investigations.

- **Ensure the continued independence and capacity of the NYC Campaign Finance Board**

New York City's public campaign financing system, widely regarded as a national model, has allowed grassroots candidates to compete with those backed by big-money donors. It prioritizes small-dollar contributions, encourages public participation, and reduces the influence of super PACs and special interests. However, the system has faced sustained political attacks, including from Mayor Adams, who has sought to undermine its authority. Any interference threatens to weaken one of the city's most effective tools for clean elections.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Publicly commit to maintaining the full independence, staffing, and authority of the Campaign Finance Board and defend it from political interference.

- **Establish a procurement ethics task force**

The City's procurement system—especially under emergency orders—has emerged as a weak point in its anti-corruption infrastructure. Recent scandals have demonstrated how emergency contracts and opaque processes can be exploited for personal gain or awarded without proper vetting. While reducing red tape is important, it should not come at the cost of oversight and integrity. Procurement reform is complex and requires thoughtful, expert input.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Establish a procurement ethics and efficiency task force in partnership with the Comptroller, procurement officials, and ethics experts, which would evaluate contracting practices, assess vulnerabilities, and recommend reforms.

Problem: Gutting Transparency Standards at City Hall

The outgoing administration has dramatically reversed prior standards of transparency when it comes to access to public information and government proceedings, eroding a core principle of democratic accountability. A more open government is sorely needed.

Solutions

- **Improve FOIL reporting and responses across City government**

Public access to records through Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) requests is frequently delayed, with some agencies taking over 400 days on average to respond. These delays discourage public inquiry and reduce transparency. All agencies should be required to use the City's OpenRecords portal, and the City must prioritize improving tracking and response times. Citizens Union, and nearly two-thirds of council members, support [legislation](#) to improve FOIL responsiveness.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Commit to reducing FOIL response times and require all City agencies to adopt the OpenRecords portal, ensuring greater transparency and reporting.

- **Restore press access to information and space**

The Adams administration has taken steps to restrict access to the press, including reducing briefings, encrypting police radio channels, barring reporters from press conferences, and attempting to relocate reporters from City Hall and 1 Police Plaza. These actions limit journalists' ability to report on government activities and erode public trust.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Rebuild a productive and open relationship with the New York City press corps, and commit to regular press briefings and meaningful access for reporters.



Problem: Power Struggles at the Expense of the Public

Recent years have been marked by a tense relationship between the legislative and executive branches, with frequent clashes over policy, appointments, and jurisdiction. While disagreements between mayors and city councils are expected, the gamesmanship has undermined the public interest. The next mayor and City Council can prioritize cooperation and long-term reforms that foster collaboration rather than political self-interest.

Solutions

- **Commit not to block ballot questions and support Charter reform**

All recent mayors, including the current one, misused their control over the Charter Revision Commission to remove ballot questions proposed by the City Council or citizens. This undemocratic maneuver undermines public engagement and encourages cross-branch rivalry. The process of amending the City Charter through a referendum should be open, deliberative, provide sufficient time for meaningful public input, and be safeguarded to prevent rushed or politically motivated revisions. The legislature recently [passed a bill](#) removing the mayor's power to bump ballot questions.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Pledge not to use mayoral authority to block ballot questions proposed by the Council or voters, and support reforms that protect the integrity of the Charter revision process.

- **Support establishing a mayoral removal mechanism over misconduct**

New York City lacks a practical, balanced, and clearly defined mechanism to remove a mayor under exceptional circumstances related to misconduct, as has been evident in the past year. Citizens Union [developed a hybrid and fair removal process](#) that ensures accountability and maintains democratic safeguards, involving clear criteria, due process, action by the Council, and a referendum. This proposal is [being considered](#) by the Council's Commission to Strengthen Local Democracy.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Publicly support the establishment of a formal process to remove a mayor in cases of serious misconduct.

- **Clean up rules concerning electioneering on the public dime**

The prohibition on elected officials and public servants using government resources for electioneering has been steadily eroding in recent years—particularly when the legislative and executive branches find themselves on opposing sides of a public referendum. This erosion is largely due to legal loopholes in the enforcement and oversight of City Charter rules. The Charter should be amended to explicitly authorize COIB to enforce key ethical guidelines that safeguard taxpayer funds from being misused for political purposes.

WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR CAN DO:

Support legislation that empowers COIB to enforce legal restrictions on government-funded electioneering.