



Nonpartisan Elections: Electorate Less Informed, Campaigns Less Competitive

By David R. Jones
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In 2003, Mayor Bloomberg attempted to eliminate the role of political parties in city elections. The mayor got his nonpartisan elections proposal on the ballot that year and 70 percent of the voters rejected it.

In a nonpartisan election, candidates listed on the ballot are not identified with any political party. New Yorkers didn't accept the mayor's argument that nonpartisan elections would increase voter turnout. This is not just a progressive issue. Last month, *The Wall Street Journal* published an opinion piece titled "Will Nonpartisan Elections Make for Dumber Voters?" In its view, "...reformers better watch what they wish for: an academic study warns that nonpartisan elections create a **less** informed electorate, resulting in less competitive local elections."

The administration's drive for nonpartisan elections comes at a time when people of color hold more public offices than at any time in our city's history. They are a majority in the City Council. A primary reason for this is the party system. Since few African American or Latino candidates can bankroll their own campaigns, nonpartisan elections could threaten to undo this accomplishment.

A lack of party identification reduces voter interest and makes it more difficult to keep track of candidates' positions on the issues. In contrast, a party label conveys instant facts to people, especially in New York where many political parties outside the two-party system are very active. Low-income and immigrant voters are often not able to get easily understood election information from other sources. In New York City, these voters are overwhelmingly people of color.

Political parties have distinctly divergent views on the minimum wage, consumer protection, civil rights, gun control, public education, and a number of other issues. Voters know this and use party labels as a guide. And in a state where third-party activity is often robust, party labels do matter to the electorate.

In addition, Supreme Court decisions have lifted restrictions on individual and corporate spending in election campaigns. This has further eroded a level playing field, especially in nonpartisan elections where candidates are more likely to finance their own campaigns. This is a particular concern in New York City because of the huge disparity in wealth here and the high cost of media. The result is that candidates of moderate financial means, particularly people of color or immigrants, would not be able to effectively compete.

When Bloomberg first ran for mayor, he had little attachment to any political party, but he had the resources to capitalize on his name recognition and advertise his agenda. This is another reason for opposing nonpartisan elections: they make politics even more of a rich man's game, reducing the number of credible candidates to those who can afford to finance their own election campaigns.

For all these reasons – discouraging voter turnout, weakening the voice of low-income voters, impeding the participation of voters of color, fostering a greater imbalance in campaign spending, deterring candidates of moderate financial means – nonpartisan elections are a bad idea for New York City.

The Charter Revision Commission will issue a report in September with changes in the city's Charter for the November ballot. The mayor and the commission ought not to attempt to force a political system in their own image onto New York City. As with term limits, the people have spoken and have clearly rejected nonpartisan elections.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 160 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.