

OPINION

Let New York City Independents Vote

by Dr. Jessie Fields and Jeremy Gruber for the Daily News



There are now more than one million independent voters in New York City. That's twice the number of Republicans. Independents have been the fastest growing group of voters in our city now for more than a decade. But independents are excluded from voting in primary elections in our city.

It is time to end this political discrimination. No voter should be required to join a political party in order to vote. Elections are taxpayer funded and should be conducted as an equal and fair process for all voters.

Primary elections are held in the same public buildings, on the same public machines, and run by the same poll workers you encounter in the general election. The city administers and pays for these elections with all our tax dollars. But as independents ourselves, the two of us can't participate despite the fact that primaries are often more determinative of who gets elected than the November general election.

The fact is that New York City is an outlier in disenfranchising independent voters. More than three-quarters of cities across the country, including most major cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Boston have held open primary elections for years. Washington, D.C. adopted open primaries last year and New Mexico opened its primaries to independents statewide just a few months ago. Our city's closed primary system is far behind the rest of the country.

A dialogue is now underway in our city about granting independents full voting rights. The Charter Revision Commission, which has held hearings in every borough, deserves enormous credit for listening to independent voters, dozens of whom have testified at each hearing about the experience of being turned away from the polls and denied the right to vote in primary elections.

The Commission's initial report indicates that they are seriously considering placing a referendum on the November ballot to change the rules of primary elections.

There's many reasons to enact primary reform, and the Commission's report deftly lays out many of them, including increased voter participation, political accountability and electoral competitiveness. But as the conversation turns to what model of reform to embrace, let's not lose sight of the most important reason, the voting rights of a million New Yorkers.

So who are NYC independents?

They are as diverse as the city itself. More than half are Millennial and Gen Z voters. And despite persistent myths to the contrary, 53% of independents in our city are voters of color according to a recent study by Common Cause NY. That amounts to 165,151 African-American, 176,161 Asian-American, and 242,221 Latino independent voters shut out of the elections that matter. Is there any context where that is anything other than a crisis?

As long-time independents, we've gotten to know our fellow NYC independents and have learned a few things. First, independents are not necessarily moderates. Just as many consider themselves liberal, socialist, libertarian, and conservative. Many don't consider themselves ideological at all, and many combine elements of different ideologies.

What unites us is a distrust of the two major political parties. and joining one or the other is just as offensive to us as asking a Democrat to register Republican or vice versa.

Our city should be encouraging every New Yorker to vote their conscience, not demanding that we join a party or give up the right to vote. In fact, the same Common Cause report found that independents in NYC overwhelmingly want to vote. Let us.

One of us (Dr. Fields) is a medical doctor in the Harlem community and she sees daily the enduring health impacts of decades and decades and decades of segregation and disenfranchisement of African-American communities. All communities deserve full and equal participation in our democracy.

The late Congressman John Lewis once said: “The vote is precious. It is almost sacred. It is the most powerful non-violent tool we have in a democracy.” We both hope that the Charter Revision Commission seizes the day and advances a measure for open primaries to the ballot. One million independent voters are waiting!

Fields is a practicing physician in Harlem, a community activist and leader of health and mental health initiatives. She also serves on the Board of Open Primaries. Gruber is senior vice president at Open Primaries and is co-author of “Let All Voters Vote: Independents and the Expansion of Voting Rights” along with Harry Kresky and Michael Hardy, former general counsel for the National Action Network.