

Opinion

[A bitter year for independent voters](#)



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[Election time is here in New York City](#) and every New Yorker has the equal opportunity to express the most basic of rights in a democracy — the right to a meaningful vote. Right? Wrong. If, like me, you're one of our city's 1.1 million independent voters, you might very well be questioning what country you live in — if you bother to show up at the polls at all.

If you were to stop a tourist in Times Square and describe a city where 1.1 million voters, 20% of all registered voters, were legally barred from participating in public

DAILY NEWS

elections, where do you think they'd imagine that city to be? China? Russia? Venezuela? No, that's NYC which bars independents from primary elections their taxes pay for; elections that often determine the eventual winner in November.

The injustice began long before our city held this year's primary elections — when in advance of the primary every registered independent voter got a text like I did from the NYC Board of Elections. It offered to help me leave my independent status and register as a Democrat or Republican. Imagine if the city sent similar messages to Democrats or Republicans and offered to help them join the other party? But that's business as usual in a city that flagrantly works to deny that independent voters are legitimate.

This spring, hundreds of independent voters showed up to testify before the [city's Charter Revision Commission](#). Opening up the city's primaries to independents became the most testified to issue over the course of hearings in every borough. New York independents asked for something very simple and very profound — let us vote. The commission took them seriously, finding that opening the primaries would improve turnout and competition and make elections more inclusive and representative.

They discovered that despite stereotypes otherwise, NYC [independents are 54% voters of color and a majority are under the age of 40](#). They are engaged politically and vote for problem solvers not ideologues. And the commission was prepared to do something about it. That is until leaders of NYC's Democratic Party and Working Families Party like city Comptroller Brad Lander showed up to demand elections stay exactly as they are and browbeat the commission into abandoning the effort.

As independents, we watched the primaries from afar, as the frontrunner [Zohran Mamdani won the Democratic primary](#) with less than half a million votes in a city with 5 million registered voters (100,000 or so additional votes were redistributed later under RCV). His margin of victory was 100,000 votes. What kind of authority comes from winning an election by such margins when 1.1 million New Yorkers never had the chance to participate?

Even in the runup to the general election, all three mayoral candidates have been largely silent on the issue of independent voters. Not one has campaigned to us, talked about us, or even acknowledged we exist. Not one has pledged to take the findings of the Charter Revision Commission and move them forward.

DAILY NEWS

Now as independents we find ourselves voting in a rare competitive race for mayor; the result of multiple candidates being forced to sidestep our broken election process.

If you're not a reflexively Democratic Party voter, you may have noticed the inequality of a ballot that lists Mamdani first and third, followed by a Republican candidate Curtis Sliwa — who ran unopposed in his party's primary, while relegating independent candidate Andrew Cuomo to a secondary line and to the far corner, along with Eric Adams and Jim Walden, who aren't even running anymore. Whomever your preferred candidate, there was nothing democratic about that ballot.

NYC is an outlier. Nationwide, 85% of cities, including most major cities such as Chicago and Los Angeles, let all citizens, including independents, vote for who they want in the primaries. It's not just the right thing to do, but when you let voters focused on problem solving vote, you're in a much better position to tackle real problems — from affordable housing to rising inequality.

Every year the independent New Yorkers' share of the electorate grows and we're not going away. We're starting to organize and demand what every citizen demands in a democracy. Let us vote.

Gruber is the senior vice president of [Open Primaries](#), a national election reform organization and an author of "Let All Voters Vote: Independents and the Expansion of Voting Rights in the United States."