

**Spoken Testimony before the New York City Charter Revision Commission
Staten Island Public Input Session on Government Reform
April 9, 2025**

Chair Buery, Executive Director Schierenbeck, members of the Charter Revision Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify and for performing this important civic service. I'm John Ketcham, legal policy fellow and director of Cities at the Manhattan Institute. My views today are my own. I also second the recommendations made by my colleague Eric Kober at the February 24 hearing.

Six years after adopting ranked-choice voting for local primary and special elections, the city's electoral dynamics remain largely unchanged. Only 23 percent of registered voters participated in the 2021 mayoral general election. Closed primaries still bar about a million unaffiliated voters from having a voice in any primary. Manhattan Institute polling conducted this January found that 44% of city voters believe that local elections are effectively decided in the Democratic Party primary, not the general election.

To promote greater political competition and turnout, I respectfully recommend that the Commission consider changes to the city's electoral structure, the details of which I will include in my extended written testimony. Today, I'd like to focus on a few caveats of nonpartisan primaries and the benefits and tradeoffs of moving the city's local-elections to even-numbered years.

MI polling shows that a 37-percent plurality of city voters supports nonpartisan primaries over open or closed alternatives. By "nonpartisan primary," I mean an election open to all registered voters, who select candidates to advance to the general election, regardless of party.

Nonpartisan does *not*, however, require removing party labels from the ballot. Eliminating party labels would be problematic, as they serve as important informational cues to help voters make their decisions.

Some jurisdictions, like Alaska and California, allow candidates to choose a preferred party that appears next to the candidate's name on the ballot. But this may mislead voters if party leadership doesn't support these candidates, which can also occur if the label reflects the candidate's voter registration.

Instead, I suggest that party leaders select the candidates who will bear their party's endorsement, allowing parties to play a role while opening the vote to all registered voters and boosting political competition.

For city council elections, I also respectfully urge the Commission to consider list-based proportional representation systems, which can bypass the need for a primary election by likewise allowing internal party processes to nominate candidates. Under these systems, party labels on ballots and party pre-selection make voting easier.

Moving elections to even years would amplify the participatory impact of a reformed electoral structure. Across the U.S. and in New York City, odd-year elections draw far lower turnout than those held alongside federal contests in even years. This dampens political competition, contributes to less representative electorates, empowers special interests, and raises election-administration costs.

Ample evidence nationwide corroborates that moving local elections to even-numbered years is the single most effective way to increase voter participation. Based on the city's historical voting patterns, holding local elections on even years could potentially double or more the recent share of New Yorkers who participate in local government.

Higher turnout yields important secondary benefits, too. It dilutes the influence of special-interest groups by raising the cost of reaching a sufficient number of voters to win an election. As a result, even-year elections encourage local elected leaders to make decisions that better reflect the preferences and concerns of a majority of their constituents.

This closer representativeness does not come at the expense of one political party over another. Studies have found that moving to even-year elections has no discernible partisan impact. Voters are also not more ignorant of local matters just because they coincide with federal elections.

Finally, eliminating odd-year elections could save \$30–60 million every four years and reduce the size of the city's Board of Elections, prompting long overdue reforms to that body.

As you are all likely aware, there is one major impediment to even-year elections: Article 13, Section 8 of the New York State Constitution, which would need to be amended before an amended charter takes effect. But the multi-year nature of the constitutional amendment process can allow city officials and voters to acclimate to the change and even potentially align the new, even-year calendar with the decennial census redistricting process, allowing the first even-year local race in 2032.

I urge you to seize this opportunity to build a fairer and more representative local democracy. Thank you, and I welcome any questions.