



The New York City Organizations of the Independence Party

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TESTIMONY OF DR. LENORA FULANI TO THE NEW YORK CITY CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION TUESDAY, APRIL 6, 2010

Chairman Goldstein, members of the Commission. My name is Lenora Fulani. Though this Commission is newly appointed, I have spoken before prior Commissions about the structure and design of New York City's political process. In 2003, I advocated strongly—together with Mayor Bloomberg—for a shift to nonpartisan elections.

At the time, there was a general outcry that the Commission was moving too fast to consider such a significant restructuring and we've begun to hear that refrain again from some political partisans who, no doubt, intend to oppose nonpartisan reform as they did in 2003. That is their right, no one would question that.

But, speaking now as an independent, as a leader in the Independence Party, New York City's nonpartisan political party, the serious question is not whether we are moving slowly enough. It is whether we are moving quickly enough. How quickly do we need to move? Fast enough to keep up with our young people, who don't identify with parties and don't like partisanship. If we don't, we will pay the price.

The results of the 2003 election on nonpartisans are well known. The measure failed 70% to 30%. This has become a talking point for opponents. *The voters have spoken, they say, case closed.* But, we can never close the case on democracy after a single round. If we had, black people would still be 3/5 of a person and women would not have won the right to vote.

Since the Charter Revision Commission last addressed nonpartisan elections in 2003—a lot has changed—in New York City and in the country.

Enthusiasm for the establishment parties is declining while enthusiasm for political independence as the antidote to partisan gridlock and dysfunction is growing.

The votes cast on the major party lines in the last citywide election either declined in the case of the Republican Party or flat-lined in the case of the Democratic Party. But the trend is in the other direction when it comes to independents. The 150,000 votes cast on the Independence Party line in the last election was double what it was in 2005 and 3 times what it was in the 2001 mayoral election.

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This all boils down to a very simple question of democracy. There are currently 897,180 registered voters in New York City who are not Democrats or Republicans. The vast majority—751,442 of them—are not aligned with any political party. Among these non-aligned voters, twenty-five percent of them are under the age of 30. Twenty percent are African American. Twenty-four percent of them are Latino and 11% are Asian American.

As the city has become majority, minority, it's also the case that the minority community is increasingly independent. We need to change our electoral system to include and empower them.

In closing, I want to ask the Commission to listen to those new and independent voices. I ask you to acknowledge the 18-year-old black youth in Harlem who registered independent but cannot vote in the decision-making round of most elections. The Latina mother in the Bronx whose kids are in public school but whose vote doesn't count in September. The Chinese student in Queens whose family came here to find democracy, only to be turned away from the polls on primary day because he is registered as an independent.

I urge the Commission to listen to these voices, to recognize the need for change, and to bring nonpartisan elections forth to the ballot.

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