



STATEMENT OF NYPIRG SENIOR ATTORNEY GENE RUSSIANOFF

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NYPIRG urges the Charter Revision Commission not to place a nonpartisan election proposal on the ballot this November.

Instead, NYPIRG suggests you continue to lay the ground work for a future commission to give this issue the serious and comprehensive review it deserves. Rushing it through in the dog days of August guarantees a needlessly rancorous and divisive fall for the work of this Commission.

Many of you have expressed concern with the Commission's very brief time span, with final recommendations due not far into August. I have been gratified by the deliberative process of the commission in contrast to the pell-mell performance of most of the post-1989 Charter Revision Commission. It's clear you already have a full plate without adding nonpartisan elections.

There's a reason why the majority of the city's civic community have expressed opposition to nonpartisan elections, including the New York City League of Women Voters, Common Cause/New York, the Brennan Center for Justice, NYPIRG and the Womens City Club of New York: There are very serious questions about the issue that deserve serious review.

Among the most critical are whether such a change would:

- cause a retrogression in the voting rights of minorities, something the U.S. Justice Department found in recently blocking a switch from partisan to nonpartisan elections in Kinston, North Carolina;
- favor candidates of celebrity and wealth; and
- result in an even poorer turnout given low participation rates of unaffiliated voters, as predicted by CUNY Graduate Center urban researcher John Mollenkopf.

For example, I understand that the Commission will be receiving testimony from a voting rights consultant at some point. Where's a meaningful opportunity for other outside experts to comment on the consultant's findings?

I agree with Commissioner John Banks: there are other more effective ways to spur voter participation. These include such steps as the already-under discussion strengthening the role of the Voter Assistance Commission coordinator. Much more also can be done to make use of city agencies, franchisees and data base to encourage voter registration, as NYPIRG has testified.