THE CASE FOR RANKED CHOICE VOTING IN NEW YORK CITY

Election reform in New York City has languished over the years. Meanwhile, the city continues to be plagued by two recurring electoral outcomes that fly in the face of our democratic values: elections that are won with less than majority support and voters who are hesitant to vote their true preference.

Common Cause analyzed election results for primary and general elections during the last three election cycles to determine the frequency of multi-candidate elections[1] and the frequency of primary and general elections that are won with less than a majority.[2] We found that 66.1% of primaries were multi-candidate races, races where a candidate could win with less than majority support. As a result, our analysis of election outcomes is largely focused on the multi-candidate primaries since 2009.

More importantly, over the last three election cycles, we discovered an alarming trend- **63.6% of multi-candidate primaries were won with less than 50% of the vote, 29.8% of multi-candidate primaries were won with less than 40% of the vote, and 7.7% of multi-candidate primaries were won with less than 30% of the vote.[3]**

We also examined the outcomes of the occasional run-off election for a citywide elected office. Since 2009, there have been three run-off elections for citywide offices.[4] **We found that run-off elections saw precipitous drops in already low voter turnout, which drove massive increases in the cost per vote.**

New York City has a unique opportunity to bring transformative change to how New Yorkers vote. The City Council's Charter Revision Commission is considering Ranked Choice Voting[5] as a possible recommendation to be approved by voters in 2019. **COMMON CAUSE NY STRONGLY URGES THE COMMISSION TO RECOMMEND RANKED CHOICE VOTING FOR ALL NEW YORK CITY ELECTIONS.**

New York City elections are long overdue for structural reform that would produce better outcomes for voters, candidates and elected officials. Ranked Choice Voting is an elegant path forward that solves for troubling citywide trends. Ranked Choice Voting builds majority support for candidates in multi-candidate races, inspires voters to vote their preference- not the lesser of two evils - and avoids costly run offs. With Ranked Choice

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[1] In this instance, Common Cause defines multi-candidate races as those with more than 2 candidates.

[2] For the purposes of this analysis, majority is defined as 50% or greater.

[3] We found little evidence that this trend persists into general elections.

[4] Under current election law, run-off elections are triggered when a candidate for citywide office fails to secure 40% of the vote.

[5] Ranked Choice Voting allows voters to rank candidates from first to last choice on the ballot. A candidate who collects a majority of the vote wins. If there's no majority, then the last-place candidate will be eliminated and votes reallocated. The process is repeated until there's a majority winner.

Voting, elected officials would start their term with a clear mandate from their constituents. And voters would back the majority winner while truly engaging in the democratic process.

2009-2017 Primary Election Outcomes

Multi-Candidate Primary Elections in New York City

Since 2009 there have been 121 primary elections in the city. The majority were city council races. 33.8% of these primaries were two candidate races and 66.1% were multi-candidate races.

2009-2017 Candidates in Primary Elections

Total Primary Elections	# of Two Candidate Primaries	# of Multi-Candidate Primaries
121	41	80

Overall, we found:
- Just 36.3% of multi-candidate primaries won with more than 50% of the vote.
- 63.6% of multi-candidate primaries won with less than 50% of the vote.
- 29.8% of multi-candidate primaries won with less than 40% of the vote.
- 7.7% of multi-candidate primaries won with less than 30% of the vote.
- Three multi-candidate primaries resulted in run-off elections.

2009-2017 Multi-Candidate Primary Election Outcomes

% of Primaries won with more than 50%	% of Primaries won with less than 50%	% of Primaries won with less than 40%	% of Primaries won with less than 30%	# of Runoffs
36.3%	63.6%	29.8%	7.7%	3

2017 Election Cycle

In September, there were 38 primaries in New York City. The vast majority were city council races, but also included several borough and citywide positions including the Mayor, Comptroller, and Public Advocate. 17 of these primaries had two candidates, the remaining 21 races were multi-candidate primaries.

2017 Primary Election Cycle

% of Two Candidate Primaries	% of Multi-Candidate Primaries	# of Citywide Primaries	# of Borough Primaries	# of City Council Primaries
44.7%	55.2%	2	1	35

Multi-Candidate Primary Outcomes
- 38% of multi-candidate primaries were won with over 50% of the vote.
- 61.9% of multi-candidate primaries were won with less than 50% of the vote.
- 19% of multi-candidate primaries were won with less than 40% of the vote.

General Election Outcomes

In the general election, two candidates won their city council races with less than 50% of the vote.
- Margaret Chin won Council District 1 with 49.9% of the vote.

- Mark Gjonaj won Council District 13 with 48.7% of the vote.

2013 Election Cycle

In September, there were 46 primaries in New York City. The vast majority were city council races, but also included several borough and citywide positions including the Mayor, Comptroller, and Public Advocate. Just 17 of these primaries had two candidates, the remaining 29 races were multi-candidate primaries.

2013 Primary Election Cycle

% of Two Candidate Primaries	*% of Multi-Candidate Primaries*	*# of Citywide Primaries[6]*	*# of Borough Primaries*	*# of City Council Primaries*
36.9%	63%	4	3	39

Multi-Candidate Primary Outcomes
- 28.5% of multi-candidate primaries were won with over 50% of the vote.
- 71.4% of multi-candidate primaries were won with less than 50% of the vote.
- 32.1% of multi-candidate primaries were won with less than 40% of the vote.
- 10.7% of multi-candidate primaries were won with less than 30% of the vote.
- A runoff race was triggered for the office of the Public Advocate.
  - Neither Letitia James nor Daniel Squadron achieved threshold support to win the Public Advocate primary.

General Election Outcomes
In the general election, all candidates won their races with over 50% of the vote.

2009 Election Cycle

In September, there were 37 primaries in New York City. The vast majority were city council races, but also included several borough and citywide positions including the Mayor, Comptroller, and Public Advocate. Just 7 of these primaries had two candidates, the remaining 30 races were multi-candidate primaries.

2009 Primary Election Cycle

% of Two Candidate Primaries	*% of Multi-Candidate Primaries*	*# of Citywide Primaries*	*# of Borough Primaries*	*# of City Council Primaries*
18.9%	81%	3	1	33

Multi-Candidate Primary Outcomes
- 42.8% of multi-candidate primaries were won with over 50% of the vote.
- 57.1% of multi-candidate primaries were won with less than 50% of the vote.
- 35.7% of multi-candidate primaries were won with less than 40% of the vote.
- 10.7% of multi-candidate primaries were won with less than 30% of the vote.
- Two runoff races were triggered for the office of the Comptroller and Public Advocate.

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[6] In 2013, Democrats and Republicans had mayoral primaries.

- o Neither John Liu nor David Yassky achieved threshold support to win the Comptroller primary.
  - o Neither Bill de Blasio nor Mark Green achieved threshold support to win the Public Advocate primary.

General Election Outcomes
In the general election, one candidate won their city council race with less than 50% of the vote.
- Peter Koo won Council District 20 with 49.6% of the vote.

Outcomes of Run-off Elections in New York City
Since 2009, there have been three run-off elections for citywide offices. Under current election law, run-off elections are triggered when a candidate for citywide office fails to secure 40% of the vote. If no candidate reaches the 40% threshold, the top two vote earners proceed to the run-off election. Run-off elections are low turnout, high expense elections, far exceeding the per-vote costs of a primary or general election. We found

- Turnout drops precipitously for run-off elections.
  - o In 2013, 73.6% fewer voters showed up at the polls between the primary election and the run-off election. 772,241 eligible voters voted in the primary and just 203,696 eligible voters participated in the run-off.
  - o In 2009, 27.1% fewer voters showed up at the polls between the primary election and the run-off election. 330,659 eligible voters voted in the primary and just 241,206 eligible voters participated in the run-off.

- Which, in turn, led to a huge increase in the cost per vote for run-off elections.
  - o Per vote, the 2013 run-off was twice the cost of the primary election and more than triple the cost of the general election.

2013 Public Advocate Run-off
The Democratic primary for the Public Advocate race was crowded with five candidates. Since no candidate achieved the 40% threshold, a run-off election was held between the top two vote earners three weeks later.

Voter turnout for the primary was a meagre 23% and the general saw a slight bump in voter turnout at 26%. However, the run-off election for the Democratic slate saw a precipitous 73.6% decline in voter participation when just 7% of eligible voters showed up at the polls.

2013 Election Cycle- Voter Turnout

	Primary Election	Run-off Primary Election	General Election
Voters	772,241	203,696	1,102,400
Turnout	23%	7%	26%

While the run-off election cost less than the primary and the general elections, the cost per vote skyrocketed. The run-off election, as measured by cost per vote, doubled from the primary and more than tripled in comparison to the general. **The runoff election, as measured by cost per vote, exceeded the costs of the general and primary elections combined.** The city spent $35.1 million on the primary and general elections in 2013, but due to the runoff were forced to spend an additional $10.4 million.

- 772,241 New Yorkers cast their ballot in the primary at a cost of $24.20 per vote.
- **203,696 New Yorkers cast their ballot in the run-off at a cost of $51.20 per vote.**
- 1,102,400 New Yorkers cast their ballot in the general at a cost of $15 per vote.

2013 Elections- Cost Per Vote

	Primary Election	Run-off Primary Election	General Election
Total Expenditures	$18,471,307.01	$10,430,602.27	$16,866,420.39
Cost per Vote	$24.20	$51.20	$15

2009 Election Cycle

The Democratic primary for the Public Advocate and Comptroller races were crowded fields with five and four candidates, respectively. Since no candidate achieved the 40% threshold, run-off elections for both offices were held between the top two vote earners two weeks later.

Voter turnout for the primary was a meagre 11%, while the general saw a bump in voter turnout at 29%. However, the run-off election for the Democratic slate saw a precipitous 27.1% decline in voter participation when just 8% of eligible voters showed up at the polls.

2009 Election Cycle- Voter Turnout

	Primary Election	Run-off Primary Election	General Election
Voters	330,659	241,206	1,178,057
Turnout	11%	8%	29%

Unfortunately, reliable expenditure data for the 2009 primary and general elections is unavailable and therefore not provided. However, the run-off election cost $48.90 per vote which undoubtedly exceeded the cost per vote of the primary and general.

2009 Elections- Cost Per Vote

	Primary Election	Run-off Primary Election	General Election
Total Expenditures	n/a	$11,800,000	n/a
Cost per Voter	n/a	$48.90	n/a

A Clarion Call for Ranked Choice Voting in New York City

As our analysis demonstrates multi-candidate primaries in New York City tend to result in negative electoral outcomes:

- Over the last three election cycles, 63.6% of multi-candidate primaries were won with less than majority support.
- In 2017, 61.9% multi-candidate primaries were won with less than majority support.
- In 2013, 71.4% multi-candidate primaries were won with less than majority support.
- In 2009, 57.1% of multi-candidate primaries were won with less than majority support.

The handful of multi-candidate races in the general election which produced a winner with less than majority support did so on the margins. Two races were within a 0.5% of the majority and one was within 1.3% of securing the majority.

Runoff elections suffer from phenomenally low voter turnout, which invariably leads to exorbitant per vote costs. In 2013, the cost per vote of the runoff election exceeded the cost per vote of the primary and general elections combined.

Implementing Ranked Choice Voting would avoid the troubling pattern of anti-democratic electoral outcomes in New York City. Candidates would move to the general election with majority support from their district. Constituents are well served when their elected representative garners majority support, while the elected official benefits from a broader base of support. As an additional benefit, the city would avoid the occasional but costly run-off election. Ultimately, New Yorkers would feel truly invested in the electoral process as our elected officials would be chosen by a majority of voters.