

Nonpartisan Elections by Dan Jacoby

Early in his first term, Mayor Bloomberg proposed holding nonpartisan local elections. The idea didn't get very far, mainly because New York City is essentially a one-party town and that party didn't want to give up any of its power.

Except...

There is reason to believe that officially nonpartisan elections would be just as partisan as the current system. There is also reason to believe that the Democratic Party machine would be just as involved, and just as effective, as it is today. There are two examples to support that view.

The first example is the recent special election for the 30th Council district. Special elections are officially nonpartisan, but the reality is often quite different.

The special election to fill the seat vacated by disgraced Republican Dennis Gallagher, held in June of 2008, is the first example. Most Republicans supported Anthony Como, a Board of Elections Commissioner and aide to then-Senator Serphin Maltese. Former Council Member Tom Ognibene also ran, in effect "challenging" Como. On the Democratic side, the party machine backed Elizabeth Crowley, whose parents had served in the City Council and whose cousin Joseph Crowley is a member of the House of Representatives and the Queens County Democratic Party leader. Charles Ober, then the president of the Ridgewood Democratic Club and a long-time activist, also ran, "challenging" Crowley.

Como won, beating Crowley by a handful of votes. Five months later, Crowley defeated Como in a two-way race; neither Ognibene nor Ober were involved. While Ognibene clearly took far more votes from Como in the first election than Ober took from Crowley, Ober became a Democratic party pariah while Ognibene was the Republican nominee a year later in an attempt to retake the seat. Ober was blamed for Crowley's initial defeat, and was severely punished by the party.

The second example is shown in the regular 2009 contests for the City Council seat in the 20th district. An insurgent (that is, someone who did not get the official Democratic party endorsement) won a highly contested Democratic primary, only to be defeated by a Republican who went unchallenged during the primary season. While a similar outcome occurred in the neighboring 19th Council district, the 20th district race was especially surprising because it was considered a "safe" Democratic district.

In a nonpartisan race, any district that is not considered "safe" by a party will result in extreme pressure being put on anyone who dares to run without a major party endorsement. After the 20th district surprise result, it stands to reason that even candidates in supposedly safe districts will be pressured as well.

In other words, the major political parties (and any "minor" party that shows strength) will find ways outside of the primary election method for narrowing their list of candidates. Establishing officially nonpartisan elections will not remove partisanship from elections, instead the party machines will end up exercising even greater control over who runs.