

Gwen Lowenheim

Brooklyn

I am Gwen Lowenheim. I am very happy to be speaking directly to the NYC Charter Revision Commission. And I'm honored to contribute to the conversation on Open Primaries in the city where my grandparents immigrated, my parents raised their kids and I raised my daughter to take our democracy very seriously and vote in all elections.

And yet, I cannot. From a young age, I wondered why two political parties, both of them private entities were spoken about as interchangeable with democracy. How did that come to be? I never registered in either. And as we know, NYC has a closed primary system, which means I, along with the 1+ million others who choose not to limit ourselves to only two options that don't represent us, cannot vote in primaries, even though our taxes pay for them. And since primaries are key to who gets elected, I've been alienated from the process for decades.

I've attended other Charter Revision Commissions, and on occasion I've heard the commission refer to itself as "non-partisan." Music to my ears! Chairman Gaspard said the same this evening. Then the music stopped. "Non" in this case is equated with panelists affiliated with either the Democrat or Republican Parties.

I teach at Pace University in NYC and founded its Global Conversation Groups Programs which build communities with differences. I have also worked with a corporate consulting firm using cutting edge tools to support innovation.

I am inspired by the students I work with. They are in their 20's into their late 30's, and are enthusiastic about creating new possibilities. They are talented and skilled at making things happen. I hope they do not become as alienated by this whole process as I have been.

In the Brooklyn commission, I heard the chair say that the goal is to create "a government of the possible." If you want to shoot for that, you are going to need input from all voters, not just the ones you handpick. For example, year after year, we've seen city administrators allow the destruction of affordable housing and welcome investment in unaffordable high risers: businesses and apartments. More and more people are sleeping on our streets each year. Many consider this a failure.

Not a government of the possible

If we opened our primaries, we'd unlock a flood of fresh ideas and practical solutions. You'd have a shot at catching up on the innovative headway being made in other parts of the country regarding homelessness, education and many of the causes we've heard here tonight. America thrives on innovation, and we need it now more than ever. Excluding independent voters shuts the door on millions of problem-solvers at a time when bold, forward-thinking leadership is essential, so I urge the commission to ensure that all voters can vote.