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The Tipping Point

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The Impact of Candidate Field Size on
Multi-Candidate Primaries in New York City

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The Tipping Point: *The Impact of Candidate Field Size on Multi-Candidate Primaries in New York City*

Common Cause/NY's (CCNY) previous research on multi-candidate primaries in New York City has shown that they typically produce undemocratic results- winners without majority support.¹ **This is why CCNY is advocating that the 2019 Charter Revision Commission adopt ranked choice voting² in all races for primary and special elections.**

Our report, [The Case for Ranked Choice Voting in New York City](#), quantified the pervasiveness of multi-candidate primaries³ and outcomes of those races during the last three election cycles. Our research showed that 66.1% of primary elections were multi-candidate primaries. **Just a third of those multi-candidate primaries produced majority support winners, candidates that earned at least 50% of the vote.** This analysis builds on our previous report by exclusively focusing on the characteristics of multi-candidate primaries in New York City.

This is of particular importance as New York City approaches 2021, an election year in which 70% of city councilmembers, every Borough President, the Comptroller and the Mayor will be term limited out of office. It is therefore reasonable to anticipate the majority of these open races will produce dense candidate fields.

February's special election for Public Advocate was a good test case of what the 2021 electoral landscape could look like. A crowded race, with a diverse slate of candidates, which produced a winner with less than majority support. Seventeen candidates ran and the winner secured 33% of the vote. This, in turn, has produced an open City Council seat in which ten candidates are vying for the seat during a special election.

For these reasons, CCNY's analysis is focused on data from the last three election cycles and, in specific, primary election outcomes from 2013. Data from the 2013 cycle is particularly instructive as a similar wave of open seats dominated the electoral landscape. Our research shows:

- **Over the last three election cycles, the average number of candidates in multi-candidate primaries was 4-5 candidates. This number holds steady through 2009-2017 primary elections.**

¹ [The Case for Ranked Choice Voting in New York City](#), November 2018.

² 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.

³ For the purposes of this analysis, a multi-candidate primary is defined as a primary race in which there are 3 or more candidates in a race.

- **However, the candidate field size dramatically impacts electoral outcomes. There is a precipitous decline in majority support winners once a primary fields 4 or more candidates.**
 - 72.4% of multi-candidate primaries with 3 candidates produced majority support winners. However, this represents 36.3% of multi-candidate primaries.
 - A paltry 13.7% of multi-candidate primaries with 4 or more candidates produced majority support winners. This represents nearly two-thirds of multi-candidate primaries.
- **In 2013, the last primary election cycle with a wave of open seats, the trends held. Just 14.3% of the multi-candidate primaries for open seats produced majority support winners during the 2013 cycle. No race with 4 or more candidates produced a majority support winner.**

CHARACTERISTICS OF MULTI-CANDIDATE PRIMARIES FROM 2009-2017

From 2009-2017 there were 121 primaries, two-thirds were multi-candidate primaries.

Candidate Field Size in Multi-Candidate Primaries

CCNY examined primary election data from 2009-2017. A descriptive analysis of multi-candidate primaries shows:

- Overall, the average number of candidates in multi-candidate primaries was 4-5 candidates. The number of candidates in multi-candidate primaries has remained stable since 2009.
 - In 2009, the average number of candidates in multi-candidate primaries was 4-5.
 - In 2013, the average number of candidates in multi-candidate primaries was 4-5.
 - In 2017, the average number of candidates in multi-candidate primaries was 4-5.
- 88.9% of multi-candidate primaries fielded between 3-6 candidates per race.
 - Roughly a third of multi-candidate primaries fielded 3 candidates.
 - 52.6% of multi-candidate primaries fielded between 4-6 candidates.
 - 11.3% of multi-candidate primaries fielded 7+ candidates.

2009-2017: Candidate Field Size in Multi-Candidate Primaries

# of candidates in multi-candidate primaries	# of races by candidate count	% of multi-candidate primaries by candidate count
3	29	36.3%
4	15	18.8%
5	16	20%

6	11	13.8%
7	4	5%
8	2	2.5%
9	2	2.5%
10	1	1.3%
Total	80	100%

Impact of Candidate Field Size on Electoral Outcomes in Multi-Candidate Primaries

An analysis of multi-candidate primary electoral outcomes by candidate field size demonstrates:

- There is a precipitous decline in majority support winners once a race has more than 3 candidates.
 - 72.4% of races with 3 candidates produced majority support winners.
 - 13.7% of races with 4 or more candidates produced majority support winners.

2009-2017: Impact of Candidate Field Size on Electoral Outcomes

# of candidates in multi-candidate primaries	# of races	# of races with majority support winner	% of races with majority support winner
3	29	21	72.4%
4	15	3	20%
5	16	1	6.3%
6	11	2	18.2%
7	4	0	0%
8	2	1	50%
9	2	0	0%
10	1	0	0%
Total	80	28	

2013 PRIMARY ELECTION CYCLE

In 2013, there were 46 primaries and 28 of those races were for open seats. 75% of the races for open seats were multi-candidate primaries. The remainder of this analysis focuses on the 21 multi-candidate primaries for the open seats.

Candidate Field Size in Multi-Candidate Primaries for Open Seats

- 71.4% of multi-candidate primaries fielded between 3-5 candidates per race.
 - 28.6% of multi-candidate primaries fielded 6+ candidates.

2013: Candidate Field Size for Open Seats

# of candidates in multi-candidate primaries	# of races by candidate count	% of multi-candidate primaries by candidate count
3	5	23.8%
4	4	19%
5	6	28.6%
6	2	9.5%
7	3	14.3%
10	1	4.8%
Total	21	100%

Impact of Candidate Field Size on Electoral Outcomes in Multi-Candidate Primaries for Open Seats

- Overall, just 14.3% of the multi-candidate primaries for open seats produced majority support winners during the 2013 cycle.
- There is a precipitous decline in majority support winners once a race has more than 3 candidates.
 - 60% of races with 3 candidates produced majority support winners.
 - No race with 4 or more candidates produced a majority support winner.

2013: Impact of Candidate Field Size for Open Seat Primaries

# of candidates in multi-candidate primaries	# of races	# of races with majority support winner	% of races with majority support winner
3	5	3	60%
4	4	0	0%
5	6	0	0%
6	2	0	0%

7	3	0	0%
10	1	0	0%
Total	21	3	

REFORM MUST HAPPEN NOW

As our research highlights, far too many of our elections produce poor outcomes for New Yorkers and candidates alike. A review of primary election data from 2009-2017 demonstrates:

- Multi-candidate primaries are the majority of New York City primaries.
- The average number of candidates in multi-candidate primaries has remained stable at 4.5 over the last three cycles.
- However, the candidate field size dramatically impacts electoral outcomes. There is a clear tipping point, once a race has 4 or more candidates democratic outcomes nose dive.
 - 72.4% of multi-candidate primaries with 3 candidates produced majority support winners. However, this represents 36.3% of multi-candidate primaries.
 - A paltry 13.7% of multi-candidate primaries with 4 or more candidates produced majority support winners. This represents nearly two-thirds of multi-candidate primaries.

Ranked Choice Voting would fix these stark, undemocratic outcomes. 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.

With the 2021 election cycle looming, there is a heightened sense of urgency to reform our elections quickly. Undoubtedly, the veritable bumper crop of open seats up and down the ballot in our local elections will create crowded multi-candidate primaries. The 2019 Charter Revision Commission is in a unique position to dramatically transform our elections to produce equitable outcomes for candidates, voters, and all New Yorkers.