DAILY NEWS

N.Y. Democrats' future depends on independent voters

By Sal Albanese and John Opdycke
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From Arizona to Pennsylvania, independent voters had a "midterms moment." Let's see if they can have one in New York.

The post-midterm coverage has been overwhelmingly about the independent voters who did more than just break with traditional midterm voting patterns. They broke down biases and misconceptions about who independents are, what motivates them, and what it takes to win their votes.

Based on exit polls, 96% of Democrats voted for Democratic candidates and 96% of Republicans voted for Republican candidates. Which made the independent vote — 31% of the midterm electorate — all the more crucial.

For the past 40 years, every time a sitting president's party has suffered large losses in the midterms, independents have voted by a double-digit margin for candidates from the other party. This time they swung 49%-47% in favor of Democratic candidates. Even those numbers obscure how far they swung in individual state races. Independents comprised 24% of the electorate and broke 57-39% for John Fetterman in Pennsylvania; 40% of the electorate and broke 55-39% for Mark Kelly in Arizona; and 24% of the electorate and broke 53-42% for Raphael Warnock in Georgia.

Across the country, independents rejected the politics of extreme partisanship, election denial and disinformation. They stood up for leadership, action over rhetoric and democratic values.

But smug Democrats should be warned: This doesn't mean that independents are now in their camp. Far from it. They broke 49-48% for Brian Kemp in Georgia and 52-46% for Ron DeSantis in Florida. Independents do not vote for parties, they vote for people. It's the number one reason independents say they are independent. Which leads us to New York.

No state discriminates against independent voters as harshly as New York. The state's laws exclude independent voters from working as poll workers or serving on boards of elections. Across America, 85% of cities in the United States hold nonpartisan elections for municipal offices; none are in New York. New York City, Rochester and Buffalo all shut out independents from their primaries. Independents here can't vote in state or presidential primary elections. There are 3.5 million independents in the state — 1.1 million in New York City alone — and they are effectively second-class citizens.

As Howard Wolfson correctly pointed out, the state Democratic Party blew the 2022 election and cost the party control of Congress by conducting an illegal gerrymander and

largely ignoring public safety concerns. But it goes deeper than that.

> ***New York independents have been fighting since 2003 to have a seat at the table and a more open democracy, yet they've been rebuffed at every turn by Democratic lawmakers and party leaders. Every bill for open primaries, every proposal submitted to charter revision commissions, every resolution introduced at the Democratic Party convention to grant independents full voting rights has been denounced or ignored.***

Despite their decades-long opposition to granting full voting rights to independents, the Democrats who control the levers of power at the city and state levels have an opportunity to do four things in 2023 that would transform New York politics and in the process allow them to gain the trust of millions of voters here.

First, they should strengthen the state's Independent Redistricting Commission — which failed spectacularly this year — by making it truly independent and not subject to partisan meddling.

Second, they should pass a bill to create nonpartisan primaries for New York State. California, Washington, Nebraska and Alaska have all done this, and Nevadans just voted to do the same (it needs to pass twice to become law).

Third, they should change Democratic Party rules to allow independent voters to participate in the presidential primary. The party can do this without changing state law. It's already been done in Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Utah. Just pass a motion at your convention and presto, 3.4 million voters can have a say in presidential politics.

Finally, the New York City Council should champion "final five" voting for New York City. We already have ranked-choice voting in closed partisan primaries, which is better than the old system. But none of the other 50-plus cities in the U.S. that use ranked-choice voting excludes independents like New York City does. The Council and Mayor Adams should endorse a plan to create a single nonpartisan primary open to all candidates and voters that advances the top five candidates regardless of party from the primary to the general election. The final victor would then be decided using ranked-choice voting.

Independent voters have arrived. They want a new political culture based on debate, voter power, innovation and accountability, not self-interested partisanship. Will New York Democrats hear them?

Albanese is a former New York City Councilmember and the chair of New Yorkers for Competitive Elections. Opdycke is the president of Open Primaries, a national election reform organization.