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Black, Latino and Asian Caucus of the New York City Council comes out against ranked choice voting

The group says it would hurt communities of color, although some of its individual members disagree.

By REBECCA C. LEWIS (/author/rebecca-c-lewis) | OCTOBER 31, 2019

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Ranked-choice voting has its first organized opposition.

City & State has exclusively learned that the Black, Latino and Asian Caucus of the New York City Council will engage in a short, but robust, campaign against ranked choice. Councilman Daneek Miller, co-chair of the caucus, told City & State that the proposed change to city elections will hurt communities of color that have traditionally been powerful voting blocs – including the black community in Southeast Queens, an area he represents.

Voters in New York City have the opportunity to approve revisions to the City Charter, including adopting ranked-choice voting (<https://www.cityandstateny.com/articles/politics/campaigns-elections/how-ranked-choice-voting-would-change-new-york-city-campaigns>) in primaries and special elections, through a series of ballot questions. It would allow candidates to vote for more than one candidate based on preference, rather than choosing one person outright. Ranked choice – also known as ranked preference or instant-runoff voting – is part of question one, which the caucus will tell New Yorkers to vote “no” on.

Miller said that the sentiment among those in the community is that ranked choice will diminish their influence, although he offered no empirical evidence from cities that use the system to support the claim. He pointed the 2013 mayoral election in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in which the candidate backed by the Somali-American community ultimately lost in the final round of vote counting – meaning he came in second – to the candidate backed by wealthy white residents. In an article provided to City & State (<https://www.minnpost.com/politics-policy/2017/10/has-ranked-choice-voting-lived-its-promise-twin-cities/>) about the race, the losing candidate – who is white – said he did not blame ranked choice, but argued it didn’t lead to the increased turnout that advocates had promised.

At the crux of Miller’s argument is that communities such as Southeast Queens and Central Harlem have struggled and sacrificed to gain the power that they hold now. He said that there is a concern that ranked choice could potentially help empower newcomers to the area who don’t vote in the interest of the area’s native residents. “What I would see is not necessarily diminishing those powers (of minority voting blocs), but empowering those who don’t necessarily have the numbers, but are new to the community ... and don’t have the numbers to achieve the electoral success that they’re looking for,” Miller said.

Election reform activists claim the opposite, citing statistics

(<http://rankthevoteny.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/RCV-Diversity-by-the-Numbers-1-Page.pdf>) that demonstrate that the rate at which minority candidates were elected increased after cities implemented ranked choice. San Francisco is one case study, where 61% of local elected officials are people of color, which is close to the proportion of the population that is non-white. In New York City currently, by contrast, the City Council and citywide officeholders remain disproportionately white.

(<http://www.nyc.gov>)

"Ranked choice voting eliminates the spoiler effect, allowing multiple candidates of color to run for office without splitting the vote," Maya Wiley, co-chair of the Committee for Ranked Choice Voting NYC said in a statement to City & State. "In San Francisco, it helped elect the city's first black woman mayor, and in Minneapolis black candidates were able to work together to unseat a 20-year white incumbent to win a seat in the City Council."

With 26 members, the Black, Latino and Asian Caucus contains more than a majority of the City Council and it represents an influential bloc of political power. Miller said the majority of the caucus members oppose ranked choice and will be at the caucus' official announcement of opposition and rally on Monday, the day before Election Day. They'll be joined by representatives from the NAACP, who say the organization "stands with" the Black, Latino and Asian Caucus.

However, Miller's co-chair, Councilman Ydanis Rodriguez, and at least seven other members of the caucus have already endorsed ranked choice. Many other prominent lawmakers of color, such as state Attorney General Letitia James, have endorsed it as well. While Miller said he disagrees with those colleagues, he said that he believes they all ultimately have their communities' best interests at heart. He added that "clearly" the majority of lawmakers of color are against it, although, until now, none had publicly taken that stance.

Time is against Miller, though, as early voting is already underway and Election Day is on Tuesday. Miller didn't offer an explanation of why the caucus is acting so late, but said that the caucus plans to get boots on the ground, starting over the weekend, to get the

word out against ranked choice. “The stakes are really high, and it absolutely has to get done,” Miller said. “There is a very, very strong feeling that this undermines democracy as we know it in communities of color.”

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On Thursday, Bertha Lewis, president of the Black Institute and a veteran progressive activist, published an op-ed in The Amsterdam News (http://amsterdamnews.com/news/2019/oct/31/ranked-choice-voting-not-so-called-spoiler-effect/) in support of ranked choice. She, like Wiley, made the case that it would benefit candidates of color by eliminating the “spoiler effect” that can occur when multiple candidates split the same base. Miller said he had not yet seen that piece, but said this: “If you look at the voices that really matter in communities of color, and see where they line up, we’re very comfortable we’re on the right side of history.”



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