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OPINION

How to fix New York's elections: Lessons From NY-10

By [Jerry H. Goldfeder](#) and [Eli Valentin](#)



The dust having finally settled on New York's congressional primaries, there are several important takeaways for voting rights advocates. Let's look specifically at the lower Manhattan-Brooklyn race in which Daniel Goldman won the Democratic nomination. He received approximately 16,000 votes in the primary out of 302,000 enrolled Democrats in the district, a mere 5%. Of the only 65,000 who voted (about 20% of those eligible), 75% voted against him.

It isn't Goldman's fault, but there is something wrong with this picture. Perhaps he will use his own experience to address this strange state of affairs. We offer three suggestions for him.

Ranked-choice voting. Unlike how Goldman won with just a slice of the electorate, ranked-choice voting requires a winner to have at least 50% of the vote. As the votes are tallied, less successful candidates are eliminated and their voters' second and third choices are distributed to those remaining. The ultimate winner is the one who has garnered votes from a majority of the electorate.

This is a bit more complicated than a straight run-off among the first round's top two or three candidates, but it is more efficient and less costly. New York City voters used this successfully in the 2021 municipal primaries and will again next year, with all candidates having to appeal to the entire district. In the end, the process reduces hyperpartisanship and assures a more representative winner.

It should be used for congressional races as well. These positions are too important to let a winner prevail with a thin plurality. Indeed, most pundits think Goldman would not have won in District

10 if there had been ranked-choice voting. We are not so sure; in New York City's elections last year, all but three of the 59 races were ultimately won by the candidate leading in the first round. But we do know that the "first-past-the-post" system deprives voters of a majority winner.

Universal voting. Ranked-choice voting, though, doesn't necessarily address turnout. As in so many other neighborhoods, the number of voters in District 10 was anemic. To remedy such an unrepresentative outcome, we suggest a not-so-talked-about alternative: mandatory attendance at the polls, with a monetary fine for not showing up.

Support for "universal voting" is scant, but growing, and is bolstered by a new book by Demos founder Miles Rapoport and [Washington Post](#) commentator E.J. Dionne, entitled *100% Democracy: The Case for Universal Voting*. They argue that showing up at the polls, like required jury duty, is a civic responsibility, and would facilitate an informed electorate. Like ranked-choice voting, it, too, would decrease hyperpartisanship and the influence of fringe candidates, yielding winners who are reflective of a majority of all of their constituents.

Democratic countries that use this procedure, such as Belgium, Australia and Luxembourg, have been doing so for many years, and have a robust participatory democracy.

There are, of course, opponents. They argue that voters should not be required to vote and that it would increase uninformed choices. But voters would just need to show up, and for the fraction with no preference, they can simply mark "none of the above." Overall, we would no longer have paltry turnouts, and public officials would actually be more representative of their districts. It is certainly worth a pilot program.

Money. While we are addressing reforms, we would be remiss to ignore that District 10 was a poster child for how money sometimes plays an outsize role in our elections. There is no question that Goldman's personal fortune enabled him to blanket the airwaves and inundate voters' mailboxes.

Putting aside his rationale that pumping millions of his own cash into the campaign enabled him to "spend time getting to know voters," even he would have to admit that his money was a decisive factor in the race — and that porous campaign finance laws are at the very heart of what's wrong with our elections.

New York City's matching funds program has gone a very long way in tamping down spending and leveling the playing field, and New York State is on the cusp of a similar set of rules. Congress has from time to time enacted campaign finance reforms, but the Supreme Court has whittled them down over the years. There are, however, advocates in Washington such as Rep. Jamie Raskin who still consider reforming federal campaign laws an important priority. As with the other reforms we are suggesting, soon-to-be Rep. Daniel Goldman should embrace this goal as well.

Jerry H. Goldfeder is director of the Voting Rights and Democracy Project at Fordham Law School and [practices election and campaign finance law](#) at Stroock & Stroock & Lavan.

Eli Valentin has served as a political advisor to numerous elected officials across the country and has been a lecturer and adjunct professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York Theological Seminary and Hunter College.