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Party switchers welcome; invaders not



By [Jerry H. Goldfeder](#)

Some New York City Republicans are threatening to invade the Democratic Party. Sound far-fetched? [As recently reported](#) in *THE CITY*, a start-up group called “New Yorkers United for Change” is urging Republicans in the five boroughs to ditch their party to become Democrats. Why? For the explicit purpose of nominating a candidate in June’s Democratic primary for mayor. Their deadline is Feb. 14, two days after the first Republican president’s birthday. I guess it’s the New Lincoln Project.

It’s impossible to know how many Republicans will actually take this plunge, and how many will then participate in the June 22 primary, but if lots do, the city’s electoral math could change profoundly, and in an instant. In 2013, the last time there was no incumbent running, only 645,000 Democrats voted in the mayoral primary. There are 570,000 registered Republicans in the city. So a mass Republican switch could spell the difference.

And because everyone knows that the Democratic winner is the odds-on favorite to win the general election — there aren’t many Mike Bloombergs ready to plunk down millions on a run — this effort is nothing to sneeze at.

Not all Republicans agree with this plan. Andrea Catsimatidis, chair of the Manhattan GOP and daughter of businessman and former candidate John Catsimatidis, believes Republicans should build up their own ranks instead.

But she may be swimming against the tide. Rensselaer County Republicans are also trying to upend political math. They are trying to persuade GOP-friendly members of the Independence Party to switch into the Working Families Party to help County Executive Steve McLaughlin's re-election.

What these party switchers should understand is that if it's done for wholly cynical purposes, it's legally problematic. Something akin to this occurred in Suffolk County just a few years ago. Over a thousand cops joined the Conservative Party for the purpose of nominating a sheriff candidate who would reflect their views. After party and court proceedings, almost all of them got their walking papers. The lesson: political parties can rid themselves of interlopers.

But on what grounds? The trial court in Suffolk County laid out the basic rule: New York's Election Law allows a party to "disenroll" ersatz members if they are not in sync with its prevailing philosophy. A hearing is held to ascertain whether a party switcher now believes in the principles of their adopted party or their real motivation is simply to alter the kind of candidates who could win. If a judge finds these folks are nothing but gate-crashers, they will be shown the door — just as the newly-minted Conservative Party "members" were in Suffolk County.

Until recently, the New York statute said that party switching had to be done almost a year before a primary — making it practically impossible to engineer a takeover. But in 2016, supporters of Bernie Sanders who were not Democrats raised a whole hullabaloo that they should be able to enroll at the last minute to vote for him. Their pleas were rejected, but Albany recently moved up the deadline from October of the previous year to just a few months before the primary. As a result, party switchers can vote in this year's June primary if they change their enrollment by mid-February.

The New York City situation is complicated by the fact that at least one Democratic mayoral hopeful is encouraging this infiltration. I recently received a mass email from one of the candidate's supporters, who advised recipients that Feb. 14 is the deadline to be a voter in the Democratic Party primary. Aside from the fact that I had no idea why I got this email, it caught my attention because this not-so-subtle appeal was obviously meant for potential switchers. The actual deadline for new voters is as late as 25 days before primary day — this year, May 28. It's only party switchers who need to mark Valentine's Day on their calendars.

Oddly enough, the leaders of the Democratic Party in the city have been publicly mum about the infiltration attempt. Maybe they are waiting to see how large the Trojan Horse actually is. On one hand, it's hard to believe that Democrats will sit idly by and allow this to occur without putting up a legal fight. On the other hand, Democrats may not want to be accused of extracting "loyalty oaths" of new members.

On balance, parties should actually stand for something. Wholesale party raiding undermines our nation's party system, and should be challenged. In fact, the U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly approved laws to prevent or minimize such widespread infiltration. If it turns out these new Democrats have genuinely seen the light, fine. If change in enrollment is just a temporary gambit to influence a primary, they should be invited to go home.

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