



Western New York Ranked Choice Voting Coalition & Unite NY

Buffalo Charter Review Commission Analysis

I. Why Electoral Reform Matters

Democracy functions best when elections are competitive, voters have meaningful choices, and those elected to public office earn the support of a broad cross-section of the electorate. Unfortunately, the evidence demonstrates that Buffalo's municipal electoral system often falls short of those basic democratic principles.

The Western New York Ranked Choice Voting Coalition and Unite NY entered the 2025-2026 Charter Review Commission process with a straightforward objective: strengthen representative democracy in the City of Buffalo by advancing practical, nonpartisan reforms that increase voter participation, improve electoral competition, and ensure that elected officials are accountable to the people they serve.

Our recommendations centered on three complementary reforms:

- [Ranked Choice Voting](#) (RCV) to ensure winners receive majority support in multi-candidate elections.
- [Open Primaries](#) to allow more Buffalo residents to participate in elections that frequently determine who ultimately holds office.
- [Expanded Ballot Access](#), including reducing petition signature requirements, so qualified candidates have a more realistic opportunity to compete for public office.

These reforms were not proposed because Buffalo experiences isolated electoral problems. Rather, they were advanced because the City's election data reveal long-term structural deficiencies that consistently limit voter choice, discourage competition, and concentrate political power in the hands of a relatively small number of participants.

[A System with Too Few Choices](#)

In both the Delaware and South Districts, there was not a single contested Democratic primary or contested general election during the entire twelve-year period. In effect, the selection of the Common Council member occurred before voters ever cast a ballot. Democratic committee members effectively determined who would represent those districts, while Democratic voters never had the opportunity to choose between competing candidates and voters from every other political affiliation were excluded from



the decision entirely. The general election became little more than a procedural requirement rather than a meaningful exercise in representative democracy.

The North District followed a similar pattern. Only one Democratic primary was contested over four election cycles, and every general election was uncontested. While the circumstances differed slightly, the outcome was the same: very few opportunities for voters to influence who would ultimately represent them.

These examples are not anomalies. They reflect a broader citywide trend in which electoral competition has become the exception rather than the norm.

Most Buffalo Voters Never Experience a Competitive Election

Competition encourages candidates to engage with voters, debate ideas, and remain accountable throughout their terms in office. When elections lack meaningful competition, accountability declines, voter participation falls, and public confidence in government erodes.

Research consistently demonstrates that competitive elections produce numerous democratic benefits:

- More candidates are willing to seek public office.
- Voters are presented with meaningful choices.
- Candidates engage a broader cross-section of the electorate.
- Public officials become more responsive to constituents.
- Election outcomes carry greater democratic legitimacy.

Conversely, systems characterized by uncontested elections, closed primaries, and significant barriers to ballot access often concentrate political power within a relatively small group of party activists and insiders. While these systems may satisfy the legal requirements of democratic elections, they frequently limit meaningful voter participation and reduce opportunities for electoral accountability.

II. The State of Elections in Buffalo

A System with Limited Competition and Limited Choice

The primary purpose of any democratic election is to provide voters with meaningful choices and to ensure that elected officials are accountable to the citizens they represent. Competitive elections encourage public debate, increase civic participation, and provide voters with an opportunity to reward or replace their elected representatives.



An analysis of Buffalo Common Council elections over the past four election cycles demonstrates that the City's current electoral system is falling short of these objectives. Rather than fostering competition, the existing system routinely produces uncontested elections, low voter participation, and electoral outcomes determined by only a small fraction of eligible voters. The result is an electoral process in which many public offices are effectively decided before most voters ever cast a ballot

General Elections Are Noncompetitive

Since 2011, Buffalo has held four Common Council election cycles across nine council districts, creating 36 possible general elections.

Of those 36 elections:

- 23 general elections (64 percent) were uncontested.
- Only 13 elections featured more than one candidate.

In nearly two-thirds of all Common Council elections, voters were presented with only a single candidate on the November ballot. While these elections satisfied the legal requirements of democracy, they did not provide voters with a meaningful choice between competing visions, priorities, or candidates.

The absence of competition was particularly evident in several council districts.

In both the Delaware and South Districts, every election since 2011 featured:

- No contested Democratic primary.
- No Republican or independent challenger in the general election.
- One candidate appearing on the November ballot.

As a result, the Democratic Party organization—not the electorate—effectively determined who would serve on the Common Council. Democratic voters never had the opportunity to choose among competing candidates in a primary, while voters who were unaffiliated or enrolled in another political party were entirely excluded from participating in the election that ultimately determined representation.

Similarly, the North District experienced only one contested Democratic primary over four election cycles and did not experience a single contested general election. These districts illustrate how electoral competition has become the exception rather than the norm.

Most Buffalo Voters Never Experience a Competitive Election



The lack of electoral competition affects far more than individual council districts—it affects nearly every voter in Buffalo.

Because competitive races are concentrated in only a handful of districts, the overwhelming majority of Buffalo residents have not had the opportunity to vote in a contested Common Council election.

Since 2011:

- 2011: No Buffalo voter cast a ballot in a contested Common Council general election.
- 2015: Only approximately 10 percent of all registered voters participated in a competitive council race.
- 2019: Approximately 12 percent of registered voters had that opportunity.
- 2023: Just 9 percent of Buffalo voters were able to vote in a contested council election.

Stated differently, during every election cycle since 2011, roughly nine out of every ten Buffalo voters entered the voting booth knowing the outcome of their Common Council race before they voted.

For most Buffalo residents, the general election has ceased to function as the forum in which elected officials are chosen. Instead, representation is often determined earlier through the political process within a single party or, in many cases, without any electoral competition at all.

Primary Elections Provide Limited Opportunities for Competition

Although Buffalo's Democratic primaries frequently determine the eventual officeholder, even these elections often fail to provide voters with meaningful choices.

Between 2011 and 2023:

- Only 15 of 36 potential Democratic primaries were contested.
- Twenty-one Democratic primaries (58 percent) featured only one candidate.

Competitive primaries occurred unevenly throughout the city. Several council districts rarely, if ever, experienced contested nominations, while only the Masten District held contested Democratic primaries in every election cycle.

When the nomination process itself lacks competition, voters lose another opportunity to evaluate candidates, debate public policy, and hold elected officials accountable. Instead



of serving as an arena for democratic participation, many primary elections simply ratify decisions that have already been made.

A Small Percentage of Voters Determine Representation

The data become even more concerning when voter turnout is examined.

Among the contested Democratic primaries:

- Average turnout represented only 19 percent of registered Democrats.
- Winning candidates received support from an average of only 10 percent of registered Democrats within their districts.
- Measured against all registered voters, successful candidates averaged support from just 7 percent of eligible voters.

Several elections demonstrated how few votes are required to secure public office under the current system.

In one Fillmore District primary, the winning candidate received only 621 votes, representing approximately 6 percent of registered Democrats and only 4 percent of all registered voters within the district.

While these elections complied with existing election law, they raise an important question about democratic legitimacy. Can elected officials truly claim broad public support when they are selected by such a small percentage of the electorate?

Structural Problems Require Structural Solutions

These findings reveal that Buffalo's electoral challenges are not isolated incidents or the result of individual candidates. Rather, they are symptoms of structural characteristics embedded within the City's electoral system.

When barriers to ballot access discourage potential candidates, when closed primaries exclude thousands of voters from the election that matters most, and when plurality voting allows candidates to prevail without majority support, the result is a political system that limits participation rather than encouraging it.

No single reform will solve every challenge facing Buffalo's elections. However, expanding ballot access, opening the primary process to more voters, and implementing Ranked Choice Voting each address different weaknesses within the current system. Together, these reforms offer a comprehensive strategy for increasing competition, broadening



participation, strengthening accountability, and ensuring that elected officials better reflect the will of the communities they serve.

The following sections examine each of these reforms in greater detail and explain why the Coalition concluded that they represent practical, achievable steps toward building a more representative and participatory democracy in the City of Buffalo.

III. What Buffalo Voters Want: Public Attitudes Toward Electoral Reform

Buffalo Voters Are Ready for a Better Electoral System

The analysis of Buffalo's election results demonstrates that the City's current electoral system produces too few competitive elections, excludes many voters from meaningful participation, and often elects public officials with the support of only a small percentage of the electorate.

While election statistics reveal how the system operates, public opinion research answers an equally important question:

Do Buffalo voters believe the system is working?

To better understand voter attitudes, Unite NY commissioned Embold Research to do a [public opinion poll among Buffalo voters](#) during the Charter Review Commission process. The findings demonstrate a consistent theme throughout the survey: regardless of political affiliation, Buffalo voters want elections that are more open, more competitive, and more representative.

Perhaps most importantly, voters consistently viewed reforms through the lens of fairness. Across every reform tested, respondents believed the proposed changes would give ordinary voters a greater voice in government and create a fairer electoral process.

Voters Recognize the Current System Is Confusing

One of the survey's most revealing findings is that many Buffalo voters do not understand how their current elections operate.

When asked whether Buffalo uses an open or closed primary system:

- 31 percent believed Buffalo already has open primaries.
- 32 percent correctly identified the current system as closed primaries.
- 37 percent said they were unsure.



In other words, nearly seven out of ten Buffalo voters either misunderstood the City's primary election system or admitted they did not know how it worked.

This finding highlights an important challenge for civic engagement. Citizens cannot fully participate in a democratic process they do not understand. It also demonstrates that the current system has failed to clearly communicate to voters who may participate in primary elections and how candidates ultimately reach the general election ballot.

Strong Support for Opening Primary Elections

Although many voters were unfamiliar with the current primary system, they expressed overwhelming support for changing it once the concept was explained.

The survey found that:

- Two-thirds (67 percent) of Buffalo voters support open primaries.
- 60 percent believe open primaries would give voters more influence over elections.
- 59 percent believe open primaries would make elections fairer.

Support was particularly strong among younger voters, unaffiliated voters, and independents—groups that are currently excluded from participating in the election that often determines who ultimately serves on the Common Council.

Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of unaffiliated voters favored opening Buffalo's primary elections.

These findings are consistent with the election data presented earlier in this report. Because so many Buffalo districts experience little or no competition in November, the Democratic primary frequently becomes the decisive election. Allowing a broader range of voters to participate would better reflect the reality of Buffalo's political landscape and expand democratic participation without limiting the rights of registered party members.

Buffalo Voters Want More Competition on the Ballot

The survey also demonstrates strong public support for reducing unnecessary barriers that discourage candidates from seeking office.

Current New York election law requires independent candidates to collect significantly more petition signatures than candidates running in major party primaries. Buffalo voters overwhelmingly rejected this unequal standard.

Survey results found that:



- 65 percent believe independent candidates should have the same signature requirement as major-party candidates.
- An additional 23 percent believe independents should have an even lower signature requirement.
- Only 12 percent believe independent candidates should face higher barriers to appearing on the ballot.

Overall, 67 percent of Buffalo voters support reducing petition signature requirements for independent candidates, while approximately two-thirds believe the reform would both increase voter influence and make elections fairer.

The message from voters is clear. Buffalo residents are not asking for fewer safeguards; they are asking for equal treatment and greater competition. They recognize that more candidates create more choices and strengthen democratic accountability.

Ranked Choice Voting Begins with Education

Among the reforms tested, Ranked Choice Voting presented a different picture.

Unlike open primaries and ballot access reform, Ranked Choice Voting remains relatively new to many Buffalo voters.

Only 15 percent reported being very familiar with Ranked Choice Voting, while nearly six in ten indicated they were either not very familiar or not familiar at all.

Despite this limited awareness:

- 49 percent already support implementing Ranked Choice Voting in Buffalo elections.
- Only a minority expressed opposition.
- 51 percent believe Ranked Choice Voting would give voters more say.
- 47 percent believe it would make elections fairer.

Support was strongest among younger voters, registered Democrats, and independent voters.

These findings suggest that familiarity—not resistance—is the principal challenge facing Ranked Choice Voting. Even before receiving extensive public education, nearly half of Buffalo voters supported implementation, and a majority believed the reform would improve voter influence.

As voters become more familiar with successful implementations of Ranked Choice Voting across the country, public support is likely to continue growing.



Public Opinion Aligns with the Election Data

Taken together, Buffalo's election results and the public opinion research tell a remarkably consistent story.

The election data reveal a system characterized by uncontested races, limited voter choice, and low electoral participation. The polling demonstrates that voters recognize these shortcomings and overwhelmingly support reforms that expand participation, increase competition, and make elections more representative.

Whether discussing open primaries, ballot access, or Ranked Choice Voting, voters repeatedly identified the same desired outcomes:

- More meaningful choices.
- Greater fairness.
- Increased voter influence.
- A political system that encourages participation rather than limiting it.

These findings reinforce the Coalition's central conclusion: electoral reform is not simply a policy preference advocated by civic organizations. It reflects the priorities of Buffalo voters themselves.

The following chapters examine how the Western New York Rank Choice Voting Coalition translated these public priorities into specific proposals before the Buffalo Charter Review Commission and the response those proposals received during the Commission's deliberations.

IV. The Charter Review Commission Process: March–June 2026

Electoral Reform Emerges as a Commission Priority

From the outset of the [Buffalo Charter Review Commission](#) process, electoral reform was one of the most consistently discussed and publicly supported issues before the Commission. Beginning in March 2026, members of the Western New York Rank Choice Voting Coalition and Unite NY participated in nearly every Commission meeting, providing testimony, legal language, policy research, statistical analyses, and recommendations regarding three interconnected reforms:

- Ranked Choice Voting
- Open Primaries
- Ballot Access Reform through reduced petition signature requirements



Coalition representatives consistently emphasized that these proposals were intended to work together as a comprehensive package designed to increase voter participation, improve electoral competition, and strengthen democratic legitimacy.

During the [March 2 meeting](#), Barbara Gunderson, representing both the League of Women Voters of Buffalo-Niagara and the Western New York Ranked Choice Voting Coalition, presented proposed Ranked Choice Voting language and distributed educational materials to the Commission. The presentation generated sufficient interest that Commissioner Steven Polowitz immediately requested a Commission vote on whether Ranked Choice Voting should be placed before Buffalo voters. Although several commissioners favored additional deliberation before taking action, the discussion demonstrated that electoral reform had become a central issue before the Commission from the earliest stages of its work.

The Coalition Presents a Comprehensive Reform Package

By the [March 25 meeting](#), the Coalition's recommendations had expanded beyond Ranked Choice Voting into a comprehensive electoral reform agenda.

Representatives from Unite NY explained that meaningful reform required addressing multiple structural barriers simultaneously. Their recommendations included expanding ballot access, opening primary elections to more voters, and implementing Ranked Choice Voting. Coalition members also submitted draft charter language, legal memoranda, educational materials, and historical research for the Commission's consideration.

Commission discussions quickly shifted from whether electoral reform should be considered to how it could be implemented within the limited timeline established for the Charter Review process. Chair Laurence Rubin informed the Commission that reforms affecting elections would likely require review under the John R. Lewis New York Voting Rights Act before they could appear on the November ballot. This preclearance process established a compressed schedule for both drafting language and producing the supporting legal and factual analysis required by the Attorney General's Office.

Electoral Reform Becomes One of the Commission's Top Priorities

During April, electoral reform moved from being one proposal among many to becoming one of the Commission's highest priorities.

On [April 13](#), Commissioner Steven Polowitz introduced a resolution recognizing voting reform as a priority issue and acknowledging Unite NY's offer to assist the Commission by providing legal research and technical expertise. Although commissioners debated the wording of the resolution and whether it limited future discussions, the measure



ultimately passed, formally establishing electoral reform as a priority for the Commission's work.

Two weeks later, during the Commission's [priority-setting session on April 27](#), electoral reform received broad bipartisan support from commissioners. Nine of the Commission's twelve members identified election reform among their highest priorities. Individual commissioners specifically cited Ranked Choice Voting, Open Primaries, and reducing petition signature requirements as reforms deserving further consideration.

This level of consensus demonstrated that, at least during the spring of 2026, there was broad agreement that Buffalo's election system warranted significant review.

Developing the Policy Framework

Throughout May, the Commission's discussions shifted from identifying priorities to addressing implementation.

Commissioners considered numerous policy questions, including whether open primaries should include all registered voters or only unaffiliated voters, whether Ranked Choice Voting should apply to primary elections, general elections, or both, and what legal requirements would govern implementation.

One issue repeatedly emerged throughout these discussions: compliance with the John R. Lewis New York Voting Rights Act.

Commissioner Norvella Pendergrass consistently emphasized that any proposal involving electoral reform would require expert analysis, demographic data, and evidence demonstrating that the proposed reforms would not negatively affect minority voting rights. Representatives of the Attorney General's Office requested detailed statistical analyses, implementation timelines, and racially polarized voting analyses as part of the anticipated preclearance review.

In response, Unite NY began preparing the expert analysis requested by the Commission, including election statistics, voting behavior analysis, and legal research designed to support the proposed reforms.

Despite the Commission's earlier vote establishing electoral reform as a priority, progress slowed considerably during late May. [On May 27](#), the Electoral Reform Working Group reported that it had not yet met, delaying substantive discussion as critical deadlines approached.

June: Momentum Gives Way to Delay



During June, public testimony supporting electoral reform continued at nearly every Commission meeting.

[On June 3, 2026](#), the Charter Review Commission's Electoral Reform Working Group concluded its review of proposed election reforms and voted to advance three recommendations to the full Charter Review Commission for consideration.

The Working Group recommended:

- Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) for municipal elections.
- Semi-Open Primaries, allowing unaffiliated voters to participate in party primary elections without requiring a change in party enrollment.
- A 50% Reduction in Candidate Petition Signature Requirements to improve ballot access and reduce unnecessary barriers for candidates seeking public office.

The Working Group demonstrated broad bipartisan consensus on the need for electoral reform. The recommendations were approved by unanimous votes in nearly every instance. Only one proposal received a dissenting vote, passing by a 4-1 margin, while the remaining recommendations were approved unanimously.

Coalition representatives clarified misconceptions regarding Ranked Choice Voting, explained the mechanics of automatic runoff elections, and continued advocating for equal ballot access standards. Public testimony also emphasized that independent candidates should not face higher signature requirements than candidates seeking major party nominations.

Within the Commission, however, discussions increasingly focused on process rather than policy.

Commissioners debated whether sufficient expert analysis had been completed, whether the Commission had enough time to satisfy preclearance requirements, and whether the proposals should proceed during the current Charter Review cycle or instead be referred to a future task force.

At the [June 22 meeting](#), Chair Rubin expressed concern that the Commission had not been given sufficient time or resources to fully evaluate electoral reform proposals and introduced draft language creating a future Electoral Reform Task Force. Other commissioners argued that substantive reform proposals were already before the Commission and deserved an up-or-down vote rather than postponement.



Commissioners also debated the legal memorandum prepared by Holtzman Vogel, the supporting analyses submitted by Unite NY, and the necessity of additional expert review before forwarding proposals for preclearance.

The Final Debate Before the Vote

By the Commission's June 24 meeting, the central question had shifted from whether electoral reform deserved consideration to whether the Commission would act upon the proposals already before it.

Several commissioners urged the Commission to consider the specific electoral reform language that had been submitted during previous meetings rather than substitute a task force recommendation. Motions were made to consider language reducing petition signature requirements and related ballot access reforms. Each proposal failed on roll-call votes.

The Commission instead tabled further discussion until its July meeting, setting the stage for the final votes that would ultimately reject the Coalition's recommendations.

The March through June meetings demonstrate that electoral reform was never a peripheral issue before the Charter Review Commission. It was repeatedly identified as one of the Commission's highest priorities, supported by substantial public testimony, accompanied by extensive legal and policy research, and discussed over the course of four months. Ultimately, however, concerns regarding timing, preclearance, and process prevented the Commission from advancing the reforms despite widespread public engagement and repeated requests for action.

Finally, on July 8th, seven different versions of electoral reforms were defeated, in succession, with only minimal support. More than one member of the CRC admitted publicly on the record that they did not even read the submitted language.

V. Grassroots Advocacy Campaign

Throughout the Buffalo Charter Review Commission's consideration of electoral reform proposals, the WNY Ranked Choice Voting Coalition and Unite NY executed a comprehensive grassroots advocacy campaign designed to educate voters, mobilize supporters, and demonstrate broad public backing for meaningful electoral reform.

Between May 19 and July 7, 2026, the coalition engaged thousands of Buffalo residents through a coordinated, multi-channel voter outreach effort.



The email campaign encouraged Buffalo voters to contact members of both the Buffalo Charter Review Commission and the Buffalo Common Council in support of Ranked Choice Voting, expanded primary access, and ballot access reform. Complementing this effort, nine targeted text message campaigns reached likely supporters with timely calls to action before key Commission meetings and votes.

Supporters also generated 102 individual letters addressed to Charter Review Commissioners and members of the Common Council, providing personal testimony and urging adoption of the proposed reforms.

Finally, on the day of the Commission's final vote, the coalition submitted 484 petition signatures from Buffalo voters who publicly endorsed the package of electoral reforms. These signatures served as a tangible demonstration of community support and reinforced that a substantial number of residents wanted the Commission to modernize Buffalo's electoral system.

Collectively, these grassroots efforts represented one of the most organized public advocacy campaigns conducted during the Charter Review Commission process. Through direct voter engagement, constituent communications, and public petitioning, the coalition ensured that Commissioners and elected officials heard from hundreds of Buffalo residents who favored reforms designed to increase voter participation, expand electoral competition, and strengthen confidence in the City's democratic process.