

A Plan to Change NYC

New York City needs change and ChangeNYC.Org has a plan to ensure we get the kind of change real New Yorkers want. It involves the Internet, grassroots organizing, the wisdom of the Obama campaign, and, above all, you, your family, your friends, and every other proud Democrat who loves our City.

This is one of the most exciting times in our nation's history! Barack Obama's landslide victory has paved the way for community organizing and political involvement in a way never before possible.

Please take the time to read this plan and learn how we can all work together to bring the change to our City that we have begun to bring to our nation.

Why NYC's Democratic Leaders Abandoned NYC's Democrats

In New York City, there is only one political party with any real power: the Democratic Party. It controls almost every single elected office in the five boroughs and sets the City's policies practically unopposed. As Democrats, you would think that would make for an ideal government. But, as we all know, New York City's government is far from perfect.

The problem is that the comfort of one-party rule has let our City's Democratic leaders settle into a pattern of indifference to the people's concerns, dangerous inaction, and, all too often, corruption.

Our City's elected officials and political bosses deliberately keep our government dysfunctional to preserve and advance their own interests. The clearest example of this self-serving agenda is the City Council's recent vote to extend term limits. New Yorkers had voted twice in the past fifteen years to have term limits, and there was no reason to believe we had changed our minds. In fact, just two days before the Council voted to treat themselves to another four years in office, 89 percent of New Yorkers polled said that they opposed the Council's power grab.

The Council voted against us anyway.

How "The Incumbent Protection Society" Denies New Yorkers Change

The reason our Council Members felt at ease ignoring the public was they knew the system is rigged to keep our elected officials in office. No matter how angry they make us, over 95 percent of incumbents get reelected.

In fact, in the last two City Council elections in 2003 and 2005 *only one single councilmember was voted out of office* in the five boroughs, and that was only because he was censured by an ethics investigation for harassment and a host of other accusations. Even then, it took a former Councilman unseated in 2001 by the City's term limit laws to beat him.

Why do we keep getting stuck with the same elected officials? Because the deck is stacked against candidates who dare to challenge incumbents. Heard of Congressional pork barrel projects? Well, New York's elected officials receive hundreds of thousands of dollars or more in "discretionary" money – known as "member items" – that they use to buy support for their reelection campaigns or to threaten organizations that if they don't play ball they'll wind up stripped of their government funding.

At the same time, the petitioning system – how candidates get on the ballot so you can vote for them – is carefully designed by our incumbent elected officials to help them knock their opponents off the ballot, so you never even get the choice to vote for anyone but the same old crowd. The few opponents who do survive the petitioning process are drawn into costly legal battles by the incumbents to drain their challengers' campaigns of resources and time.

They also get to plaster their names on garbage cans, government buildings, and community developments to ensure they have superior name recognition – all too often the decisive factor in local races where only the most attentive voters know who the candidates are and the majority of people cast their vote simply for the name they've heard the most.

There are many other advantages that keep the same old elected officials coming back election after election, like media favoritism and the ability for incumbents to send out taxpayer-funded campaign literature that they pretend is a community report, but to list all their tricks would take days.

The bottom line is that without term limits incumbents stay in office for as long as they like. The only way they leave is if they are elected or appointed to higher office, retire, die, or go to prison. Far too often in New York City politics, the last of these is what finally brings our incumbents' careers to an end.

Barack Obama and Why Now is the Time for Change

The Obama campaign didn't just succeed in rallying a nation behind an extraordinary candidate, it proved that democracy is once again alive and well in America. By using the power of the Internet and grassroots organizing with unprecedented intelligence and purpose, the Obama campaign gave America what we were craving: choice.

For once, we had the choice of a candidate who wasn't a Washington insider, who wasn't already owned by lobbyists and special interests, who wasn't the heir to a family fortune or a dynasty of elected officials. Given real choice for the first time in many of our lives, the people responded with awe-inspiring excitement, gratitude, and dedication. Millions of donors gave what little they could afford, understanding that no sacrifice was too great to buy back our country's founding principles. Tens of thousands gave up days, weeks, months of their lives to volunteer.

Everyone told someone that it wasn't too late to change America if we all worked together.

ChangeNYC.Org is here to change New York City, just like Barack Obama emerged out of nowhere to change America. We know that in order for the Obama Administration to succeed in achieving its great countywide aims, every city, every neighborhood and every block in this country must do its part.

And the greatest city in America – our City – must work harder than any place to ensure that the change we need is the change we accomplish.

We have a long way to go. Before we can fully restore the people's faith in our local government, we must renew our voice in our own communities and reconnect to the decision-making process that shapes our everyday lives.

Thankfully, on the national level, Barack Obama has already shown us the way.

How the Internet Will Change NYC

Just like the Internet has transformed the media, shopping, and business, now it can be used to transform our government. The Obama campaign proved that the Internet can increase the participation of ordinary people in their government, democratize campaign fundraising, build a political organization run by regular citizens, and educate the public about the many important issues that affect our everyday lives.

Up until now, politics as usual has thrived in New York City by hiding its true face from New Yorkers. Under a thin guise of transparency, the majority of decisions really affecting our political system are still made in backroom deals between all-powerful party leaders – just like they were in the infamous days of Tammany Hall. Government contracts, judgeships, influential appointments, candidate nominations – all are divvied up by these powerbrokers behind closed doors.

These party bosses aren't the politicians pushing their way in front of the television cameras. They're the guys who understand that real power resides behind the scenes, so that the media and the public don't think to ask too many questions. They're the players who get together behind closed doors and pick the Council Speaker, the second most powerful person in New York City after the Mayor.

But now with the Internet, we finally have the tool to expose these shadowy figures. We also have the instrument to make the critical decisions these bosses have made in our name for decades. The key to this transformation is Internet voting.

Choice is Change: The Power of Internet Elections

The more choices voters have, the stronger our democracy. That's the spirit of the government our Founding Fathers set up. The record-breaking turnout in this year's Democratic presidential primary was in large part a result of the fact that voters felt that for the first time in recent memory they had real choice at the polls. As an old-time New York politician said, if one candidate gets 51 percent of the vote and the other gets 49 percent, it's the people who win.

It's uncompetitive elections that keep our government from moving forward into the future. We have elected officials in New York City who have been in power since the *early 1970s*, who haven't once faced a serious opponent since they got into office. What's the incentive for these politicians to keep doing better?

If more people participated in voting and saw how limited their choices really are, then there would be more interest in the candidates and a greater motivation for more concerned citizens to run for office. There's no better way to open the system and get more people involved than Internet elections.

Many people are suspicious whether Internet elections are safe from manipulation. These are the same fears that many of us had about our credit card information when we first started shopping online. While protections against identity theft have become very sophisticated in the private sector, we must still be careful to test the security of online voting technology in the early stages of its implementation.

This testing is already being performed on a national level. In 2004, Americans living abroad were allowed to vote on the Web in the general election for President for the first time in our nation's history. In 2008, the Democratic Party extended this right to Americans living abroad to vote in the presidential primary. Democrats who registered to vote online received an encrypted email with a 10-digit ballot number and an eight-digit PIN. Of course, experts admit no online voting system is 100 percent secure, but Americans who cast their ballots for President in Florida in 2000 or Ohio in 2004, know that no voting system – paper or electronic – is 100 percent tamper-proof. What is clear, say many Americans

living abroad, is that they wouldn't have bothered voting, if they didn't have the option to do so from the hassle-free convenience of their home or a nearby Internet café.

Everyone who believes in the people's right to participate in their government and determine their own destiny must join the effort to accomplish this goal. Especially in a City filled with so many busy people, it makes sense to give New Yorkers an option to vote where they don't have to stand on line or miss work. They could even do so from their office desk in ten minutes or less on their lunch hour.

The best way for New York City's Democratic Party to reinvigorate its members is to embrace this 21st Century approach to democratic action that the national party has already begun.

To make sure Internet voting works, Democrats should start by electing our party officials online: county committee members, district leaders, even the county leader. Right now, the majority of these officials don't have to worry about elections, because they're never challenged by an opponent. But even in the rare case that they are, county committee and district leader are positions that inspire so few Democrats to come out to the polls that they wind up decided by only a few hundred votes – and in some cases, a few dozen.

The all-powerful county leaders are currently selected exclusively by party insiders at each borough's biennial meeting, thus ensuring that the existing power structure stays firmly intact year after year.

Without a doubt, these county leaders will heatedly object to a shift toward online voting. They will attack the move as impractical and expensive, despite the fact that according to an article in *Wired Magazine*, the online system Democrats used to vote abroad for President cost “under \$100,000”.

But the real reason the party bosses will object is that the Democratic leadership sustains itself on the disillusionment, isolation, and inconvenience of its members. The truth is that when you vote, the people win. When you stay home, the bosses win.

The current system of elections creates weak representation. But it even debilitates our good elected officials, because when so few people feel connected to City government our politicians lack the powerful public mandate necessary to achieve great change. Thousands of more New Yorkers voting online would give our best leaders the momentum they need to push back against the special interests, lobbyists, and elected officials who refuse to act for the public good.

Online elections will also allow voters to make smarter choices at the polls. Rather than checking off a slate of unfamiliar names, voters will be able to instantly Google websites, interviews, blogs, and newspaper endorsements that will give them much greater insight into the candidates' merits. For once, the majority of us will have the tools to make an educated choice in races we haven't bothered to study before Election Day.

To bring real change to New York City's Democratic Party, ChangeNYC.Org will spearhead this movement toward online elections by funding initiatives and supporting candidates who will fight for voter participation and transparency. And we will use the strength of our numbers to pressure the party bosses to let the rest of us Democrats finally move our party and the City into the 21st Century.

After a few years of successfully testing online party elections, ChangeNYC.Org will campaign to extend this innovative voting system to all City and State elections.

A Great Way to Improve Voting For Those Who Don't Surf the Web

Online voting will not replace traditional voting, it will enhance it. But for seniors who don't know how to use the Internet, or New Yorkers who don't have easy access to a computer, there is another important way ChangeNYC.Org aims to open up the political process to increase public participation.

New York has one of the most restrictive systems of voting in the country. That's the main reason why New York ranked an embarrassing 43rd out of the 50 states in voter turnout in 2006.

Almost every other state in the nation makes our voting laws look primitive. There is no good reason why in a busy city like New York we can't allow early voting. In states like Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico it is estimated that as many as 50 percent of voters cast their ballots before this past Election Day. Residents of Virginia, Kentucky, and Georgia had more than a week and a half to vote prior to November 4th. To encourage early voting in California, a suburb of Los Angeles even set up drive-thru voting machines.

ChangeNYC.Org will challenge our elected officials and any candidate running for office in New York City to demonstrate that they are really serious about encouraging New Yorkers to vote. We'll make sure they make it clear to our members how they stand on early voting, and then pressure them to turn their public position into legislative action.

How You Can Finally Attend That Community Meeting You Never Have Time For

Thousands of New Yorkers log on to read their favorite neighborhood blog each day, but only a handful of us make it to the local community meetings that decide what goes on in our neighborhood. That's because so few of us, despite our best intentions, have time to attend these meetings.

Mayor John Lindsay once dreamed of setting up "little City Halls" in storefronts all around New York, so that voters in all five boroughs would have grassroots access to city government. Now, thanks to the Internet, we can make his dream a reality.

In 2009, ChangeNYC.Org will host a series of Internet town halls and ask all New Yorkers how they think we should revise the City Charter and improve our local governments. We will unify the recommendations made by the public and present them to the Mayor, the City Council, and the media, so for once they can see what the people really think and what we really want done to improve our neighborhoods and the City as a whole.

How Community Boards Could Really Represent the Community

In conjunction with this neighborhood-building initiative, ChangeNYC.Org will petition Mayor Bloomberg to include in the next Charter Revision Commission a proposal to reorganize the City's Community Boards to allow Internet membership, online discussion, and Internet voting on issues that come before the Board.

Right now, the way the system is set up, it is very difficult for New Yorkers to oppose anything the government does that they don't like. But if the people had a real say in their Community Boards they would finally have the resource to express the needs of their neighborhoods and empower their grassroots initiatives. Right now, neighborhood groups fighting overdevelopment have no real ally in their battles to preserve their communities. ChangeNYC.Org wants to return the City's Community Boards to the community, so that New Yorkers will have a tool to fight back against their government when their government is refusing to respect and represent their will.

Opening our City government onto the Internet isn't just about voting. It's about empowering the people to break down the barriers that keep us apart, so we can create communities that work together to decide what is best for our City.

And we don't need to stop at Community Boards! We can upgrade precinct councils, neighborhood advisory boards, and parents' school associations to operate online too.

This is how New York City can reconnect the disconnected and revitalize our democracy. Just like BarackObama.com brought millions of Americans into the political process, bringing our City government and Democratic Party online can restore the transformative power of choice to the people of New York.

A Brief History of Change in NYC

In the past 60 years, only two people have truly dared to reform New York City politics. In both instances, their motivations were not so much altruistic, as they were fueled by personal ambition and attempts to gain greater power over their party.

The first wave of reform came under Carmine De Sapio, the last head of Tammany Hall. In 1954, De Sapio campaigned against Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr., the late President's son, eventually persuading Roosevelt to abandon his run for Governor. Eleanor Roosevelt, the former first lady and Franklin's mother, blamed De Sapio for derailing her son's political ambitions and vowed revenge. Using her enormous political influence, over the next seven years Eleanor Roosevelt battled to oust De Sapio from his post as Manhattan's Democratic county leader. Eventually, even De Sapio's old allies, like Mayor Robert F. Wagner, decided it politically expedient to denounce him, and De Sapio's leadership came to an end in 1961 along with the dynasty of Tammany Hall.

What is truly interesting, though, is that in the course of his battle with Roosevelt it was actually De Sapio who became the reformer. De Sapio calculated that his best chance to stay in control of his party was to recast himself as the real reformer and open up the Democratic Party to as many people as possible. It was De Sapio who first welcomed women, African-Americans, and Latinos into New York City's Democratic Party. He named the first Puerto Rican district leader in Manhattan, Anthony Mendez, and pushed Hulan Jack as New York City's first African-American borough president.

De Sapio also fought for rent control and lowering the voting age to 18. He even changed the Democratic Party's rules to allow for the direct elections of district leaders. Prior to De Sapio's reform, district leaders were selected by the county committee and the county leader in the same kind of shady backroom deals in which the county leaders are still chosen today.

Of course, De Sapio was also a crook – he was convicted of conspiracy and bribery in 1969 and ended up serving two years in federal prison – but he was a crook who, unlike today's Democratic leaders, was sensitive to what the people wanted from their elected officials. At the end of the day, De Sapio realized that as long as there were two candidates, he still needed the people to come out to vote for his choice.

The party bosses of today have succeeded in undoing De Sapio's reforms by bringing back the days of Boss Tweed and making sure that the public really only has one choice in elections. That way it doesn't matter what the people want. They only get what their incumbents and the party leaders decide to give them.

Robert Kennedy, the Reformer

After sweeping away the Republican incumbent Kenneth B. Keating in 1964, New York's newly-elected Senator, Robert F. Kennedy, set his sights on claiming control of the State legislature. Throughout his campaign for Senate, Kennedy had been roundly attacked as a carpetbagger – like Hillary Clinton 36 years later – and now with his victory was intent upon consolidating New York's power structure around him, so there wouldn't be any more irritating dissent.

Kennedy tried to clean up Manhattan's Surrogate Court, which to this day remains a piggy bank for party patronage, calling the Court "a political toll booth exacting tribute from widows and orphans." He took aim at cronyism in Albany and fought to strengthen home rule of New York City. He also proposed non-partisan redistricting, a move aimed at eliminating one of the main tools party leaders use to keep their incumbents in office for decades.

Fiercely battled by a faction of the Democratic machine, Kennedy's attempts to take over Albany were ultimately repulsed with the help of the Republicans, who were as deeply invested in maintaining the status quo as the old-line Democrats. Rather than engaging in further infighting, Kennedy, instead, took his movement for reform to the national level, using his Senate seat to advocate for the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, waging anti-poverty campaigns, and eventually running for President in 1968.

Had Kennedy not been assassinated, who knows how he might have changed New York politics forever?

A New Day, A New Formula

In Kennedy's absence, politics in New York has continued as backward as ever for decades now – if not more so. Even Tammany Hall seems a step up from the blatant disregard for the public with which today's party bosses control the City.

"You're living in the past if you think you can still force the public to swallow any candidate you nominate," Carmine De Sapio told *Life* magazine in 1955. "This is a new day and we need a new formula. We have to offer the public what it wants – a slate of reputable officials who will give them good government and after they're in office we'll follow through to see that the people get what we promised them."

Unfortunately for New Yorkers, this formula has never been discovered.

Until now.

ChangeNYC.Org's plan to change New York is an effort to localize the success of Barack Obama and the millions of supporters who joined him on his historic journey to the White House. Our goal is to welcome every New Yorker back into the political process and unify all of us behind a movement for transparency and true representative democracy. We want to give the people of New York City real choice so they can decide for themselves who the best leaders to represent them will be and how they want those leaders to govern.

This is the most exciting time in American politics in generations. Now that all of us have achieved something so special in electing President Obama, it is absolutely essential that we keep up this amazing momentum for change. If we all just pat ourselves on the back for a job well done and give up pushing for a better nation, we will never accomplish the change we so desperately need.

This change begins at home. We all have to get involved to make sure President Obama's reforms don't bypass New York. By bringing the spirit and the innovation that made the Obama campaign such a success to local politics, we can change New York City the same way we have all worked together to change America.

The failed government of our parents' and grandparents' New York City need not be the government of our children and our grandchildren. By coming together as one City, we can finally change New York once and for all.