

EDITORIAL

Restore integrity to the ballot

To end deal-making and give voters more choices, lawmakers should ban cross-endorsements

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Five people ran for governor of New York last fall. But when voters went to polling places on Election Day, they found those five names listed on 10 different ballot lines.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo ran as the candidate of the Democratic, Working Families, Independence and Women's Equality parties. Marc Molinaro, his principal opponent, was the choice of the Republican, Conservative and Reform parties.

That's fusion voting — being allowed to appear on multiple ballot lines by receiving cross-endorsements from different parties.

And it stinks.

At best, it's a practice whose time has come and gone.

At worst, it's a way for parties to manipulate elections by making back-room deals that deprive voters of choices, divvy up the spoils of patronage, and let party bosses cling to power — as is the case in Suffolk County.

At a minimum, it's a mockery of the idea that a political party should stand for its own set of principles and run candidates that share those positions and values. And it gives minor parties influence not commensurate with their size, by giving them a vehicle to force major parties to adopt more extreme positions (or deliver jobs) in exchange for endorsements.

With the state Democratic Party recently approving a resolution to ban fusion voting, there is more energy than ever supporting its prohibition. Though there is no bill pending in the State Legislature, the time for this reform has come.

Fusion voting once was widespread, but states began outlawing it in the late 19th century as minor parties began using it successfully to their advantage. Only four states still allow candidates to appear on multiple ballot lines. Another four states allow candidates to receive multiple endorsements but limit them to one ballot line, so as not to confuse voters with lots of boxes and to keep ballots shorter.

In New York, the two major parties, Democratic and Republican, typically run

Family Court Judge (Vote for One)	District Attorney (Vote for One)	County Treasurer (Vote for One)	Sheriff (Vote for One)	Court Legislator (14th District) (Vote for One)
Democratic 5A <input type="radio"/> Thomas J Spota III	Democratic 6A <input type="radio"/> Thomas J Spota III	Democratic 7A <input type="radio"/> Angie M Carpenter	Democratic 8A <input type="radio"/> Vincent F De Marco	Democratic 9A <input type="radio"/> Thomas Dolan
Republican 5B <input type="radio"/> Thomas J Spota III	Republican 6B <input type="radio"/> Thomas J Spota III	Republican 7B <input type="radio"/> Angie M Carpenter	Republican 8B <input type="radio"/> Vincent F De Marco	Republican 9B <input type="radio"/> Kevin J Mc Caffrey
Conservative 5C <input type="radio"/> Thomas J Spota III	Conservative 6C <input type="radio"/> Thomas J Spota III	Conservative 7C <input type="radio"/> Angie M Carpenter	Conservative 8C <input type="radio"/> Vincent F De Marco	Conservative 9C <input type="radio"/> Kevin J Mc Caffrey
Independence 5E <input type="radio"/> Thomas J Spota III	Independence 6E <input type="radio"/> Thomas J Spota III	Independence 7E <input type="radio"/> Angie M Carpenter	Independence 8E <input type="radio"/> Vincent F De Marco	Independence 9E <input type="radio"/> The Schaffer Team Thomas E

Because of deals between political parties, the three candidates for Suffolk County-wide office in 2013 faced no opposition, depriving voters of choices.

their own candidates, many of whom welcome minor-party endorsements. Among minor parties, only the Greens and Libertarians consistently field their own candidates with well-defined platforms — and each garnered more than the 50,000 votes in the 2018 gubernatorial election to gain a guaranteed spot on the ballot for four years. Some minor parties, like the Independence and Reform parties, are ideologically bankrupt.

The Working Families and Conservative parties generally function as the more extreme wings of the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively. They say fusion voting allows people to vote for a candidate on a different line to show their support for a more liberal or conservative viewpoint than typically

expressed by the candidate.

But the same goal can be accomplished via a primary — as when lefty newcomer Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez beat incumbent Joe Crowley in a Democratic congressional primary last year. In a maddening twist possible only via fusion voting, Crowley remained on the Working Families line in November; the minor party had given him its pre-primary endorsement over Ocasio-Cortez, who was not generally expected to win. So party officials had to tell their members to abandon their own line and vote Democratic for Ocasio-Cortez. Only in New York.

But that's nothing like the havoc fusion voting wreaks in Suffolk, where voters often literally have no choices — as in 2009 and 2013, when the district attorney,

treasurer and sheriff were unopposed, each running on four lines.

In Suffolk, parties have long made deals on judges, cross-endorsing each other's selections to ensure they split the posts and associated jobs. The Democratic and Conservative parties tried to rig the sheriff's race in 2017 and conspired last year on a megadeal that put eight judges on the bench. The result, according to local lawyers, is an increasingly weakened judiciary filled with mediocre judges.

Ask yourself this: In what honest scenario could Democrats and Conservatives endorse the same candidate?

The state Conservative Party often holds Republicans hostage, too, by threatening not to endorse them, a handicap Long Island's GOP senators saw far too late.

Much of the opposition to banning fusion voting comes from the Working Families Party, which supported most of the Democrats now in the Senate majority. Last week, 26 of them signed a letter saying they want to keep fusion voting. Some privately have told leadership they would shut down government by refusing to approve any state budget that includes a ban.

But the Working Families Party functions in 18 states, according to its website, only four of which allow fusion voting. As for the contention that the drive to eliminate fusion voting stems from Cuomo's anger over Working Families support for rival Cynthia Nixon in last year's Democratic primary, that's irrelevant to whether fusion voting is a good idea.

What would happen if fusion voting died? Ballots would be simplified, with one candidate on one line. A candidate would not be held hostage by a minor party in exchange for its line. Legitimate minor parties with clear philosophical positions would benefit as illegitimate parties fall by the wayside. A party still could allow someone not from the party to run on its line via a Wilson Pakula certificate, but only on its line.

And don't assume that minor-party candidates would never win. In 1990, Conservative James Buckley was elected to the U.S. Senate. Current state Attorney General Letitia James won a New York City Council seat in 2003 as a Working Families candidate.

The State Legislature has taken big steps this year toward making voting easier and elections more fair. Getting rid of fusion voting would help with both goals. Let's get it done.