



Good Government in 2014: A Blueprint for New York's City Elected Officials

Citizens Union is a nonpartisan good government group dedicated to making democracy work for all New Yorkers. We are a civic watchdog, combating corruption and fighting for political reform. We work to ensure fair and open elections, honest and efficient government, and a civically-engaged public. We are New Yorkers from diverse backgrounds and political beliefs, connected to our communities and united in our commitment to put the city's long-term interest ahead of all special interests. Principled and pragmatic, Citizens Union is an independent force for constructive reform, driving policy and educating the public to achieve accountable government in the City and State of New York.

Throughout its history, Citizens Union has successfully championed a nonpartisan approach to leading our city government. Most recently, progress was made in creating more effective lobbying oversight and enforcement, strengthening the city's heralded campaign finance system, establishing a fairer and more accountable council member item program, and creating a more voter-friendly city election system.

Presented below are our principles of good government and values that make democracy work for all New Yorkers. We issue these at the start of a four-year government cycle in which all three citywide officeholders are new, and the council has twenty-one new members and a new speaker. In wishing our newly elected officials well, we applaud the historical significance that for the first time an African-American woman and Latina hold citywide elected office as public advocate and council speaker, respectively.

Governing using these good government principles will beneficially impact every issue before the city, as an effectively and efficiently run government is at the core of the development of sound policy.

1. **Commitment to Public Integrity.** Public corruption has become an all too familiar occurrence in Albany, and it also has swept up officials representing the city. Our public officials must first and foremost be committed to an ethical government that establishes professionalism and integrity as its ethos. An ethical and professional approach should be ingrained in the culture of every office and agency, and monitored effectively by the city through its oversight entities, the Conflicts of Interest Board and the Department of Investigation, which should be provided with adequate resources to conduct their duties.
2. **A Culture of Transparency.** The new officeholders must build on steps made by the previous administration, establishing protocols of openness and sharing of decision-making with the public. The previous administration and City Council in passing a nationally-recognized model Open Data Law, established an open data portal to unleash the city data that drives city government to the public. Council hearings and other public meetings of city agencies are now webcast online and discretionary funding decisions are more accountable, with their data made more available and useful for analysis. Pension board meetings are webcast and expenditures made by city agencies are provided in near real time. The march toward ever-increasing transparency should be a hallmark of the new administration.
3. **Holding Open and Accessible Elections.** The decades-long decline in voting and citizen engagement is a clear and present danger to the vibrancy of our democracy. Less than 1.1 million New Yorkers – an abysmal 23.6% voter turnout – voted in the 2013 general election for mayor, the lowest turnout in at least 60 years. City officials need to use robustly their authority under the law to revolutionize elections and expand access to the ballot for both candidates and voters. Reforming the operations of the City Board of Elections is needed to remove institutional barriers to participation. Unwieldy registration processes need to be digitized and modernized so all New Yorkers can express their choices with ease, and voters need to be better educated about the choices they have on Election Day before arriving at the polls. Stronger public education for voters and novel ways to inspire their participation need to be employed. Implementing nonpartisan elections will also enable all voters and candidates to run in the first and often determinative round of voting. To the extent that changes need to be made at the state level, the city should be a strong voice for reform of our elections in Albany.

4. **Ensuring the Strong Voice of the Public Interest.** Our city's long-standing and model campaign finance laws have stood as a bulwark against the flood of independent spending unleashed by the *Citizens United* decision. Our lobbying laws have been dramatically improved, beginning in 2006 and continuing in 2013 with greater disclosure and better enforcement. Yet powerful interests and individual insiders can still exert undue influence on our elected officials. We recognize and encourage the lobbying of government as a critical element of a robust democracy that provides important information to our public officials, but our decision-makers must ensure that the public interest prevails against policies that serve the few at the expense of the many.
5. **Balanced Governance.** A well-run city enables all of our elected officials to come to the table and offer their insights and solutions to the issues facing New Yorkers. City Council Rules that extend the reforms of recent years – while smartly balancing the ability of individual members to be effective representatives with the need for a council speaker to be an effective counterweight to the mayor – are essential to ensuring that all voices are heard. While all major citywide offices and the Council Speaker will be held by the same party for the first time in a generation, a vibrant discussion of ideas should mark our formation of policy even while recognizing the unity of those in power. To that end, independent budgeting for offices that serve as a counterweight to the mayor should be provided.
6. **Inclusive and Participatory Governance.** Our large and diverse city must ensure that there are ample opportunities for input so all voices are heard and valued as part of the decision-making process. While this is most fundamentally realized through election reforms, all New Yorkers should also be engaged to participate in community boards, shape discretionary funding decisions, and inform land use and development decision-making. This broader view of involvement enables all to participate. Taking steps to increase civic education in our public schools would help young people become better citizens.
7. **Effective and Efficient Administration of Government that is Responsive and Responsible.** A strong mayoralty has contributed to our city's ascendance; this is something that few could have imagined decades ago. Yet not all New Yorkers have benefited from the economic gains the city has made. The challenge for the next administration is to improve upon the solid foundation that has been built and provide greater opportunity so that the benefits of the city's economic resurgence are available and accessible to all New Yorkers. It must value all who contribute to creating our city's strong civic fabric and create avenues for meaningful participation in the decision-making process. That begins with a government that efficiently and responsibly delivers city services and programs that allow greater access to economic opportunities that allow access to a more shared prosperity for all.
8. **Professional Governance.** Many of the new officeholders have admirably risen up through the party ranks and their neighborhoods to now lead our city. We expect our new leaders will transcend party politics and serve the broader and wider constituency, even while acknowledging their roots in acquiring their new roles. They must let the public interest drive their decision-making above all else, and attract skilled and qualified executive, managerial and non-managerial candidates to ensure that city government runs well, and represents all communities effectively. Integral to this effort is modernizing our civil service laws so that all workers can reach their potential while ensuring that due process is provided with regard to management decisions. A professionalized workforce that is well trained, appropriately compensated, merit-based, and given opportunities to develop professionally will be best positioned to lead the city into the future.
9. **Public Safety with Unparalleled Professionalism.** New York has experienced historic decreases in crime that have resurrected neighborhoods throughout the city in ways not conceivable decades ago. The brave men and women in the police force are deserving of great praise for this historic accomplishment. Yet the newfound levels of safety have been accompanied by tactics which have undercut the sense of security in certain communities and resulted in their alienation. The new mayor and police commissioner appear poised to adopt a policy on stop, question and frisk that truly reflects the reasonable suspicion standard and is employed with greater precision, diminished frequency and the utmost professionalism. The new Inspector General and existing entities like the Civilian Complaint Review Board should closely monitor stop, question and frisk and other police conduct to ensure that respect for the constitutional rights of the people is always maintained.
10. **Public Education that Engages.** The city's education system has undergone landmark changes in the last 12 years, dramatically centralizing administration under mayoral control and adopting an evidence-based approach to school and student assessment. Yet a centralized approach necessary to move such a large government agency needs to be more inclusive of the very people it serves: students and their parents. The mayor and new schools chancellor must focus on giving all stakeholders a more meaningful role while still maintaining a vision that results in continued student achievement that allows for creative thinking and teacher accountability.