



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Media contact: Susan von Seggern, Independent Voter Project
213-840-0077, susan@susanvonseggern.com

Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans Sue New York Over Closed Primaries That Shut Out 3.1 Million Voters

Federal lawsuit says the State of New York disenfranchises millions of voters, including war veterans.

NEW YORK, October 1, 2026. Paul Rieckhoff, an Army combat veteran who led an infantry platoon in Baghdad, and Kristen Rouse, who served 32 years in the Army, the Army Reserve, and the Army National Guard, including three tours in Afghanistan, filed a federal lawsuit today challenging New York's closed primary system, which bars any voter who has not joined a political party from voting in primary elections that are paid for by taxpayers and administered by public officials.

The suit, filed in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, was brought by Rieckhoff and Rouse together with Independent Veterans of America, the organization Rieckhoff founded, and the Independent Voter Project. It names the New York State Board of Elections and the New York City Board of Elections. No political party is a defendant.

"I took an oath to defend the Constitution, and New York tells me I can't vote in the election that actually decides who represents me unless I join a political party that I don't agree with," Rieckhoff said. "I don't want to join a political party. I just want a meaningful opportunity to vote."

According to the State Board of Elections, 3,187,610 New Yorkers, 25.4 percent of active registered voters, are registered with no party. That is more New Yorkers than are enrolled in the Republican Party. Every one of them is barred from every primary in the state.

Additionally, a poll commissioned by Open Primaries found that up to 40% of Democrats in NYC aren't really Democrats at all. They are reluctantly registered with the Democratic Party just so they have the opportunity to vote in primaries.

In most of New York, the primary is the election. In November 2024, of the 239 races for Congress, State Senate, and Assembly, 77 were uncontested and another 134 were decided by more than ten points. Only 28 were even close. In June 2026, the only contested statewide primary drew fewer than 980,000 ballots, roughly 7 percent of the state's active voters.

To vote in a June primary, a New Yorker must enroll in a party by February 14, on a sworn form that becomes a public record the State publishes and sells. After the deadline, the enrollment cannot be undone until after the primary.

Summary of the Complaint Against New York

The complaint does not ask any party to open its primary to non-members. The lawsuit challenges the State's decision to require party membership as a condition of participating at an important stage of the public election process.

"The right to vote derives from citizenship, not from joining a political party," said S. Chad Peace, lead counsel and legal strategist for the Independent Voter Project. "That's all this lawsuit is about. Do elections belong to the political parties, or to the voters? We represent the voters."

"New York's own constitution says no member of this state shall be disfranchised," said Samuel Gregory, a Brooklyn trial attorney and local counsel for the plaintiffs. "Yet, New York disenfranchises millions of voters, veterans among them, just because they don't join a party."

The lawsuit simply asks the court to declare the State's requirement that a voter join a private political organization as a condition of participating fully in the public election process unconstitutional. If the Plaintiffs are successful, the Legislature would have the first opportunity to design a primary that gives every voter a ballot.

New York Veterans

New York is home to more than 580,000 veterans. The lawsuit is the centerpiece of Let Vets Vote, a campaign launched today in New York City by Independent Veterans of America, the Independent Voter Project, and Veterans for All Voters to secure a primary ballot for every New Yorker.

Rouse, of Brooklyn, founded the NYC Veterans Alliance and served as a Deputy Director of the New York State Division of Veterans' Services (now the Department of Veterans' Services). She first enrolled in a political party for one reason: it was the only way to vote in the primary. In 2021 she left that party as a matter of conscience and enrolled in the Working Families Party, believing she could still vote in primaries. She could not, because that party holds no primaries in her districts. She has now filed to withdraw her enrollment and, under current law, will not receive a primary ballot again unless she rejoins a party.

"I spent 32 years in uniform serving my country, not a political party. I shouldn't have to sign up with a party to vote in a public election," Rouse said.

"We served our country to defend the Constitution and the fundamental democratic rights of every American. Our families stood beside us, and some of our brothers and sisters in arms paid the ultimate sacrifice. Yet veterans who return home to New York and remain unaffiliated with a political party are barred from voting in taxpayer-funded party primaries. This lawsuit asks whether that exclusion violates the very constitutional rights we served to defend," said Alberto Ramos, Navy veteran and CEO of Veterans for All Voters

The complaint, *Rieckhoff, et al. v. Berger, et al.* (26-cv-08655), will be made available at LetVetsVote.org and IndependentVoterProject.org.

About Independent Voter Project

The Independent Voter Project is a nonpartisan nonprofit that works to give every voter a ballot in publicly funded elections and authored California's nonpartisan primary election system, Proposition 14, in 2010. <https://independentvoterproject.org/>

About Independent Veterans of America

Independent Veterans of America organizes politically independent veterans to defend and strengthen American democracy. It was founded in 2024 by Paul Rieckhoff, founder of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. <https://independentveteransofamerica.org/>

About Veterans for All Voters

Veterans for All Voters unites veterans behind reforms that reduce polarization and strengthen accountability in American politics. <https://veteransforallvoters.org/>