



RJC Ballot Question FAQs

The Commission's ballot questions are based on what we heard from New Yorkers. The intention behind each is to put racial equity at the heart of City government. The Commission aimed to propose changes that are structural, which get at the roots of racial inequity in the city. We are pleased to present them to New York City voters in November.

For more details on the ballot questions, please read our final report. Our final report contains a summary of the Commission's work, process, and intentions behind each ballot question. The report also provides background and analysis of structural racism in New York City.

<https://racialjustice.cityofnewyork.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Final-Report-of-the-NYC-Racial-Justice-Commission.pdf>

Ballot Question #1: A Statement of Values to Guide Government

What is it?

This proposal would add a preamble to the City's charter. A preamble is an introductory statement that explains the purpose or goals of a legal document, such as a constitution or statute. The proposed preamble defines our collective values and acknowledges our history through a guiding statement.

The values in the proposed preamble are taken directly from public input. The RJC studied preambles from other countries, states, and cities and held conversations with local and national community leaders, academics, activists, young people, and faith leaders virtually and in person in all five boroughs. Through these efforts, the RJC identified values—like equity, fairness, compassion, accountability, and justice—that matter most to New Yorkers.

The proposed preamble:

- Recognizes harms of the past
- Recognizes the contributions and leadership of New Yorkers who fought for justice
- Puts forth a vision of a just and equitable city based on New Yorkers' values

Why is this important?

The RJC believes it is important that our foundational law acknowledges our history and articulates a vision of quality, resilient, and well-resourced neighborhoods and lives for all New Yorkers. During the charter revision process, our commissioners were surprised to learn that the New York City charter does not currently have a preamble. There is no section in the charter which clearly states the foundational values of New Yorkers.

Additionally, truth-telling is a critical part of the RJC's work to begin dismantling structural racism. As a first step towards truth, reconciliation, and repair, the proposed preamble would enshrine in the City's constitution an acknowledgement of historical wrongs and the ugly truth of racism and discrimination in our city. For example, it recognizes the historical efforts of Asian immigrants in shaping New York City—particularly important now when many Asians may not feel that their city fully embraces their



contributions. The preamble acknowledges the contributions of historically excluded groups so that the city can begin to move towards healing and justice.

The RJC believes that New York City government should be guided by New York City values. The purpose of adding a preamble is to clearly state a vision for our city, grounded in an understanding of our history and our values as New Yorkers. Adding a preamble would allow New Yorkers to adopt a vision and foundational values for New York City to guide City government in fulfilling its duties.

How does it work?

Beyond words, the preamble is intended to have an actual effect on the way City government works. The proposed preamble instructs City agencies and officials to use it as a guide as they carry out their duties. The preamble is intended to guide how City government fulfills its planning, review and auditing functions to move towards the vision set out in the preamble.

The proposed preamble is intended to reset City government and City officials towards this new vision of equity and justice for all New Yorkers. It calls on us as New Yorkers to reconstruct, revise, and reimagine our foundations, structures, institutions, and laws, in order to promote justice and equity for all. It states that the City must strive to remedy past and continuing harms. This “reset” of City government will guide government in carrying out its functions, including in determining what New Yorkers need to thrive, such as new investments in their neighborhoods, services provided in easy-to-understand languages that they speak, or quality hospitals and schools where they live.

While the preamble does not create a private right of action, it is intended to lay out a vision that the City should hold itself to and that New Yorkers could point to when seeking to hold government accountable. City agencies will be directed to use the preamble as a guide for developing their programs and reviewing their performance. Advocates can point to the preamble in conversations about the role City government ought to play in society.

Ballot Question #2: Create A Racial Equity Office, Plan, and Commission

What is it?

This proposal would create an Office of Racial Equity, a citywide Racial Equity Plan, and a Commission on Racial Equity.

The Office of Racial Equity would be required to work with every City agency to create Racial Equity Plans with data measuring disparities. Those plans would all roll up into a citywide Racial Equity Plan that the mayor is responsible for. The creation of these plans must happen at the same time as agencies are engaged in the budget process.

The Office of Racial Equity would also be responsible for creating best practices to make City services and programs more equitable and accessible to New Yorkers, such as improving language access, making sure resources reach underserved neighborhoods, and addressing the ways certain groups can become marginalized or excluded.



The Commission on Racial Equity would be an independent body that identifies priorities for the citywide Racial Equity Plan based on community input. The Commission on Racial Equity would also review and report on the citywide Racial Equity Plan. Different City officials would appoint 15 members to lead the Commission on Racial Equity. The commissioners are meant to reflect New York's diverse communities.

Why is this important?

The RJC believes this proposal is important because it would make the mayor and every City agency responsible for racial equity. This proposal is intended to put racial equity at the heart of City government. The Racial Equity infrastructure is designed to create a framework that gets at the roots of racial disparities in NYC. And that framework is designed to evolve, adapt, and grow over time.

RJC believes that, if approved by New York City voters, this proposal would be the most bold and ambitious racial equity infrastructure in the U.S.

This is not meant to be just another office. The RJC believes that City government needs a central body to ensure that this work is coordinated across *all* agencies. *Every* City agency – from Administration for Children's Services (ACS) to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) – would be responsible for creating a plan to address racial equity. This planning process is required to happen while agencies are putting together their budgets. This way, agencies can make sure their racial equity work has enough resources and money to succeed. And there is an independent "check" on that process – the Commission on Racial Equity.

The Commission on Racial Equity would not be your typical NYC commission. It is designed to include nontraditional voices and perspectives. Having different City officials appoint commissioners is meant to provide checks and balances among elected officials. The Commission on Racial Equity is intended to ensure accountability and that community voices are heard in the process.

The Racial Equity Plans are important because even though we all know that disparities exist, it is still important to measure them. Officials and the public need this data to understand whether current or new policies are making those gaps better or worse. The data is also necessary to know what neighborhoods have the worst disparities so that officials can prioritize programs and resources that will address those disparities. The plans would make agencies responsible for explaining how they will address disparities and improve outcomes for all.

How does it work?

Racial Equity Plans

Every two years, during the City's budgeting process, all City agencies will have to develop Racial Equity Plans. Those plans would all roll up into a citywide Racial Equity Plan that the mayor has responsibility over.

The Racial Equity Plans would include data to measure whether the agency is improving racial equity or not in their work. Agencies must collect and submit data to prove the effectiveness of their plans. The



plans must include both short-term strategies for immediate relief and long-term strategies to address root causes of inequity.

Office of Racial Equity

The mayor would be responsible for appointing a Chief Equity Officer to lead the Office of Racial Equity. The Office of Racial Equity would act as the coordinating body for development of the Racial Equity Plans.

The Office of Racial Equity would be responsible for setting standards for disaggregating data to show differences in wellbeing between New Yorkers of different races or ethnicities, and among different neighborhoods. This would allow government to more precisely target the needs of specific communities and neighborhoods.

In addition, the Office of Racial Equity would be responsible for creating neighborhood maps to understand what neighborhoods are underserved. Also, the Office of Racial Equity must create best practices for City agencies to prioritize ease of use, language justice, and access, including physical accessibility, to remove barriers that make access to government time-consuming and difficult for New Yorkers. Finally, the Office of Racial Equity would be responsible for advancing policies and best practices that address how people and communities have been marginalized.

Commission on Racial Equity

The Commission on Racial Equity would gather community input to identify priorities to be included in the Racial Equity Plans. The Commission on Racial Equity would have opportunities to respond to the City's Racial Equity Plans, review data, and issue its own reports on the City's progress.

The Commission on Racial Equity will be independent of the mayor's office and serve as a "check" on the mayor's Racial Equity Plan. The Commission on Racial Equity will be made up of 15 commissioners from every borough appointed by the mayor, the City Council, Comptroller, and Public Advocate. City officials would be required to appoint commissioners that represent or have experience advocating for everyday New Yorkers impacted by structural racism, including people who have never served on a commission or board before, people who have lived in public housing, people who have been formerly incarcerated, and people who represent youth voices.

Ballot Question #3: Measure the True Cost of Living

What is it?

This proposal would require the City to measure the True Cost of Living. The City would be required to calculate the average amount necessary to cover the cost of essential needs in New York City and report on it every year.

Why is this important?

The RJC believes that the True Cost of Living will be a necessary first step towards economic justice by emphasizing a standard of dignity rather than emphasizing staying just above poverty or the most



impoverished conditions. The True Cost of Living is meant to change the conversation by focusing us on the actual cost of living in New York City, rather than an extremely low, poverty-based number.

Did you know that the federal poverty guideline says that a family of four in NYC does not live in poverty if they have an income of \$26,501? Every New Yorker knows that number is unrealistically low. That is because the federal poverty guideline criteria, which have not been updated since the 1960s, do not factor in regional cost differences.

The RJC believes that New Yorkers should be able to do more than simply exist in a never-ending cycle of poverty. The True Cost of Living measure can help to identify what it would take to live above a subsistence level.

Requiring the City to measure the True Cost of Living is meant to guide the City's decisions as it develops and administers programs and services, and as it sets wages for its own employees and contractors' employees. Similarly, the RJC intends that the True Cost of Living measure be used as a tool by advocates, unions, workers, and policymakers to advance changes that lift New Yorkers out of poverty into a standard of living with dignity.

This is a foundational change in response to many stories we heard about the unaffordability crisis in New York City disproportionately impacting New Yorkers of color.

How does it work?

Every year, the City would have to measure the true cost of living. The City would be required to calculate the average costs of essential needs including, but not limited to, housing, childcare, child and dependent expenses, food, transportation, healthcare, clothing and shoes, menstrual products, general hygiene products, cleaning products, household items, telephone service, internet service, and other necessary costs, which could include costs such as tax obligations. Public assistance or charity would not be counted against these costs. Rather, the calculation would be a total of what it costs to meet those essential needs in our city without relying on public or private assistance. The City would be required to publicly report this measure every year.

The purpose of the True Cost of Living is not to give money to, or take money away from, New Yorkers. Instead, the RJC began with a core idea: not knowing the true cost to live in NYC makes it impossible to discuss the state of economic wellbeing of New Yorkers. When we more concretely define the cost required to live with dignity, we can work on solutions to support those struggling and prevent cycles of poverty from affecting future generations.