Harold Ford Jr.'s interest in running for the senate seat from New York currently held by Kirsten Gillibrand has been met by discouragement from the Democratic political leadership in New York and Washington. Ford is, in many respects, not a great candidate for that seat. His record on abortion rights and marriage equality is not likely to be well received by a New York primary electorate. His roots in the state are not deep, as he only moved here following a narrow defeat for a U.S. Senate seat from his home state in Tennessee in 2006, although there is some precedent of electing people from out of state to the Senate in New York. Should Ford decide to run, Senator Gillibrand's substantial initial fundraising edge would give her an additional advantage.

The leadership of the Democratic Party has not lined up behind Gillibrand so much as they have lined up against the idea of Ford's candidacy. Ford's is not the first name which has been floated as a potential primary opponent to Gillibrand. More formidable politicians with better records for the liberal primary electorate and solid roots in New York politics such as Representatives Carolyn Maloney and Steve Israel and Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer have evinced some interest in the race before deciding not to run, presumably at least partially due to the pressure they both encountered from state and national party leadership.

All of these candidates have been pressured not to run, raising the question of why New York State's Democratic leadership is so opposed to an unproven and unelected senator being challenged in a primary. This pressure seems to originate from two ideas. First, there is an assumption, which is rarely challenged, that competitive Democratic primaries make it more difficult for the Democrat to win in November. Second, the political leadership is articulating a general aversion to incumbents facing primary challenges.

Each of these ideas is flawed, but combined they create genuine problems for our democracy. The first notion doesn't stand up to serious scrutiny. While bruising primaries can damage the eventual winner, they often have the opposite effect. The challenge Hillary Clinton presented to Barack Obama, for example, while frustrating for Obama at the time, probably made him a stronger candidate against John McCain. Chuck Schumer, New York's senior senator, and one of the state's loudest voices against potential Gillibrand opponents won a competitive multi-party primary in 1998 before defeating incumbent Republican Senator Al D'Amato in the general election. There are, of course, many examples of Democrats who have lost after difficult primaries as well, but there is no clear pattern that tough primaries make it harder in the general election.

The view that primaries make it tougher to win in November, while not as accurate as some seem to believe, it at least grounded in some notion of what is best for the party. The more generalized aversion to primaries against incumbents is a more serious problem. In states and districts that are largely dominated by one party, primaries are often the only time the voters get to weigh in
on choosing their representatives. This problem is particularly acute with regards to Senator Gillibrand a woman who not only was not elected to the Senate, but was appointed by somebody who was not elected to the governor's office. Unless we accept the fiction that voters care about about running mates when they vote for governor, Gillibrand is two degrees of separation away from having been elected to her senate seat.

If Gillibrand gets elected, or more accurately, confirmed by the voters, this November, she will likely be in the senate a long time as it is very difficult to defeat an entrenched Democratic statewide office holder in New York. Gillibrand may have a long and successful senate career ahead of her, but the voters should have the right to evaluate her at least this once. There is also, however, a real risk that comes from helping Gillibrand avert a primary. Before she was appointed last year, Gillibrand had never run in a major race subject to the scrutiny of the New York City, and therefore national, media. If Gillibrand has been involved in a scandal, taken money from the wrong people or is simply a poor campaigner, it would be good to know that before she is her party's general election candidate in November.

Efforts to dissuade potential primary opponents are part of a broader view among much of the political elite that primaries are never good. This was one of the main factors leading many prominent Democrats to rush to support Joe Lieberman against a progressive primary challenge in 2006. This sentiment is one of almost undisguised contempt for the people. It demonstrates how senators, and other political elites, view themselves as members of a select group who, on a very important level, are not responsible to the voters. To view primaries as anything other than a legitimate and important part of the political system is to suggest that ultimately the people do not know best. This is, of course, runs against a basic tenet of democracy and our political system.

Politicians in the U.S. do not measure success by winning elections, but by avoiding them altogether. Raising a formidable amount of money, pressuring potential opponents and, more benignly, maintaining strong support, are all ways of doing this. Often the failure of a serious opponent to emerge is due to the strength and popularity of a particular candidate, but when it happens too frequently, due to the intervention of other political elites, it has a destructive impact on the political system, causing leaders to forget the import of being accountable to the people and ultimately limiting the choices available to voters.