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For More Information:
Neal Rosenstein (917) 575-4317
nrosenstein@nypirg.org

Ten Common Sense Steps to Better Elections in New York State

Despite the huge increase in turnout for the midterm elections, New York's antiquated election laws continue to depress participation at the polls. One of Albany's first jobs in 2019 should be to institute a series of common-sense reforms to knock down long standing barriers to the ballot. With Democrats now firmly in control of both houses of the legislature and Governor's mansion, the time for finger pointing is over and the time for enacting meaningful reforms has arrived. NYPIRG offers ten common-sense reforms to NY's archaic elections system.

I. Enact Same Day/Election Day Registration. States with Election Day Registration consistently have the highest participation rates in the country. New York should join more than 15 states with this extraordinarily effective reform.

II. Enact Early Voting. Reduce lines and potential chaotic sites on Election Day with at least ten days and two weekends of early voting - including evening hours for working folks. Early Voting would also reduce the number of voters suffering problems, like broken scanners arising on Election Day that turn them off and drive them away from the polls.

III. Enact Automatic Registration. Use existing government databases like those at the Department of Labor and at SUNY and CUNY to update voters' registration information. It will help clean voter rolls and reduce Affidavit Ballots on Election Day.

IV. Remove Barriers to Youth Voting. Allow 16 & 17 year-olds to pre-register to vote and clarify state law to ensure that college students don't face discrimination when choosing to register from their new college addresses.

V. Allow No-Excuse Absentee Voting. For many voters, getting to a poll site on Election Day is a barrier in and of itself. All voters should have the option of voting by mail, a reform that could also increase participation in typically low-turnout elections.

VI. Replace the patronage structure of Boards of Elections. Our elections should be run by professional civil service employees. Party bosses from the two major parties shouldn't control the process through unaccountable appointments.

VII. Improve Poll Site Management. Give non-emergency County, City, and State workers time-off on Primary and General Election Day if they work the polls. This should improve poll worker standards and poll site operations. Changes in technology also mean we can do away with specific ED sign-in tables and create a more efficient experience for voters.

VIII. Create a Voter's Guide for State and Federal Elections. It's become increasingly hard to distinguish fact from fiction online. The State should publish a voter's guide for state legislative,

statewide and congressional elections and mail a copy to households with registered voters just like they do in other states and for municipal races in NYC.

IX. Ensure the Integrity of Election Results. We've all become aware of the technological threat to our election systems. New York needs to implement risk-limiting post-election audits to ensure voters of the integrity of results and create a Task Force with public participation to start exploring ways to ensure our future elections will be secure.

X. That's Just a Start. This list has focused on actual reforms to the voting process itself, but election reform needs to be comprehensive. Meaningful state campaign finance reform based on NYC's successful program, eliminating state contribution loopholes and enacting an independent redistricting process will all lead to better choices at the polls for all New Yorkers and strengthen democracy.

These common sense reforms will help eliminate the institutionalized voter suppression enshrined in state law that leads to lower voter participation across New York. Let's hope the state politicians elected under the current system have the will to make changes now that this year's election is behind them.

Neal Rosenstein is the Government Reform Coordinator for NYPIRG, the New York Public Interest Research Group.

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