

OTHER VIEW | MERCURY NEWS

Effort could prevent some from voting

Elections have consequences – some of them unintended. How many voters realized that Republican victories in 2010 would mean the disenfranchisement of potentially millions of voters?

Since then, state lawmakers nationwide have introduced more than 180 bills to restrict voting rights, a trend that began during the George W. Bush administration. At least 18 states have passed laws that include requiring photo identification to vote, ending election-day registration and reducing access to early and absentee voting.

The Brennan Center for Justice estimates that as many as 5 million Americans could have difficulty voting this fall as a result.

These laws are no coincidence. They are a coordinated effort among Republicans to narrow the voting population in ways that will increase their power. The courts and the federal government are stopping some of these attempts, but it's like playing Whack-A-Mole.

The courts won't be enough to protect voting rights if people keep electing lawmakers who want to restrict them. Voters need to make this an issue.

The driving force behind the movement is the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council, whose other claim to fame is getting dozens of states to pass the controversial "stand your ground" laws related to the killing of Trayvon Martin. Restricting voting rights has one thing in common with those laws: Both respond to nonexistent threats.

Although sponsors of voting bills claim they're only trying to keep elections fair, numerous studies by election law experts have found zero evidence of widespread voter fraud in the United States. As a 2007 report by the Brennan Center put it, "It is more likely that an individual will be struck by lightning than that he will impersonate another person at the polls."

There is a real danger facing conservative politicians, however: that they will lose power. That's why nearly all of these laws target young, minority and low-income voters likely to vote Democratic. In Texas, for example, a concealed handgun license can be used as identification at the polls, but a student ID can't.

Florida is ground zero in this battle. Republican Gov. Rick Scott ordered county elections officers to purge 2,700 people from the rolls, but his list was riddled with errors. It even included a man who had served in the Battle of the Bulge. *The Miami Herald* found it dominated by Democrats, independents and Hispanics. Fortunately, the U.S. Justice Department is suing Florida, claiming that it is violating the Voting Rights Act.

Florida also passed a bill restricting voter registration drives. It was so Draconian that the League of Women Voters and others stopped registering voters altogether until a federal judge blocked parts of it this month.

Any attempt to narrow the voting population is suspect; increasing voter participation should be a national goal. To reverse this trend, voters need to elect representatives who value voting rights.

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ARTIST'S VIEW



POLITICS | SEN. TOM O'MARA

What's next?

The state Legislature's regular session concluded late last week with a flurry of agreements and actions that addressed some of our most pressing issues: prescription drug abuse, domestic violence, care for people with special needs and cyber bullying, to highlight just a few.

All of these achievements, and many others, followed the enactment of a 2012-2013 state budget that's been widely hailed for its commitment to spend less and not raise taxes, as well as to keep building a stronger foundation for growth throughout the upstate, private-sector economy. In even broader terms, last week capped a two-year session cycle, going back to 2011, when Governor Andrew Cuomo and the Legislature have worked together on issue after issue to turn this state around. In summarizing this year's session, the governor said that it represents "one of the most successful and broad ranging legislative sessions in modern political history. From transformative economic reforms to historic social progress, this session was a magnificent accomplishment for the people of New York State."

So what's next? That's the key question. Because we can't stop now, or rest easy. One place I believe we can find answers to this question, maybe the best answers, is a recently released study by the U.S. Chamber of

Commerce that ranked New York as a Top 10 state for "growth, productivity and livability." No, that's not a misprint. There in fact was some positive news on progress being made to put the New York State economy on a stronger, better course. This latest U.S. Chamber of Commerce

report reaffirms that the actions we've taken in New York over the past two years are beginning to work.

Before concluding our regular session last Thursday, the Legislature and the governor took another step in the right direction by approving a comprehensive strategy to boost one of New York's most vibrant industries, the craft brewing industry, through a series of initiatives including tax incentives and regulatory reform. It was a strong statement in support of agriculture, business and tourism throughout the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions, and statewide – a strong bipartisan effort to recognize a vibrant industry and take steps to help it grow, create jobs and strengthen other key industries.

New York's craft brewing industry offers unlimited economic spin-off opportunities. It already consists of more than 90 breweries, accounts for thousands of jobs and generates more than \$200 million of annual economic activity.

This attention to the craft brewing industry was first included in a comprehensive economic strategy the Senate developed early this year called New Jobs-NY. And since not all of New Jobs-NY has been acted on, I believe it's a great place to turn for a jump-start to looking ahead to the next legislative session.

We need to keep doing anything and everything possible to cut taxes, help businesses grow and control state spending, which is the bedrock of New Jobs-NY. I think it's especially important that the Senate plan targets a manufacturing resurgence as the foundation of future private-sector job growth and economic security for upstate communities and workers.

The Chamber of Commerce report, "Enterprising States," showed New York jumping 11 places into the top 10 for growth, productivity and livability.

The full report can be found on the Chamber's website at: <https://www.uschamber.com/reports/enterprising-states-policies-that-produce> (pp. 13-14 for state-by-state ranking, and pg. 67 for New York information). The study concludes that "states that boost exports, foster innovation, provide businesses with certainty and reasonable taxes, insist on excellence in education, and prioritize infrastructure are leading on job creation and economic growth."

The Senate's New Jobs-NY plan proposes to keep strengthening the state's economic competitiveness and improve New York's business climate through a broad strategy involving significant tax relief, much of it aimed at private-sector job creation, and fiscal responsibility and spending control across state government. Among other groups and organizations, it's supported by leading statewide business organizations including the Business Council of New York, Unshackle Upstate and the National Federation of Independent Businesses.

Additional provisions of the Senate's 2012 New Jobs-NY plan include a two-percent state spending cap; requiring a super-majority vote to increase state taxes; placing a moratorium on new taxes and fees; and new regulatory reforms to cut expensive red tape for businesses.

You can read more about New Jobs-NY on my website, omara.ny.senate.gov.

■ **Sen. Tom O'Mara is a Republican from Big Flats.**

OTHER VIEW | MORNING NEWS

Financial crime hurts all investors

Rajat Gupta, a former Goldman Sachs director, and Houston financier Allen Stanford seemed to embody those possibilities that we call the American Dream. They had dollars, prestige and swagger, and they enjoyed the perks of financial success.

Last week, after federal prosecutors peeled back those facades, both men received the comeuppance that perpetrators of big-dollar financial conspiracies often elude. Stanford was sentenced to 110 years in prison for bilking investors out of more than \$7 billion over two decades. Two days later, a jury convicted Gupta of leaking confidential boardroom information to billionaire hedge fund manager Raj Rajaratnam, an indiscretion that could land Gupta behind bars for up to 25 years.

High-profile financial cases are not easy or inexpensive to prosecute. The issues are complex, and prosecutors often prefer to pick off lower-hanging rotten fruit rather than do hand-to-hand legal combat with well-connected defendants. In winning cases against Gupta and Stanford, federal prosecutors deserve credit for not backing down and, instead, obtaining a measure of justice.

The misdeeds of both men should gnaw at all investors, who should expect to win some and lose some, given the nature of any financial investment. Complex transactions tend to favor the professionals - those who know the deal from the inside - which is why aggressive government enforcement of laws against insider trading and elaborate Ponzi schemes are essential to protecting average investors.

Any time a select few aren't taking the same risks as the rest of us and, in some instances, are actually running a rigged game, federal prosecutors and financial regulators need to haul those violators into court. With record numbers of Americans owning stocks, bonds and other investments, either individually or through retirement accounts, aggressive prosecutions of white-collar criminals are needed to protect the integrity of financial markets.

The irony is that Stanford seemed a self-made man who contributed to charities, and Gupta was a respected businessman and philanthropist; both were in roles that to some degree elevated them above suspicion. The jury foreman in Gupta's case told reporters that he had not wanted to convict. "I wanted to believe the allegations weren't true. Here was a man who came to this country and was a wonderful example of the American Dream."

Yes, but the American Dream is about equal opportunities and the same rules for all, not the sort of financial shenanigans that game the system to benefit a few. So we urge federal prosecutors also to keep financial fraud a top priority. In addition to tough laws against financial crime, the willingness of prosecutors and regulators to haul wrongdoers into court is the best way to police free markets.

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