



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Velmanette Montgomery

# **Protecting New York's Democracy: Senate Democratic Majority Passes Historic Election Reforms**

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## NEW YORK STATE SENATE DEMOCRATIC MAJORITY

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### **Protecting New York's Democracy: Senate Democratic Majority Passes Historic Election Reforms**

(Albany, NY) The Senate Democratic Majority passed major legislation today to improve New York State's broken electoral system. New York consistently ranks as one of the worst voter turnout states in the nation. As the first major act this legislative session, the new Senate Democratic Majority, under the leadership of Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart Cousins, passed a series of bills to establish early voting and no-excuse absentee voting, modernize and expand voter registration, impose limits on LLC contributions, extend Primary Election voting hours and ensure uniformity throughout the state.

"Government should be about breaking down barriers, which is why the Senate Democratic Majority is making it easier for those who are eligible to vote. We need more voices in our democracy, not fewer," Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins said. "Easing access to voting and having New Yorkers exercise their Constitutional right to have their voices heard shouldn't be partisan or controversial."

Other states have taken the lead on issues like early voting, same-day registration, pre-registration, and no-excuse absentee voting. It is time for New York State to catch up, so we can once again lead the way forward.”

**The historic legislation passed by the Senate Democratic Majority includes:**

- **Early Voting:** This bill, S.1102 introduced by Chair of the Elections Committee, Senator Zellnor Myrie, will establish an Early Voting system to permit eligible voters in New York State to vote in person during a designated period.
- **Consolidation of Federal and State Primaries:** This bill, S.1103 introduced by Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, will save taxpayer dollars and make state primary elections the same day as federal primary elections. It also ensures that New York State’s election law complies with the federal Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act.
- **Closing the LLC Loophole:** This bill, S.1101, introduced by Senator Brian Kavanaugh, will amend Election Law to hold LLC’s to the same aggregate contribution limit of \$5,000 that applies to corporations. The amendment would require the disclosure of the identity and proportion of ownership of all direct and indirect owners of the membership interests in the LLC. This legislation will also amend the Election Law to require all contributions made to political committees or campaigns by an LLC be attributed to each member of the LLC in proportion to the member’s ownership interest.
- **Same-Day Voter Registration:** This bill, S.1048 introduced by Deputy Majority Leader Michael Gianaris, amends the constitution to remove the ten-day advance voter registration requirement, subject to second passage of the next legislature and approval by a statewide referendum.
- **No-Excuse Absentee Voting:** This bill, S.1049 introduced by Senator Leroy Comrie will amend the state Constitution to allow for any voter to request to vote by mail without declaring reason subject to second passage of the next legislature and approval by a statewide referendum.

- **Voter Registration Transfers: This bill, S.1099, introduced by Senator David Carlucci, will require the Board of Elections to transfer the registration and enrollment of a voter to wherever they move in New York State.**

- **Voter Pre-Registration: This bill, S.1100, introduced by Senator David Carlucci, will enable 16- and 17-year olds to pre-register to vote and requires local boards of education to adopt policies to promote student voter registration and pre-registration.**

Deputy Majority Leader Michael Gianaris and bill sponsor, said, "At a time when voting rights are under assault, we must fight for our democracy because there's nothing more important than the right to vote. Our new Senate Majority will make voter registration easier and access to the ballot box fairer."

Senate Elections Committee Chair and bill sponsor Senator Zellnor Myrie, said, "Too many New Yorkers struggle to get to the polls because of work obligations, family obligations, or other barriers. Early voting helps ensure that all New Yorkers have the opportunity to make their voices heard at the ballot box."

Bill sponsor Senator David Carlucci said, "It is a new day in Albany. No longer will New York tolerate voter suppression and turnout lagging behind the rest of the nation. With this package of bills, we will aggressively break down voting barriers and ensure every New Yorker can have their voice heard."

Bill sponsor Senator Leroy Comrie said, "Countless New Yorkers across our state lack access to the ballot because of antiquated absentee voting requirements. Passing no excuse absentee voting will simplify requirements so that New Yorkers with disabilities or work and family obligations--folks who for too long have been denied a reasonable opportunity to vote--rightfully have the ability to participate in our democracy by casting a ballot."

Bill sponsor Senator Brian Kavanaugh, said, "Our state has some of the worst election laws in the country, making it unnecessarily difficult to vote and allowing special interests to drown out the voices of millions of New Yorkers by giving unlimited amounts of money to politicians. For years, Democrats in both the Senate and the Assembly have fought to change this, and as an Assemblymember I was proud to sponsor and pass nearly all of the bills before us today--only to see them blocked by Senate Republicans. Well, today is a new day! The sweeping reforms to our broken

voting system that we are passing under the leadership of Andrea Stewart-Cousins and Election Chair Zellnor Myrie will make it clear that we want every eligible voter to participate in our democracy without undue hardship. And closing the LLC Loophole--the most egregious defect in our campaign finance system--will cut off an enormous flow of unlimited, often virtually anonymous campaign contributions that have allowed certain individuals and narrow business interests to buy influence wholesale. This is a huge first step in what I hope will be a broader overhaul of our campaign finance system."

Senator Joseph Jr. Addabbo said, "As a former chair of the Senate Elections Committee, I know that expanding and protecting voter rights is critical to making the process easier and more accessible for larger numbers of New York residents. Voting is a cornerstone of our democracy, and it is imperative we enact measures to allow and encourage more voters to cast their ballots. While sensible safeguards are obviously key to ensuring the integrity of the electoral process, we must also remove unnecessarily burdensome obstacles that deter potential voters from having a voice in their own government."

Senator Jamaal Bailey said, "New York State currently ranks forty-one in voter turnout. Despite their desire and willingness to participate in the election process, citizens across the state cannot vote due to the significant barriers they face in casting their ballots. The election system in New York State disenfranchises people who want to make a difference in our government, public policies, and democracy. We need voter reform to make it easier for New Yorkers to exercise their constitutionally-given right to vote and make their powerful voices heard. I thank my colleagues in the Senate Democratic Conference for passing comprehensive legislation that will safeguard the voting rights and civic participation of all New Yorkers."

Senator Brian Benjamin said, "These voting reforms, which will modernize our electoral system, will pave the way for significantly increased voter turnout and civic participation in our democracy. New Yorkers entrusted us with a strong mandate to restore power to the people and I look forward to working with my Senate colleagues to make that a reality."

Senator Alessandra Biaggi said, "There is nothing more important than having people participate in government and vote to choose their representatives at all levels. Maximizing participation, along with campaign finance reform, are the best

ways to ensure that elected officials represent their districts and not special interests. I am proud that my first votes as a new State Senator will be for legislation that makes it easier to vote. And I will work hard to see that everyone in my district eligible to vote, starting with high school students, takes advantage of the new laws. Thank you to Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins and my colleagues for appropriately prioritizing these bills as our first business.”

Senator Neil Breslin said, “Our democracy is founded upon fair and open elections which is why it is critical that we modernize New York’s antiquated voting laws. This legislative package the Senate Democratic Conference is passing today will make voting easier while ensuring voter’s rights are protected.”

Senator John Brooks said, “Today, the Senate Democratic Majority has sent a clear message—We are putting an end to blocking pro-voter legislation, and tackling the problems we are facing as a State head on. The passage of these election reform bills, as well as addressing issues where there is continued discrimination, sends a clear message that the New York State Senate is opening the door to perhaps the most successful and progressive session in this State’s history.”

Senator James Gaughran said, “Democracy dies in the darkness and we’re about to light a fire in New York State. I’m proud to be a co-sponsor of this important packing of voting reforms.”

Senator Andrew Gounardes said, “Voting is the lifeblood of our democracy. New York State should be at the forefront of progressive change, but for years, we have been plagued by a system designed to suppress our vote. These changes speak to the very core of our promise to bring about fundamental change for New York State. New York’s voting laws have been an embarrassment and a stark contrast to our progressivism. Government should work to make it easier to vote, not harder. Democrats in New York State promised to create a more inclusive system, and that’s exactly what we’re doing.”

Senator Pete Harckham said, “These common sense reforms will open greater access for voters to exercise their fundamental right to vote.”

Senator Brad Hoylman said, “For far too long, our antiquated voting laws have prevented New Yorkers from exercising their constitutionally-guaranteed right to vote. Today, that changes. These reforms will increase voter participation and help

restore the integrity of our electoral institutions, marking a bold, first legislative victory for our Democratic Conference. I applaud Leader Stewart-Cousins, Deputy Leader Mike Gianaris, Senator Myrie, and my Democratic colleagues for their commitment to making our democracy more accessible and fair. From this day forward, New Yorkers can continue to count on their lawmakers in Albany to act on the progressive ideas that led them to the ballot box in November. We're only just getting started."

Senator Robert Jackson said, "It is crucial that we fix the regressive voting laws in New York State that make it more difficult for people, especially the working class, to exercise their democratic rights. I am committed to making sure that we pass legislation now to ensure that same-day registration, early voting, and other proven reforms are in place for the next election cycle."

Senator Todd Kaminsky said, "The ability to vote is at the heart of our republic and it is critical for us to enable and empower our fellow citizens to partake in the democratic process. From allowing New Yorkers to vote at a time convenient to them, to allowing same-day voter registration, these reforms are no-brainers, and I was proud to be part of the effort to reduce barriers to participation in our democracy. By increasing voter turnout, we can jumpstart the participation our democracy deserves to ensure that government works for the people it is meant to serve."

Senator Anna Kaplan said, "Voting is the most important action any citizen can take to ensure their voice is being heard, yet New York's outdated election laws make it far too difficult for New Yorkers to exercise their constitutional right and have a say in our democracy. I'm proud to co-sponsor legislation to allow early voting in New York, as well as legislation modernizing our archaic voter registration laws, because New Yorkers should be given every opportunity to make it to the polls and have their voices heard."

Senator Tim Kennedy said, "When we see low voter turnout statewide, more often than not, people want to get out to vote and exercise their right as Americans, but are hampered by arcane election laws that hinder voter participation rather than encourage it. I'm proud to join my colleagues to make these reforms a top priority, because this is truly a bipartisan issue; it has nothing to do with who you're voting for, and everything to do with how accessible your right to vote should be."

Senator Liz Krueger said, "The right to vote is one of the most fundamental freedoms belonging to every American. But New York's convoluted and out-dated voting laws have discouraged participation in our electoral process and caused us to have one of the lowest voter turnout rates in the country. I am pleased to join my Democratic colleagues in advancing this important package of bills that will modernize voting procedures, remove barriers to voting, and help give New Yorkers the free, fair, and accessible elections they deserve."

Senator John Liu said, "Our nation's founding principles of democracy can only be upheld and nurtured with active participation by the citizenry. Unfortunately and unacceptably, our state's archaic laws have for too long made voting difficult and resulted in the lowest voter turnouts in the country. Voting is everyone's civic duty and today we make it easier for our fellow New Yorkers to cast their ballots in every election. Vote, damn it, vote!"

Senator Monica R. Martinez said, "Voting rights are a critical cornerstone of our democracy. Enhancing voting rights will remove obstacles that currently exist that prevent people from participating and making their voices heard."

Senator Rachel May said, "Voters are angry about the barriers they face in trying to participate in our democracy. Many important races in our upstate district were decided in the second primary of the year, on a Thursday afternoon in September, on a date exquisitely timed to prevent the many college students in the district from registering at their new addresses. Ordinary voters proudly made modest donations to candidates, only to find that large donors were having a much greater impact. I am proud to support these changes in our voting laws that will open the polls longer, make it easier to register, and reduce the power of big money in our elections."

Senator Shelley Mayer said, "Democracy has never demanded greater participation. I am proud to stand with Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins and my colleagues as we pass momentous legislation to expand voter access in New York State. For far too long, New York State saw one of lowest voter participation rates in the country. Outdated rules and regulations acted as barriers and kept voters from getting to the polls. We know from the experiences of other states that if we expand voter access, more people will participate. Early voting, automatic voter registration, vote-by-mail, and closing the LLC loophole in the campaign finance system will increase civic engagement and participation in New York State. I have supported and co-sponsored these bills for many years, and I am thrilled to see them finally pass the State

Senate.”

Senator Jen Metzger said, “This package of election reforms advances our most fundamental democratic right, the right to vote, and will do much to address the flaws and barriers in our current laws that have contributed to New York having one of the worst voter-turnout records in the country. Expanding opportunities to vote will be particularly beneficial to more rural communities, where work obligations and transportation constraints can pose obstacles to getting to the polls on election day.”

Senator Velmanette Montgomery said, “It is clear today, more than ever, that every election matters and every vote counts. New Yorkers deserve the right to have their powerful voices heard and be given the ability to participate in the electoral process. Finally, today, under the leadership of Democratic Majority Leader Andrea-Stewart Cousins, we strike down antiquated voting laws that have disenfranchised marginalized communities and introduce legislation that supports individuals taking part in the democratic process. I am proud to join my colleagues in the Senate Democratic Conference to support these voting reforms to strengthen democracy across New York State.”

Senator Kevin Parker said, “Voting and fair elections underpin a functioning democracy, but for far too long Senate Republicans have stifled commonsense reforms that Senate Democrats have long supported. I applaud Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins and the Senate Democratic Conference for making these reforms a top priority as we embark on a historic legislative session.”

Senator Roxanne Persaud said, “Voting is the cornerstone of citizens’ ability to take part in our government, and access to it is what makes our democracy strong. I applaud my colleagues in the Democratic Conference and Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins for addressing this important issue at the beginning of the new legislative session.”

Senator Jessica Ramos said, “New York’s voter turnout has decreased to historic lows, fueling a culture of corruption in Albany. We were ranked 49th in 2014! When we commit as your representatives to increasing voter turnout, we are increasing accountability too. Our state can only be its best with an educated and engaged electorate. These bills will expand our democracy and therefore lead to a better New

York.”

Senator Gustavo Rivera said, “We in the Senate Majority Conference were serious when we said that a new era was dawning in New York State. That is why we are starting by reforming our State’s draconian election system, which has limited New Yorkers’ ability to be civically engaged for far too long. I am proudly casting my votes for measures that will increase access to our democracy and ensure that New Yorkers can make their votes count.”

Senator Julia Salazar said, “I’m delighted to get to vote in support of all of these proposed elections reforms in committee and on the floor today. Although these reforms mark long-awaited progress in the way that our elections are administered I fervently believe that we have more work to do in order to make our elections truly accessible, democratic, and free from the outsized influence of corporate interests. I look forward to being a strong voice in advancing these goals.”

Senator James Sanders Jr. said, “It is our duty and our responsibility as Americans to make our voices heard. We have the power to effect change, but we lose that power when we don’t exercise our right to vote. By enacting these reforms, it is my hope that more New Yorkers will sign up to take part in the Democratic process.”

Senator Diane Savino said, “Thank you to Leader Stewart-Cousins on her leadership in bringing election reform as the first issues to the floor this year. It is long overdue that we ensure everyone in New York has proper access to the voting booth, and we’re approaching updating election law in a pragmatic way.”

Senator Luis Sepulveda said, “I am excited to work with New York Senate Democrats to pass overdue voting reforms that will increase access to the polls for our citizens. The right to vote is a bedrock principle of American democracy. Ensuring that every adult citizen can cast a ballot is a top priority for my office.”

Senator Jose Serrano said, “For far too long, archaic election laws and disenfranchisement efforts have undermined the democratic process throughout our state and nation. New York has consistently had some of the lowest voter turnout rates in the country. By cutting through red tape, modernizing voter registration, and enabling early voting, today’s historic actions will make it easier for New Yorkers to make their presence felt and exercise their right to vote for government representatives that reflect their needs and values.”

Senator James Skoufis said, “New York State has embarrassingly low voter turnout, and it’s about time we do something about it. This package of voting and election reforms is a vital first step in engaging New Yorkers in the democratic process. I’ve long supported these measures in the Assembly and am proud to join my new Senate colleagues in finally getting these improvements passed into law.”

Senator Toby Ann Stavisky said, “New York has some of the poorest voter participation rates in the nation because of its antiquated election laws. We have waited too long to resolve this problem. We must strengthen our democracy by expanding our fundamental right and responsibility to vote. These bills will improve the process.”

Senator Kevin Thomas said, “This is yet another step in the right direction that proves the NY Democratic Senate Caucus is leading the way in opening government to all the people. Democracy only works when it is accessible to everyone. Equality is only achieved when each person has their voting rights protected and all obstacles are removed so they can more easily and efficiently cast their vote.”

Susan Lerner, Executive Director of Common Cause/NY and Founding Member of Let NY Vote, said, “For years, New Yorkers have been demanding efficient, equitable and accessible elections and, finally, on the first full day of the legislative session the new Senate Majority, responded with a robust package of voting reforms; making clear their commitment to democracy. The initial bills including, early voting, registration portability, consolidation of primaries, and pre-registration of 16 and 17 year olds, are a fantastic first step and we look forward to working with lawmakers and the Board of Elections to implement these long overdue reforms. New York can and will be a shining example of democracy.”

Blair Horner, Executive Director of NYPIRG, said, “For way too long, New Yorkers have had to endure obstacles to voting and a disgraceful pay to play campaign financing system. And to add insult to injury, no movement for reform out of Albany. The new Senate Majority and their colleagues in the Assembly and the Governor’s mansion deserve credit for taking the first meaningful steps to strengthen New York’s democracy. This down payment on democracy should send a strong signal to New Yorkers that the days of voter frustration and cynicism are beginning to end.”

Sean Morales-Doyle, Counsel in the Democracy Program at the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law, said, “This is a tremendous moment for New York legislators to

focus on passing democracy reform as their first priority in 2019. Voters in November made it clear: there is an incredible thirst in New York and nationally for a functioning democracy, and it's encouraging to see legislators are responding to this demand."

Dustin M. Czarny, Democratic Caucus Chair of the NYS Elections Commissioner Association, said, "It is fitting that the most significant reform to New York State voting laws since women's suffrage in New York has been brought about in part by our new Majority leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins. She and the new unified State Government has delivered what voters demanded when they went to the polls in 2018, a modern voting system for a modern society. We look forward to implementing these reforms for the voters."

Alex Camarda, Senior Policy Advisor at Reinvent Albany, said, "We commend the Senate and Assembly for modernizing voting and voter registration in New York. During these tumultuous times, it is essential democracy works for New Yorkers, and people feel they can express their voice. Reinvent Albany salutes the many organizations, electeds and their staffs, and everyday New Yorkers who advocated for a better voting experience since the last century, culminating in this remarkable moment Albany can be proud of."

Javier H. Valdés, Co-Executive Director of Make the Road New York, said, "We applaud the State Senate in reforming our voting laws that will help transform our state democracy. Same-day registration, early voting and allowing 16 year olds to pre-register to vote, are all long overdue in New York State. We look forward to these changes, along with ending the corporate contribution loopholes, to ensure our community is heard in every election."

Mario Cilento, President of the New York State AFL-CIO, said, "The New York State AFL-CIO strongly supports voting reforms and improvements that will make it easier for individuals to exercise the most fundamental and basic rights in any democracy. Together, these reforms will encourage and increase voter participation by removing barriers to voting. I congratulate Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins for getting this important legislation to the Senate floor for a vote and I thank the Democratic majority for making these reforms a priority this session."

Hector Figueroa, President of 32BJ SEIU, said, "This is a historic moment for New York. When working people have full and fair access to the ballot, our democracy is

stronger and works better for everyone. We applaud our elected officials for making voting access a top priority in 2019.”

Andy Pallotta, President of NYSUT, said, “Exercising our right to vote is the fundamental way working families can ensure our voices are heard in the halls of power,” “Removing barriers to voting is critical to building a strong and vibrant democracy that protects the interests of the people instead of wealthy special interests. I applaud Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins and her colleagues for advancing this critical issue.”

Dennis Trainor, Vice President of CWA District 1, said, “Protecting and expanding voting rights is one of the most important issues for our members. New York has lagged behind the rest of the country on things like same-day voter registration, early voting, mail-in ballots, and more. It’s time for us to make a change. It’s time for us to make it easier for New Yorkers to vote and repair our political system. I’m thrilled to see our elected leaders stepping up to make this a reality. We applaud Leader Stewart-Cousins and Speaker Heastie for promoting these essential steps to improve our democracy, and we look forward to working with them to make New York a true leader in fair elections.”

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