

## WHY BIPARTISAN BOARDS OF ELECTIONS ARE NECESSARY AND HOW TO IMPROVE THEM

I have been involved in elections for nearly fifty years. For the first twenty five years, I worked on many campaigns and was involved in party politics. During that time, it always made sense to me that the County Board of Elections was run on a bipartisan basis. For the past eighteen years, I have been the Democratic Commissioner of Elections in Tompkins County. Although it would be much easier to administer elections if one person was in charge, it is imperative and worth the extra effort to have a person from each of the two major parties responsible for the running of elections.

The major benefit of a bipartisan team running elections is transparency. When one person runs the show, it is easy for them to keep others from knowing what is going on. When two people are administering the elections in a county, then everyone knows what is being done. In upstate New York, most counties have a significant enrollment advantage by one party or the other. Having two people in charge prevents one party from getting an unfair advantage and helps to make things clearer.

If you want an example of how bad things could get if BOEs were not bipartisan, you only need to look to the states of Georgia, Arizona, Michigan and Pennsylvania. The elections in each of these states are run by a partisan elected Secretary of State. Fortunately, in none of those states, did the Secretary of State buckle to the enormous pressure being put on them to do the wrong thing. If one or more of them had given into the pressure, you would be hearing a lot of people asking, "Why is only one person in charge?" Remember that the example above involved a national race. What if the race involved was for Mayor or District Attorney?

Anecdotally, I can tell you that many times last year, our office would get calls from irate voters asking how we could trust that our elections were being conducted in a fair manner. After all, they had been hearing the exact opposite on social media. When we would tell them that our elections were not run by one party or the other and that all decisions on how we run our elections were made in a bipartisan manner, the caller was invariably surprised and expressed satisfaction that it was the case.

Last year, there was a very close race in CD 22 which covers 8 counties. The actions of all of the BOEs in CD 22 were made public and scrutinized. The good news is that in 7 of those counties, the elections were run fairly and every one that should have been able to vote was able to vote and have their vote counted. The bad news is that in one of the counties, several egregious errors were made which prevented hundreds of voters that legally registered to vote from being able to vote or in some cases to have their vote counted once they had voted. This is unacceptable and must be dealt with. In dealing with what happened in this one county, one must remember that having BOEs which are run in a bipartisan matter is not why this happened. And running BOEs in a different manner is not the solution.

I offer a couple of suggestions on how to improve the administration of elections. First, elections in New York State must be adequately funded and Boards of Elections from county to county in the state must be adequately staffed. Over the past 2.5 years over 75 bills involving elections

have been passed by the Legislature and signed by the Governor. Almost all of these bills were excellent and if acted on properly, will make voting more accessible to all. Many of the bills had funding attached to them. On the other hand, many bills had costs associated with them that were not obvious. A case in point is the bill that would make it possible for a voter's registration to travel with them if they moved from one county to another within the state. This is an excellent bill and should have been passed years ago. It is also difficult to execute properly and requires additional communication between counties. There are many other bills which govern how we handle voter registrations and requests for absentee ballots. Trying to handle this work is much more labor intensive than it was five years ago. Some counties have adequate funding and staffing to handle this additional work. Many do not. There needs to be consistency in how county BOEs are staffed and funded.

The second suggestion I have is that new commissioners should go through a training program administered by the New York State Board of Elections. Contrary to what many may think, elections are complicated and not as easy as one may think to administer. When one gets elected to a position on a Town Board, Town Clerk or to be a Town Justice, I believe they are required to attend a two or three day session where they are taught what is involved in successfully carrying out their duties. The same should apply to Commissioners of Elections. This would also help bring consistency as to how BOEs across the state handle various tasks.

In closing, I feel that it is important that Boards of Elections across the state be run in a bipartisan manner. When elections are run in this manner, voters have more confidence in the system. At the same time it is important that Boards of Elections be adequately funded and staffed and that the Commissioners at the county level be properly trained.

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