



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Timothy M. Kennedy

## Senator Kennedy Pushes Low-Cost, Common-Sense Solution to Increase Voter Participation – Expanding Vote-by-Mail Option Adds Convenience and Accessibility

TIMOTHY M. KENNEDY September 18, 2013

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*After low turnout in primary elections across region and state, Kennedy presses legislation to expand state's existing vote-by-mail systems to boost voter participation.*

*Legislation will open up new access to mail-in ballots for all voters by extending absentee voting rights to all individuals who for any reason are unable to vote in person, or simply choose to vote-by-mail.*

*Kennedy: New York State has an unfortunate record of low rates of voter participation, and it's time our state takes action to reverse those trends.*

BUFFALO, N.Y. – Following the dismal turnout numbers in primary elections across Erie County, Senator Tim Kennedy, D-Buffalo, is advancing a common-sense, low-cost solution that will help increase voter participation across the state. Kennedy cosponsors legislation (S.2252) to expand the state's existing vote-by-mail system, and he's urging his colleagues in the State Legislature to support the bill. The legislation will open up new access to mail-in ballots for all voters by extending absentee voting rights to all individuals who for any reason are unable to vote in person.

Kennedy says the bill will ultimately allow every voter who would like to vote by mail to gain access a mail-in ballot. Essentially, this will eliminate all potential for an unexpected occurrence or previous obligation to prevent an individual from making it to the polls on

election day.

Currently, people seeking to vote by mail with an absentee ballot must sign a document asserting that they will be outside of their county of residence on the date of the election or that specific circumstances – such as illness or providing primary care to someone who is ill – prevent them from voting in person. Kennedy’s legislation will end those requirements and expand mail-in voting rights to anyone who for any reason cannot make it to their polling location on election day, or who simply prefers to vote by mail.

“Our legislation presents a low-cost, common-sense solution that could greatly improve turnout by simply opening up new access to our existing vote-by-mail systems,” Kennedy said. “New York State has an unfortunate record of low rates of voter participation, and it’s time our state takes action to reverse those trends. By extending vote-by-mail rights to all voters, our state will provide New Yorkers with the opportunity to avoid lines, vote early and ensure their voices are heard in important elections. It will be a first step as we work to improve voter participation through a variety of initiatives and legislative proposals.”

Specifically, the Kennedy-supported bill says voters may vote with a mail-in ballot if “he or she expects to be unable to vote in person due to duties, occupation, business, personal matters or studies.” By including the words “personal matters”, this legislation ultimately allows all voters to vote by mail if they so choose.

In New York State, vote-by-mail systems already exist for absentee voters and individuals who are permanently disabled. These existing systems will simply have a higher volume of votes to count, if this bill becomes law.

In December 2009, the Pew Center on the States released [a study that examined vote-by-mail and vote-in-person systems](#). The study took a critical eye and pointed out benefits and

potential flaws of each system. Notably, the report described vote-by-mail by saying, “This (system) allows voters to avoid missing work to stand in line at a precinct on Election Day, and provides the conveniences of choosing when to vote and taking as much time as needed to complete the task.” Their analysis also indicates improved accuracy of vote results with vote-by-mail systems, as vote-by-mail ballots showed fewer voting errors – such as duplicate votes – than in-person ballots.

Compared to New York State’s low rates of voter participation, Oregon has demonstrated high rates of turnout over the last several election cycles. **Public officials and elections observers in Oregon credit their vote-by-mail system for their high turnout numbers.** Since 1998, the state has employed an entirely vote-by-mail system, and it has proven to be convenient, secure and cost-effective, officials say. While Oregon voters only have the option of mail-in ballots, Kennedy wants New York State to maintain access to traditional vote-in-person systems and open up new opportunities for mail-in votes.

Kennedy supports several legislative proposals to boost voter participation. He supports efforts to simplify the state’s online voter registration system and legislation to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to pre-register to vote. Kennedy is also pushing for bills to provide voters with more elections information via email and postcards sent by mail.

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*Senator Timothy M. Kennedy represents the New York State Senate’s 63rd District, which is comprised of the town of Cheektowaga, the city of Lackawanna and nearly all of the city of Buffalo. More information is available at <http://kennedy.nysenate.gov>.*