



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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## Senate Majority To Build On Election Reforms And Further Empower New York Voters

BRIAN KAVANAGH January 11, 2021

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### Senate Majority To Build On Election Reforms And Further Empower New York Voters

(Albany, NY) The Senate Majority will advance major legislation to improve New York State's electoral system and empower voters. This action continues the Senate Democratic Majority's tradition of kicking off Session by passing major pro-voter, anti-

disenfranchisement, pro-democracy legislation. The bills that will be passed by the Senate build on the historic reforms passed during the 2019 and 2020 Legislative Session. The legislative package that will be advanced by the Senate Majority includes greater access to using absentee ballots and ensuring they are counted, no-excuse absentee voting, and an absentee ballot tracking system.

“Elections matter, voting matters, and leadership matters. We have seen how fundamental change can be achieved when people exercise their Constitutional right to vote,” **Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins** said. “The Senate Democratic Majority has started the past two Legislative Sessions with legislative packages to empower New Yorkers and reduce barriers to voting. The bills advanced by the Senate Majority continue those efforts and will help reform and modernize our electoral system. I applaud the bill sponsors for their leadership on this foundational issue, and thank my colleagues for advancing these bills and standing up for New York voters.”

**Deputy Majority Leader Senator Michael Gianaris and bill sponsor** said, “As our Democratic supermajority continues to reform the way elections are run, fixing our latest-in-the-nation vote counting status will go a long way towards restoring faith in election results. I am proud to have authored this important legislation so we are never again still counting votes into the new year.”

**Senate Elections Committee Chair and bill sponsor Senator Zellnor Myrie** said, “For the third year in a row, the Senate Majority has advanced bold, meaningful steps to expand voting rights and voter access as our first legislative priority. This is because we know that voting is the right that safeguards all our other rights. Over the past year, that's become clearer than ever before. The legislation we passed today will ensure ballots are counted when a voters' intent is clear, improve and simplify procedures for requesting and returning absentee ballots, and expedite the canvassing process that has often dragged on for weeks. These bills are critical

to ensuring that the law, and our elections administration, stands firmly on the side of the voters. I am grateful to Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins for prioritizing these important bills, and look forward to further improvements to New York's elections.”

The additional voting reforms passed by the Senate Democratic Majority includes:

- **Speeding Up the Absentee Ballot Counting Process:** This bill, [S.1027](#), sponsored by Deputy Majority Leader Senator Michael Gianaris, amends various provisions of the Election Law in order to allow for expedited review and canvassing of absentee ballots without compromising the integrity of elections.
- **Preventing Disenfranchisement of Absentee Voters:** This bill, [S.253](#), sponsored by Senate Elections Committee Chair, Senator Zellnor Myrie, prohibits voiding absentee ballots on technicalities where intent of voters is clear and the law has been substantially complied with, including where there are stray marks or the ballot is undated but is time stamped by the Board of Elections.
- **Permanently Authorizing Absentee Ballot Drop Boxes:** This bill, [S.492](#), sponsored by Senator Brad Hoylman, authorizes the Board of Elections to establish absentee ballot drop-off locations or drop-boxes to provide voters with a convenient and secure option for delivering their absentee ballots.
- **Increasing Transparency and Information about Absentee Ballots through a Tracking System:** This bill, [S.1028](#), sponsored by Senator Leroy Comrie, ensures that all voters in the state have access to absentee ballot tracking by requiring the New York State Board of Elections to create a statewide absentee ballot tracking system for absentee voters ensure that their vote is counted in the election while allowing counties and the New York City Board of Elections to also maintain their own absentee tracking systems.

- **Implementing Permanent Authorization for Applying for Absentee Ballots Online:** This bill, [S.632](#), sponsored by Senator Robert Jackson, permanently allows voters to apply for absentee ballots online and allows absentee ballots postmarked through Election Day by making permanent Chapter 91 of the Laws of 2020, which sunset on December 31, 2020. Under current Election Law, applications may only be made by mail or fax.
- **Creating Accountability for Timely Receipt of Absentee Ballots:** This bill, [S.516](#), sponsored by Deputy Majority Leader Michael Gianaris, establishes a mandatory timeframes for processing of absentee ballot applications and ballots by Boards of Elections based on when the application was received.
- **Enabling Earlier Applications for Absentee Ballots:** This bill, [S.631](#), sponsored by Senator Julia Salazar, permits Boards of Elections to receive absentee ballot applications earlier than thirty days before the applicable Election Day by making permanent Chapter 138 of the Laws of 2020, which sunset on December 31, 2020.
- **No-Excuse Absentee Voting Constitutional Amendment:** This legislation, [S.360](#), sponsored by Senator Leroy Comrie, amends the State Constitution to allow for any voter to vote by absentee without an excuse.
- **Ensuring Voters Timely Receipt of Absentee Ballots:** This bill, [S.264](#), sponsored by Senator Zellnor Myrie, sets deadline for absentee ballot applications sent by mail to 15 days before the election, up from 7 days, to better allow for voters timely receiving their absentee ballots.

**Bill sponsor Senator Leroy Comrie** said, “We know now that allowing any eligible voter the right to cast a ballot by mail not only increases participation, but it also gives opportunity to folks who otherwise would be disenfranchised because of circumstances outside of their control. New Yorkers need no-excuse absentee voting enshrined in our state constitution as

well as a reliable and user-friendly system for tracking absentee ballots online. I am proud to stand with Leader Stewart-Cousins and my Democratic Conference colleagues in support of expanding access to the ballot.”

**Bill sponsor Senator Brad Hoylman** said, “In the most recent elections, some New Yorkers stood on line for as long as five hours to cast their ballots. With today’s passage of S.492, New York is one step closer to joining the 33 states and the District of Columbia that reduce wait times and make voting easier and safer by deploying secure drop boxes as an option for returning absentee ballots. Thank you to Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins for prioritizing legislation that protects our democracy, while others desperately attempt to undermine the power of the vote. I look forward to continuing to work with Assemblymember Dick Gottfried to enshrine this legislation into law.”

**Bill sponsor Senator Robert Jackson** said, “In the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, the primary and general elections in 2020 showed us the ongoing need to expand access to the ballot. I’m eager to pass this package of legislation today in response to the lessons we learned from last year. One of those, my bill S632, will make permanent my colleague Senator Myrie’s idea during the pandemic to make it easier to get an absentee ballot by requesting it electronically. In the 21st century, we should be able to ask for an absentee ballot online. It just makes sense! I’m proud to be part of this historic Senate Democratic majority—we are demonstrating our commitment to ensuring that all eligible New Yorkers have access to the ballot box.”

**Bill sponsor Senator Julia Salazar** said, “Last session, we were able to pass groundbreaking election reforms that expanded poll access and ballot access across the state of New York. While advocates and civil rights leaders fought for years to win these victories, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to a system that still needs serious improvements, and has shed light on the flaws in our absentee voting system. Our local

boards of elections and poll workers have been pushed to their limits, and it is imperative that the state legislature act now to make permanent the expanded access that we secured for New Yorkers last year. This legislative package is another achievement in fighting for fair elections and expanded access to the polls, which are fundamental in protecting our democracy.”

**Senator Jamaal Bailey** said, “New Yorkers have never been more engaged in our elections. I am proud to be a member of a conference that from the first day of our majority, has prioritized the expansion of voting rights, improvements in the absentee ballot process, and has worked tirelessly to prevent voter disenfranchisement. This year we continue, making critical changes designed to ensure New Yorkers are even more confident in the counting and delivery of their votes, and user friendly to encourage more New Yorkers to become civically engaged. I would like to thank Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, Elections Committee Chair Zellnor Myrie, and my colleagues that sponsored the legislation included in the package.”

**Senator Alessandra Biaggi** said, “In 2020 I was proud to sponsor legislation to temporarily expand absentee ballot voting to all New York voters, ensuring that our communities can safely cast their ballots throughout the course of the pandemic. It is an honor to join my colleagues in 2021 to pass legislation that will bolster the efficiency and accessibility of our absentee voting system, and move to permanently allow any eligible voter to cast an absentee ballot without an excuse. This is a monumental step in our work to build safe and fair elections in New York State.”

**Senator Jabari Brisport** said, “Threats to democracy are rarely as obvious as an armed attack on the capital. More often they come in the form of red tape or logistical impracticalities that stand between someone and their right to vote. These less dramatic threats to democracy are no less serious nor less urgent to resolve.”

**Senator John Brooks** said, “The sad events of this past week in our Nation’s Capitol seriously underscores the lengths that enemies of democracy will go to disregard and even overturn the people’s right to vote. This legislation rightfully places more power in the hands of the registered voter and significantly reduces the influence of ideologues and special interests by vastly increasing public access, transparency, and efficiency to the electoral process. By passing these bills, the NY State Senate will be continuing to expand the voting rights of its citizens while increasing protections against disenfranchisement.”

**Senator Samra Brouk** said, “While some governors and other national leaders have tried repeatedly to strip eligible voters of their rights to participate in our democratic process, here in New York we are doing the opposite. New York is committed to improving its voting process to ensure that our elections and their results are administered in a timely, fair, and equitable way. These bills are important next steps toward a more just, accessible, and inclusive voting process.”

**Senator Jeremy Cooney** said, “Free and fair elections are the backbone of our nation. These reforms will modernize and revitalize our election system, encourage voter participation, and ensure confidence in the absentee process in New York.”

**Senator Jim Gaughran** said, “Last year the surge in absentee votes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted serious and significant structural weaknesses in NY's voting systems. These bills are meaningful reforms to modernizing NY's elections system and ensuring every voter has easy and accessible access to their most fundamental right -- to vote. Thank you Leader Stewart-Cousins for your leadership.”

**Senator Andrew Gounardes** said, “Today, we begin the 2021 legislative session with the recognition that the benefits of a democratic society stem from access to the vote and trust in the system. We continue on our steady path to move New York from 'worst to first,' in

voter participation. These bills will ensure that many more New Yorkers can vote easily, and, equally importantly, that their voices get heard and their votes get counted in a timely manner. This year, New York's election workers pulled off a free, fair and well-run election in the midst of a pandemic - we honor them and thank them. But in races like mine, voters did not know the results nearly two weeks after Election Day. New Yorkers deserve better, and this legislation to count the votes more quickly is an important step. I am proud to vote for greater access to the vote and faster election results today."

**Senator Pete Harckham** said, "As proven in our most recent election, held in a pandemic, removing onerous restrictions on absentee ballots helped ensure wider voter participation. This new legislative package strengthens voting rights in New York and makes it possible for countless seniors and others to cast their votes. It's about time."

**Senator Michelle Hinchey** said, "Voting is the central pillar of democracy, and it's important that we do all we can to make it easier for New Yorkers to exercise this fundamental right. Expanding vote-by-mail in New York is a critical step to increase voter participation and the accessibility of our elections. I'm thrilled that the legislation we passed today will substantially modernize our absentee voting process and put us on track to enable a universal system so that New York voters are empowered to make their voices heard in future elections."

**Senator Anna M. Kaplan** said, "This past election, we saw an historic number of New Yorkers exercise their right to vote through absentee ballots, exposing numerous weaknesses and inefficiencies in our existing laws that must be remedied in order to make the process easier, and fully respect the will of voters. The bills being advanced by the Senate Majority today will ensure that our right to vote, a sacred pillar of our democracy, is strengthened and accessible to all New Yorkers, and I thank my Senate Majority Colleagues and Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins for their leadership to advance these important bills."



**Senator Brian Kavanagh** said, “These reforms build upon our success in recent years in greatly increasing New Yorkers' access to voting and dramatically improving virtually every aspect of the way we administer elections. At a time when there are some jurisdictions in our country seeking to make it more difficult for Americans to participate in elections, and in some cases to suppress the votes of communities of color, New York now stands out for the inclusiveness, fairness, and integrity of our election laws. The elements of this package that will facilitate a secure, rapid tabulation of election results should help increase public faith in the democratic process. I am proud to support this election reform package, and I thank all of the bills sponsors, especially Senator Myrie, who chairs our Elections Committee, for their leadership.”

**Senator Tim Kennedy** said, “The Democratic Majority has repeatedly worked to advance progressive legislation that repeals arcane election laws and streamlines the process for New Yorkers to exercise their rights as Americans, allowing them to do so efficiently and effectively. I'm proud to join my colleagues in continuing to make voting reforms a top priority, and pleased to help advance an agenda that emphasizes transparency and accessibility.”

**Senator Liz Krueger** said, “The right to vote is the most fundamental right of any citizen in our democracy. Appallingly, elected officials around this country continue to try to make voting more difficult and disenfranchise people, especially low-income people and voters of color, citing bogus and thoroughly debunked lies about fraud. That’s not how we do things in New York. I am proud to be part of a Senate Majority that has already passed historic voting reforms and yet continues to take action to improve voting access for all New Yorkers.”

**Senator John W. Mannion** said, “Voting is a fundamental right of every New Yorker and this legislative package vastly expands access to the polls while ensuring public trust in our elections, systems, and institutions. As someone who personally experienced an attempt to

undermine the vote count, it is clear that increasing transparency and allowing for more timely results will make illegitimate challenges to free and fair elections much more difficult.”

**Senator Rachel May** said, “As we vote on these bills, a battle is raging in New York’s 22nd Congressional District about how to count absentee ballots in an incredibly close race. The danger is that this election will ultimately be decided not by the voters but by lawyers contesting ballots on a host of arcane technicalities. Meanwhile, the process is dragging on so long that the people of the district have no representative in the midst of a national crisis. The bills we are passing today would not have solved every problem hampering the ballot count in the 22nd District, but they will vastly streamline the system and give the voters more confidence that the results will reflect their will.”

**Senator Shelley B. Mayer** said, “This year's primary and general elections reaffirmed the critical benefit of allowing all voters the safe and easily accessible option to vote by mail in New York State. I am proud to vote for a package of additional election reforms to enhance the state’s Absentee Ballot laws including expedited review and canvassing of ballots, establishing Absentee Ballot drop boxes, and requiring Absentee Ballot tracking, among other reforms. I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues on adopting reforms that modernize the state’s election laws and make it easier for citizens to cast their ballots while protecting the integrity of the system.”

**Senator Elijah Reichlin-Melnick** said, “In my 2020 primary and general elections, New York’s archaic absentee ballot rules caused long delays in determining a winner. These vitally needed reforms will help expand access to voting, add much-needed transparency into the process, and help restore faith in our election system.”

**Senator Sean Ryan** said, “Conducting the 2020 election during a global pandemic brought to light the need to modernize our voting systems. This thoughtful package of legislation will make it easier for people to use absentee ballots here in New York. At a time where it seems our Democracy is being challenged at every corner, ensuring every single voter in New York maintains their most fundamental right should be a top priority. This legislation is a critical step in that direction.”

**Senator Kevin Thomas** said, “New Yorkers should be given every opportunity to exercise their fundamental democratic right to vote. These groundbreaking reforms will modernize our electoral system and increase election access, accountability, and security. I applaud Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins and the Senate Democratic Conference for its commitment and ongoing dedication to protecting our state's democracy.”

**Blair Horner, NYPIRG Executive Director**, said, “Thanks to the reforms enacted over the past two years, New York has dramatically improved its voter participation rate. When it comes to voting, New York which was once among the worst, is now getting closer to the middle of the national pack. But New York 's voting rate in 2020 was still below the national average. The package of bills being advanced this week, particularly the constitutional changes, will, if enacted, move New York closer to the national leader.”

**Susan Lerner, Executive Director of Common Cause/NY**, said, “Common Cause/NY is pleased the New York State Senate is starting session the same way it has the past two years: putting New York voters first. Clearly, today's package is just the beginning. We look forward to working with the Senate and the Assembly to pass even more crucial election reforms, most particularly restoring voting rights for folks recently released, this year.”

**Jennifer Wilson, Deputy Director of the League of Women Voters of NYS**, said, “The reliance on absentee voting during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for several important

fixes to the state's absentee voting operations. This package of bills will ensure New York State voters have adequate access to apply for, submit, and track their absentee ballot. These procedural fixes will give voters greater peace of mind when electing to vote by absentee ballot in future elections. We applaud the Senate for moving forward this package of bills and hope to see additional reforms related to the timing and transparency in reporting election results to the public."

**Jarret Berg, Co-Founder of VoteEarlyNY** said, "The voting reform package being advanced by the Senate Majority will help modernize New York elections by expanding access, improving administration, and enshrining a series of due process safeguards to better ensure our fundamental rights are protected and respected."

**Dustin Czarny, Onondaga County Elections Commissioner and Chair Democratic Caucus of the NYS Elections Commissioners Association**, said, "These legislative changes will go a long way towards fixing some of the byzantine process we have in New York. Improving our absentee and vote by mail system will not only give voters more options but will give clear direction to Boards of Elections across the state. I am happy to support these bills."

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