



For Immediate Release
June 7, 2012

Contact: Anna Adams-Sarthou (Senator Gianaris): 718-728-0960
Nicole Arrindell (Assemblymember Kavanagh): 202-422-8509
Desiree Reiner (Brennan Center): 646-292-8321

GIANARIS, KAVANAGH, BRENNAN CENTER INTRODUCE VOTER EMPOWERMENT ACT OF NEW YORK

Good government and advocacy groups join in announcing legislation.

New York, NY – Senator Michael Gianaris, Assemblymember Brian Kavanagh, and the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law joined with good government and advocacy groups today to announce the introduction of the Voter Empowerment Act of New York, a nonpartisan initiative to increase voter participation as the 2012 election season commences. This legislation would amend the election law to update, streamline and make more efficient the voter registration process in New York.

Currently, the single biggest barrier to voting is our antiquated registration system. The proposed bill would improve New York's voter participation by automatically registering citizens to vote with their consent and updating their registration information when they interact with specific government agencies. It would also computerize the entire registration process, reducing typographical and clerical errors that come with hand-written registration documents and making it easier for eligible voters to register. In addition, it would allow 16- and 17- year-olds to pre-register in advance of their 18th birthday, thus incentivizing more voters to go to the polls on Election Day. In 2010, only 36 percent of New York's citizen voting-age population cast ballots, making the state's voter registration rate the third worst among states in the country. In an election year, it is crucial for New Yorkers to be reminded of the importance of voter registration and voting whenever possible.

Updating New York's registration system will remove unnecessary burdens on New Yorkers, ease election administration burdens for the state and county boards of elections, improve the accuracy of the voter rolls, and ultimately increase the number of eligible voters who are registered in the state. The legislation would reduce the number of duplicate or outdated registration records and ensure that fewer eligible voters are left off the voter rolls.

"As election season approaches, government bureaucracy continues to impede too many people from voting," **Senator Gianaris** said. "Our proposal would remove these obstacles and maximize voter turnout while saving the state and its counties hundreds of thousands of dollars per election, thus preventing disenfranchisement and enabling better record keeping."

"When voters try to register, or change their address, or change their party, they often find that the rules prevent them from making the change in a timely way or, worse, that the change doesn't take and they are excluded from voting," said **Assemblymember Kavanagh**, who chairs the Assembly subcommittee with jurisdiction over election operations. "By modernizing the way we collect, process, and store voter information, we can make registration virtually universal among New Yorkers who are eligible to vote."

"We applaud Senator Gianaris and Assemblymember Kavanagh for taking this much needed step to bring New York's outdated and error-prone voter registration system into 21st century," said **Wendy Weiser, Director of the Democracy Program at the Brennan Center for Justice**. "Through this effort, New York will lead the country in having a voter registration system that is accurate, complete, and works for all voters."

The Voter Empowerment Act of New York would do the following:

- Automatically register eligible consenting citizens at designated government agencies;
- Permit pre-registration of 16- and 17- year-olds;

- Automatically transfer registrations of New Yorkers who move within the state;
- Provide access to voter registration records and registration of eligible citizens online and;
- Allow people to register or change their party later in the election cycle.

The provision amending voters' ability to enroll in a party or change their party affiliation is particularly impactful. Currently, when a registered voter seeks to change his or her party enrollment, enroll in a party for the first time, or terminate his or her party enrollment that change does not go into effect until the first Tuesday following a general election. As a result, voters wishing to make such enrollment changes may have to wait more than a year for the changes to be implemented. Under the proposed legislation, changes to party enrollment would take effect ten days after the date on which the changes were applied, coinciding with the deadlines for voter registration and simplifying the process for both voters and the Board of Elections.

The Voter Empowerment Act of New York was modeled after the Voter Empowerment Act introduced in the United States House of Representatives. Parts of these measures have been implemented successfully in multiple states across the country, including Arizona, Delaware, Georgia, Kansas, Pennsylvania, and Washington. When signed into law, the Voter Empowerment Act of New York would be the most comprehensive state plan implemented to modernize the voter registration system.

The significance of the Voter Empowerment Act of New York is compounded by the state's multiple election days, which can be confusing and lead to low voter turnout. Voters should be aware that, generally, they have the opportunity to vote in at least two elections per election year – a primary and a general. Due to this state's overly complex election system, however, New York this year has four election days:

- Tuesday, April 24th was the Presidential primary;
- Tuesday, June 26th is the congressional primary;
- Tuesday, September 13th is the legislative primary and;
- Tuesday, November 6th is the general election.

The following organizations offered support for modernizing the voter registration system:

Heather Smith, President of Rock the Vote, said, "Rock the Vote is thrilled to see legislation that would upgrade our voter registration system and encourage greater participation. In particular, the bill's provisions permitting the preregistration of 16 and 17-year olds will facilitate opportunities to register new voters both during high school civic programs and the first time they interact with the DMV to get a driver's license. We applaud this effort to make the voter registration process more accessible to the young people of New York State."

Sally Robinson, President of the League of Women Voters of New York State, said, "Since the 1920's, the League of Women Voters of New York State has been working in Albany on behalf of the rights of voters. From the start a major focus of our efforts has been to make it easier to register to vote, thereby extending the franchise to more New Yorkers. We support the passage of the Voter Empowerment Act because it represents a major step forward in this direction. New York State can, and should, be a model for accuracy, efficiency, and confidence in our registration system. More registered voters leads to more voters at the polls on Election Day."

Arthur Eisenberg, New York Civil Liberties Union Legal Director, said, "It has long been recognized that cumbersome voter registration laws burden the constitutional right to vote and reduce voter turnout. This legislative effort properly seeks to reform our registration laws and broaden electoral participation in ways that will enhance our democratic system."

Susan Lerner, Executive Director of Common Cause/NY said, "We welcome this effort to upgrade New York State's election administration with the adoption of these long overdue modernization efforts. Eliminating unnecessary and complicated registration requirements reinforces the importance of voting. We cannot have a vigorous democracy when citizens feel there are obstacles to voting which are officially created."

Bill Samuels, Founder of the New Roosevelt Initiative, said, "To continue to rebuild trust and respect in our political system, we should make it easier not harder for citizens to vote. This legislation streamlines the current outdated process and helps allow more people to exercise their right to vote and their voices to be heard."

Steven Carbó, State Advocacy Director for Demos, said, "A modernized voter registration process in New York would have the potential to bring millions of eligible, unregistered persons into the democratic process. All New Yorkers have the right to an election system that facilitates voter participation. With the introduction of the Voter Empowerment Act of New York, Demos looks forward to a new conversation on advancing the freedom to vote in the 21st century."

Diana Fryda, Voter Empowerment Organizer of the New York Public Interest Research Group, said, "New York's paper and postage voter registration system is a relic of the 20th century and in sore need of modernization. Creating an automated registration process for consenting, eligible citizens would be a win-win, resulting in better election administration and higher voter participation. NYPIRG urges its implementation."

Queens resident Brian Pearson, a formerly-incarcerated New Yorker and leader of VOCAL-NY, said, "This bill will ensure that every New Yorker has a full and fair opportunity to get on the voter rolls. Expanding automation to public service agencies ensures that government uses the information already at its fingertips to get all eligible voters registered, and will dramatically increase voter registration and participation rates."

Chung-Wha Honh, Executive Director of the New York Immigration Coalition, said, "The New York Immigration Coalition has brought together diverse immigrant community groups to register, educate, and mobilize new citizen voters over the years, and have increased turnout and civic engagement among immigrant communities. Unfortunately, there are still too many barriers that make voter registration inaccessible, and that's why we're a hundred percent in support of the Voter Empowerment Act of New York."

Dominic Mauro, Open Government Coordinator of Reinvent Albany, said, "The Voter Empowerment Act propels New York's antiquated and often dysfunctional voting process into the 21st Century. It uses Information Technology to empower the citizen and provide better government services at lower costs. Voting is non-partisan, so is government efficiency. The Voting Empowerment Act deserves the support of the entire Senate and Assembly, and the Governor."

###