Voter Participation: How to Turn Up the Volume

New York has one of the lowest voter participation rates in the country.   There are many potential solutions, some of which are described below, that can help turn this around in New York.   We urge the Association to support these solutions in formulating the Association's 2016 Legislative Agenda, ensuring that the county boards of elections are positioned to implement 21st century policies to promote greater voter participation.

Modernize Voter Registration

We recommend that New York State modernize voter registration to make it more economical and efficient for clerks processing the information and more convenient for eligible voters to register and stay registered.   Paper-based registration is inefficient, outdated and costly. We believe that reform measures should include the following:

- **Electronically register consenting and eligible voters at designated government agencies**.
- **Make registration portable so voters** who submit required information to government officials **stay on the rolls** when they move within the state or change their names.
- **Create an Election Day fail-safe** to allow a voter who registers at a government agency but whose name does not appear on the voter registration list to cast a ballot that counts.
- **Shorten the deadline** for registration **to ten days before an election.**
- Allow pre-registration of **16 and 17 year-olds to vote**; research indicates that this reform can help to create life-long voters.
- **Expand the current DMV program to permit all eligible voters** to **register over the Internet**.
- **Provide funding** for modernizing voter registration, including internet registration and electronic transmission by agencies, in the state budget.

We urge the New York State Election Commissioners Association to support bills that feature these reforms such as the **Voter Empowerment Act, S.2548-A/A.5972**.

Switch to Electronic Poll Books

Our groups strongly support replacing printed poll books with electronic poll books to eliminate time and resources spent producing paper poll books and updating voter information, and to **speed up** processing voters at the polls on Election Day. In a recent poll, as relayed in the Presidential Commission on Election Administration, of all the election reforms, clerks and administrators identify electronic poll books as at the top of their priority lists. State and county boards of elections should be guided by findings of the 2014 electronic poll book **pilot projects in Chautauqua and Onondaga counties**. This initiative would also facilitate implementation of early voting. Our groups support designated state-funding for the necessary equipment purchase.

Bring Early Voting to New York State

New York is one of only fourteen states that does not allow early or no-excuse absentee voting, despite this having become a national trend. Our groups strongly support **in-person early voting legislation along the following lines**:

- Early voting **should occur for two weeks** inclusive of two weekends, with at least some weekday voting hours scheduled before and after typical business hours.
- In advance of the first day of the early voting period, **each county should provide public notice** of the days, hours and locations for early voting in that county.
- **Revisions of election procedures** should be implemented **to limit costs** of early voting, and mechanisms should be implemented to ease administrative burdens, such as the **use of electronic poll books**.
- **State funding** for early voting should be considered.
- A **uniform standard** incorporating the variables below should be used **to determine the minimum number of voting sites** for each county. **Counties should have flexibility** to add sites beyond the minimum and should consider the following factors in creating any additional sites:
    - The type of election (primary, general and special as well as the year in which the election is taking place)
    - The voting population or the number of active voters
    - The number of assembly districts, in part or whole, in a county
    - Population density, geography, and the methods and distance of travel for voters to reach potential locations

Revise New York's Laws to Make Ballots More Voter-Friendly

New York's arcane ballot design rules should be revised so that New York voters can be assured of ballots that are easy to read and understand.   New York's rules are largely intended for old, retired, lever voting machines and are unduly complicated. Design standards will assist counties in designing ballots that deliver **clear instructions**, demarcate races and candidates effectively, and eliminate "split contests" where candidates for a single office spill over onto more than one row, increasing the risk of inadvertent overvotes.   Absent changes to state law, counties should explore redesigning the ballot to increase font size to the extent possible and other administrative changes.

We urge the New York State Election Commissioners Association to support bills that feature these reforms such as the **Voter Friendly Ballot Act, A.3389.**

Upgrade Poll Workers Recruitment/Training and Websites

The most common challenge facing all boards of elections is the recruitment and training of poll workers. We strongly urge the state and county boards of elections to work together to develop ways to increase the number of poll workers and improve their training.   We urge county boards of elections to take advantage of the 2010 election law amendment allowing split shifts for poll workers. Urban county boards of election should develop programs for recruiting municipal workers – and high school and college students - to serve as poll workers. We recommend that poll workers should be trained to assist voters with ballot marking devices so all voters can vote privately and independently.

We believe that all New York county boards of elections should have websites that are maintained all year and offer access to election information for county residents. We support budget lines to provide such online information.