Modernizing Voter Registration in New York

New York's voter registration system urgently needs reform. Under the current, outdated system, election clerks process mountains of paper forms that voters submit—often at the last minute before the registration deadline, which can swamp officials at the very time they need to be preparing for Election Day. Registration applications that voters complete at state offices like the DMV are sometimes never sent to election officials. And even when the forms are sent in, inevitable clerical errors often produce inaccurate, incomplete registration records. These problems cause headaches for elections officials, long lines at the polls, and, sometimes, disenfranchisement for voters whose registration information is inaccurate or misfiled.

The anecdotes below illustrate these problems. These are a small sample of the citizens who, every cycle, do everything they are supposed to do, and are left behind by the 19th-century voter registration process they encounter. Each story below was reported during the 2008 election cycle to a hotline operated by the Election Protection Coalition, a national coalition of non-profit groups working to ensure that every eligible citizen can cast a ballot that counts. The reports illustrate the significant and unnecessary gaps in our existing registration system—and make clear that New Yorkers deserve a modern, cost-effective system that works.

IN 2008, NEW YORK VOTERS FREQUENTLY ENCOUNTERED LOST REGISTRATIONS, MISSING RECORDS, AND DATA ERRORS:

- "I registered back in June and never received anything. I know of at least 4 or 5 other people in the same boat."
- "I registered at a shelter through a board of elections representative. But I am not showing up as registered."
- "I sent in my registration and received a certified mail receipt from the board of elections, but I am not on the list."
- "My name was not on the list; I voted in every election since I was 18 (1989). I also voted in the primaries. Also, there were many other people in my building who were not on the list."
- "I registered at the DMV but the registrar had an incorrect address due to a typographical error. Says the error cannot be corrected between now and election day."
- "I was told that I was registered when I called the County Board of Elections, but was not on the rolls at the polling place."
- One worker reported, "voter's name was not found on the list, but then on closer examination she was there - had difficulty locating Hispanic last name due to confusion about order in which names listed."
- In October, a voter reported: "I registered at the DMV in June, but my name does not appear on the voter roll."

<u>NEW YORK VOTERS ALSO EXPERIENCED CHALLENGES WITH</u>
ADDRESS CHANGES, AFFIDAVIT BALLOTS AND **DUPLICATE RECORDS**:

- "I moved twice and re-registered to vote both times, but am not listed as registered at the new address according to NYBOE."
- "I updated my address with the county officials but it was sent to the Albany office rather than the New York City officials. I was told that it may have been lost on the way to Albany."
- "I recently moved. I sent in an updated registration to reflect change of address in a timely manner. My old county updated my address (even though I moved to a new county) but had me listed as 'inactive.' I called my new county office and they told me that I am not registered there. I called my old county and they told me I had to go to the election office in the old county to vote in person on voting day."
- One worker reported, "In addition to her name, voter still appears under her married name. She is now divorced. She was concerned about having duplicate registrations. "

MODERNIZING NEW YORK'S VOTER REGISTRATION SYSTEM IS THE ANSWER:

- Under a 21st-century registration system, state agencies would electronically transfer voter information to election officials, eliminating the risk that paper registration forms will be lost, or that data entry errors will be made processing hand-written forms.
- By automatically updating county voter registration lists based on information available from state agencies, eligible voters will remain actively registered, even if they move within the state; moreover, a system that updates when voters move cuts down on fears of fraud from bloated lists — like when someone registers at a new address and the old registration is not cancelled.
- By registering voters using data that has already been validated by a state agency via prior contact with a voter, the system guarantees accurate voter lists and limits both mistakes and fraud.
- Voters would use a secure Internet portal to check and correct their registration information, and look up information like their correct polling place. New York already has a one-way lookup site, but upgrading to full functionality would be convenient for voters and reduce errors without extra burdens on poll workers and election officials.
- Finally, a fully modern system would include an election-day failsafe, ensuring that eligible voters who somehow fall through the cracks are still able to cast a valid vote on election day.

<u>A MODERNIZED VOTER REGISTRATION SYSTEM CAN ALSO</u> **SAVE COSTS**:

- Arizona lowered its cost for processing registrations from 83¢ to 3¢ with online registration.
- Delaware's *eSignature* system, which allows voters to enter registration information via electronic terminals at DMV offices and then transmits that data automatically to election officials, has saved the state—whose population is less than one million—over $200,000 per year.
- Washington, by automating only a *portion* of its registration transactions, saved over $120,000 in 16 months.
- Canada saved over $110 million USD in the four election cycles since its automated system was implemented.