

BRENNAN
CENTER
FOR JUSTICE

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May 13, 2013

Hon. Thomas F. O'Mara
333 East Water Street
3rd Floor, Suite 301
Elmira, NY 14901
by email: omara@nysenate.gov

Re: Co-sponsorship for the Voter Empowerment Act of New York (A187A/S619A)

Dear Senator O'Mara,

I am writing to you today on behalf of the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law to urge you to co-sponsor the Voter Empowerment Act (VEA) of New York (A187A/S619A). By comprehensively modernizing New York's outdated voter registration process, the VEA will save money and register more voters.

The Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law is a not-for-profit, non-partisan public policy and law institute that focuses on issues of democracy and justice. Through the activities of its Democracy Program, the Brennan Center seeks to bring the ideal of representative self-government closer to reality by working to eliminate barriers to full and equal political participation, and to ensure that public policy and institutions reflect the diverse voices and interests that make for a rich and energetic democracy.

New York's voter registration system is in desperate need of an upgrade. New York ranks 47th in the nation in voter registration, with less than 64% of eligible New Yorkers registered to vote.¹ The current voter registration system is a costly, outdated, paper-based system that is subject to human error — every paper form is one typo away from potentially disfranchising a voter. The VEA will modernize that system by harnessing technology that saves money for the state and taxpayers, enhances registration accuracy and reliability, and increases the number of eligible voters who are registered in the state.

¹ Press Release, Office of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, Governor Cuomo Announces Reforms to Expand Access to Voter Registration (Aug. 16, 2012), available at <http://www.governor.ny.gov/press/08162012-voter-registration-reform>.

How the VEA Works

The key provisions of the VEA will:

- Electronically transfer the voter registration information already digitally collected by certain government agencies to local election offices when an eligible citizen consents to being registered to vote or when an already-registered voter changes her address;
- Incorporate existing verification and eligibility checks on registration applications;
- Transfer to the correct county the registrations of New Yorkers who move within the state;
- Enable voters to access and update their own voter registration records online;
- Allow people to register to vote, or change their party affiliation, closer to Election Day; and
- Permit sixteen and seventeen year-olds to pre-register and permit college students to vote in the community they consider home.

A modernized voter registration system allows voters to seamlessly use the information they are already providing for other government transaction for voting purposes. This eliminates needless paperwork, and makes registering more convenient for voters. By automatically updating voter registration records when a voter moves within the state, the VEA ensures that New Yorkers do not lose the right to vote because of an address change. The VEA also gives voters the choice to register and update their voter information online at any time. New Yorkers can bank online and pay their taxes online; they should be able to safely and securely access and update voter registration online as well.

How the VEA Benefits Voters and Election Administrators

More Registered Voters. In other states where implemented, a modernized voter registration system has increased the number of voters who are able to successfully register and cast a ballot. In Washington and Kansas, the number of voter registration transactions at DMVs nearly doubled, and in South Dakota, the number increased almost eight-fold.² And, by ensuring that eligible teens have the right to pre-register to vote in advance of their 18th birthday, and that college students can vote in the community they truly consider home, the VEA will increase participation among young voters.

Cost Savings. A modernized voter registration system will save New York taxpayers money. Digital registration saves money on data entry, printing and mailing costs. Maricopa County, Arizona spends only 3 cents to process an electronic registration, compared with 83 cents for a paper form. The county estimates it saved more than \$450,000 in registration costs in 2008 alone,³ and more than \$1 million over the course of five years.⁴ Other states are seeing similar

² CHRISTOPHER PONOROFF & WENDY WEISER, VOTER REGISTRATION IN A DIGITAL AGE 15 (2010), *available at* http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Democracy/Paperless_Registration_FINAL.pdf.

³ PONOROFF & WEISER, *supra* note 2, at 12.

⁴ PEW CENTER ON THE STATES, INACCURATE, COSTLY AND INEFFICIENT: EVIDENCE THAT AMERICA'S VOTER REGISTRATION SYSTEM NEEDS AN UPGRADE 2 (2012), *available at*

savings. Delaware saved more than \$200,000 in the first year it fully automated DMV registration. Washington's State Board of Elections saved more than \$126,000 in 2008 alone, and its counties saved even more.⁵

Reduce Registration Problems. States that have passed similar bills have reported a significant reduction in voter registration problems, and a decrease in provisional ballots cast.⁶ This will allow more voters to cast ballots that count and enable election officials to do their job more easily, effectively, and accurately. Election officials have consistently reported that electronic registrations are less error-prone than paper forms, thus making voter rolls more accurate. And what has been reported as one of the most challenging aspects of voter list maintenance, tracking changes of addresses,⁷ will be far more streamlined with VEA. More precise and up-to-date voter rolls will also enable officials to allocate ballots, machines, and poll workers more accurately, leading to more efficient elections.

The VEA will modernize New York's voter registration system by providing convenient and secure options for voters to get and stay registered in a way that largely eliminates the errors and frustrations that plague the current system. It will give New Yorkers more choices about how to register to vote, restore faith in our registration system, and ensure that our democracy is open to all eligible voters.

Again, we urge you to show your support for these much needed reforms, and to become a co-sponsor of the Voter Empowerment Act.

Sincere Regards,



Diana Kasdan

http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election_reform/Pew_Upgrading_Voter_Regist ration.pdf

⁵ PONOROFF & WEISER, *supra* note 2, at 12-13.

⁶ PONOROFF & WEISER, *supra* note 2, at 13; *see also* PEW CENTER ON THE STATES, *supra* note 4, at 7 (detailing problems caused by outmoded registration systems, including provisional ballots).

⁷ MYRNA PÉREZ, VOTER PURGES 8 (2008), *available at*

<http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/publications/Voter.Purges.f.pdf>.

cc: A187A Sponsors and co-sponsors
Assemblymember Brian Kavanaugh
Assemblymember Michael Cusick
Assemblymember Micah Kellner
Assemblymember José Rivera
Assemblymember Deborah J. Glick
Assemblymember Crystal D. Peoples-Stokes

S619A Sponsors and co-sponsors
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