

Frequently Asked Questions About the Stringer Assembly Reform Resolutions

What are the major provisions of the resolutions?

The first, one-chamber resolution would:

- Give each Committee the power to hire and fire its own staff. Currently, that authority resides with the Speaker.
- Require all floor votes to be slow roll call votes, with members' votes counted only when members are present in the chamber and personally indicate whether they wish to vote "aye" or "nay." Few votes are currently subject to such a requirement and "empty chair voting" is a commonplace.
- Require a public hearing upon the petition of one-quarter of a committee's members, unless the petition is rejected by a majority vote of the committee's members.
- End the blanket jurisdiction of the Rules Committee and resultant gridlock.
- Require a two-thirds vote of the Assembly to accept a "Message of Necessity," a parliamentary tool that is used to force votes without giving legislators time to read last-minute budgets and legislation.
- Make Motions to Discharge a viable tool to release bills from committee gridlock.
- Make attendance at committee meetings mandatory.

A second, joint resolution, would initiate conference committees immediately upon passage of comparable legislation in both chambers.

Why are there two resolutions?

Most of the changes in the Stringer proposal can be enacted and implemented in a single chamber, and those are self-contained in the one-house resolution, to enable expeditious action and avoid the often arduous two-chamber legislative process. A second, joint resolution includes those changes that require approval of both chambers.

Can it happen?

Yes, it can—and it will.

In addition to a groundswell of support for the Stringer Assembly Reform Resolutions from voters and editorial boards across the state, what makes the proposal more politically viable than any other reform measure currently on the table is that the bulk of it is packaged as a one-house resolution.

Since most of the proposals at issue can be acted upon by the Assembly, without the Senate or the Governor, chamber-to-chamber finger-pointing will not stop progress, nor can it be used as an excuse for inaction on the part of the Assembly. Between now and the Assembly's January 5 deadline—in the form of a scheduled vote to adopt or amend the Assembly rules—all eyes will be on the Assembly. We believe this unprecedented accountability will produce historic results.

What about the Senate?

We do not plan on letting the Senate off the hook. In response to the statewide support for the Stringer resolutions, Majority Leader Bruno has convened a Task Force on Government Reform, and we will demand of it nothing less than the reforms we are asking the Assembly to support.

However, at the moment, we are focusing our attention on the Assembly, where we have specific, actionable resolutions to implement reform. With the Stringer resolutions on the table, and a rules adoption vote scheduled for January 5, the Assembly has a narrow window of opportunity to take the lead and set the benchmark for reform in the Senate.

If history and the experience of other states serve as a guide, it is reasonable to expect that reform in one house of the Legislature will be followed by reform in the other.

Which Brennan Center proposals are not included?

The resolutions do exclude some of the Brennan Center's proposals, including limitations on committee assignments, term limits for committee chairs and caps on bill introductions. The Brennan Center continues to view these as valuable reforms, while recognizing that no set of outside proposals is ever adopted in whole when transformed into a legislative proposal.

Is the resolution too radical? Not radical enough?

Some say the Stringer resolution goes too far. The truth? As editorial boards from across the state have written, the reforms it would implement are reasonable, not radical.

In an effort to craft a proposal around which to build a statewide, bipartisan coalition of support, the resolution's sponsors excluded some of our report's more radical recommendations. The reforms that remain may be foreign to Albany, but they are commonplace in legislatures throughout the country. The Stringer resolution will reform the Assembly—not topple it.

Others say the resolution does not go far enough. But this simply is not an acceptable excuse for inaction, either. We, too, believe that its passage should not mark the end of the reform “conversation” in Albany. But its passage would not in any way preclude future reforms, and right now it represents the best hope for real change—which is why all Assembly members that claim to stand for reform must sign on now.

With that in mind, we will not accept, nor do we believe voters will accept, a watered down or “compromise” version of these very reasonable proposals.