



Testimony of Vote Early NY

at the

Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2021 Executive Budget Proposal: Public Protection

Presented to the

**Senate Budget and Revenue Committee
Assembly Ways and Means Committee**

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Good Morning Chairpersons Krueger and Weinstein and esteemed Members of the Senate Budget and Revenue Committee and the Assembly Ways and Means Committee.

My name is Adam Magazine, Co-Founder of Vote Early NY, Inc, a non-partisan non-profit dedicated to raising awareness among the public about new access (and threats) to our voting rights and working with Boards of Elections statewide to ensure proper pro-voter implementation of reforms to New York's election law and related regulations.

The 2019 and 2020 legislative sessions saw the enactment of the most comprehensive election reforms in the history of New York State, including online and automatic voter registration and the implementation across the state of early voting, electronic poll books, registration portability, an online absentee-ballot request portal, and youth pre-registration to name a few. But, of course, no one knew just how challenging the 2020 election cycle would be.

As is well known, due to these reforms and Executive Orders and legislation in response to the Covid-19 State of Emergency, voters eligible to participate in the 2020 Primary and General Elections were provided with "Three ways to vote":

- (1) Remotely by mail ballot;
- (2) in person, during the Early Voting period; and
- (3) in person, on Election Day.

In combination, these changes dramatically expanded access to voting in New York in a very short timeframe. In general, the State and county Boards of Elections rose to the challenges of implementing many new voting processes during a pandemic quite admirably. However, much remains to be done to modernize New York elections. It is not necessary to go into detail here regarding the issues we have seen with absentee ballot processing and canvassing, long lines at polling places, and other administration issues. But now is the time to address the historic lack of state funding for election administration to ensure that New York can be an example to the rest of the nation in the future.

The state has entered a new and modernized voting environment: Election Day alternatives like early voting and absentee voting are here to stay; the electorate has eagerly embraced the availability of alternatives to waiting in long lines to vote at a single assigned location on a single Election Day. Further, voters demand and deserve a voting and registration infrastructure that is modernized and standardized across the state. To be successful and safeguard our civil rights, the State Board must be engaged to build out the modern election infrastructure needed and set uniform standards to ensure all New York voters have equal access. The costs associated with these changes cannot be left to the localities alone.

Further changes are coming to our elections. The Governor's budget proposal would *double* weekend Early Voting hours and increase minimum evening early voting hours from two weekdays open until 8 pm, to *three* weekdays open until 9 pm.¹ The state needs to increase funding to help cover the costs not only of providing minimum Early Voting hours and locations but should

¹ FY 2022 New York State Executive Budget, Public Protection and General Government, Part S, Section 1 (b) and (c).

structure the funding in a way that incentivizes local boards to go beyond the minimum safeguards in the law and tailor programs that best serve their communities.

It is imperative that the state Board of Elections be appropriately funded to implement the following in the near term:

- A statewide online voter registration, voter information and update system;
- A uniform and transparent (ideally digital) system for faster and more accurate absentee and affidavit ballot verification, objections, curing and counting;
- A statewide online absentee ballot request portal that also permits voters to track their ballot from request to canvass in real time, and the ability to track and cure technical defects;
- The build out and syncing of Automatic Voter Registration with several agencies.
- A basic statewide multilingual voter education budget, including public-facing troubleshooting for frequently asked questions, that utilizes traditional and new media, social media outreach, to inform all stakeholders and the voting public about changes to election law and policy, voter deadlines, and other important information.

The state should make funds available to county Boards of Elections to cover the expenses of expanded absentee voting. Counties will need funds akin to past Aid to Localities grants, allowing for added personnel and overtime spending as well as some capital expenses to optimize operations in response to the changes in voting behavior. In addition, the original capital grant deadline for Early Voting should be extended to counties who may need to upgrade to electronic poll books, as requested by NYSECA. The state must also provide recurring funding for Early Voting, especially if hours and locations requirements will be increased.

New York has finally created a modern voting system commensurate with its position of leadership within the nation. Now is the time to implement a reliable, robust, and recurring annual funding stream to make the system efficient, accessible, and equitable.

Thank you for your attention to these important issues and for your leadership improving voter access and modernizing our electoral system, so that all eligible New York voters can participate in our democracy. Vote Early NY and our Coalition partners stand ready to assist in improving administration and safeguarding civil rights.