



# ELECTION COMMISSIONERS ASSOCIATION OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK 2022-2023 DEMOCRATIC CAUCUS

**Testimony before The New York State Assembly & New York State Senate**

**Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Local Government Officials/ General Government**

**Wednesday, February 15, 2023.**

**Dustin M. Czarny, NYSECA Democratic Caucus Chair**

Thank you for letting me testify today. My name is Dustin Czarny and I am an Elections Commissioner in Onondaga County and the Democratic Caucus Chair of the New York State Elections Commissioner Association. NYSECA represents the diverse 62 counties throughout New York State. I am proud of our bi-partisan Election Board system and I truly believe this is a model that should be followed nationwide. The Democratic and Republican Commissioners must work together to ensure the integrity of our election system. The built-in checks and balances help NY avoid the partisan battles we see unfolding in other States. Commissioners must find ways to put partisan ideologies aside to meet the needs of the voters.

The Board of Elections has faced many hurdles over the last few years and has risen to the challenge. Since 2019 we have implemented election reforms such as Early Voting, Electronic Pollbooks, Universal transfer of registrations. We have administered one of the highest turnout Presidential elections in modern history. We have revamped a robust system of delivering absentee ballots to voters at the highest volume in NYS history. Implementing a cure system to prevent accidental disenfranchisement of absentee voters over technical deficiencies. We have done all that in the middle of a multi-year pandemic that challenged the very nature of our mostly in-person voting system and put the health of our election workers at risk. While no system that is made up of human workers is without its flaws, our Boards have risen to the challenge, and kept our electoral system afloat in New York.

In 2023 and beyond there are more reforms the NYS Legislature has charged our boards with implementing. Last year we took on the task of canvassing absentee ballots before Election Day, ending New York's infamous run of being last in the nation to certify our results. We will expand Early Voting opening more sites than the last few years. This year we will take on online and automatic voter registration which will swell our voter rolls and make it easier for

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New Yorkers to register and update their voter registration. The Democratic caucus of commissioners looks forward to these challenges as they will improve the lives of voters and participation in our Electoral system.

I would be remiss however not to point out that with these added burdens will come added burdens. The expansion of Early Voting will mean more inspectors with more pay as minimum wage increases and expanded weekend hours add to our costs. We will need to bring in additional personnel to conduct the early canvass of absentees before Election Day as our regular personnel are tied up with Early Voting and Election Day preparation. We need additional equipment such as high speed scanners, sorting equipment, and rolling our electronic poll books on Election Day as well as on demand ballot printers. Additionally we have an aging fleet of Election Day scanners that is in desperate need of replacement.

These added costs are met with skepticism and resistance from our host counties. The politicization of our electoral process is not just something happening in other states, it has been happening on the local level as well. Host counties made up of elected leaders who are hostile to these voting reforms refuse to give more than minimum funding to our Boards of Elections. This resistance is in part because of our independence and in part because of the national ideological battle over the right to free and fair elections. Too often the Election Boards are after thoughts for county budgeting and they are resistant to our requests to cover the added duties put upon us by State Government.

The Executive budget comes along way for providing the necessary funding for the New York State Board of Elections. This is righting many years of misery when it comes to funding the State Board of Elections. It is a welcome and important step as the State Board of Elections will be a vital partner for County Boards. The State Board of Elections will shoulder the burden of Online and Automatic voter registration as well as tracking of our absentee ballots and the Campaign and Public Finance systems. However the Executive Budget only appropriates old unspent Aid to Localities and Capital Funding will help some counties who are behind on upgrading their systems. However we need new and substantial funding for all counties going forward.

New York State must play a role in funding elections at the County level. The burdens that County Boards face in 2023 are similar to those we faced in 2019. We need similar funding. In 2019 we received \$10 million in Aid to Localities and \$25 million in capital funding. This level of funding will allow for our boards to hire personnel to accomplish the absentee staffing and staff expanded Early Voting centers. The Capital funding will allow us to expand Electronic Poll Books for use on Election Day statewide as well as purchasing technological advances for

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canvassing and reporting Absentee results alongside Election and Early Voting results in a timely manner. It will also allow many counties to start replacing their aging Election Day scanners as next generation machines are set to be certified by the New York State Board of Elections over the next 6 months.

We have aging electronic poll books that are in need of being upgrade. Similarly many counties have precinct scanner fleets that are in desperate need of replacement. Next generation precinct scanners are being approved by the NYS Board of Elections this year. Providing funding to counties to be able to replace their fleets is necessary to ensure every voter in every county has the same Election Day and Early Voting experience. We also would like dedicated funding and/or grants for voter outreach and education, a source of funding not provided by most counties to the Election Boards. These funding requests have the bi-partisan support of the entire NYS Elections Commissioner Association.

We must also protect our Board of Elections from interference from local elected officials. Often the existence of state funding is a reason for county offices to use that instead of committing the appropriate amount of local dollars. This often results in no net revenue for local board of elections to accomplish their added burdens. We need to establish minimum staffing levels tied to voter registration rolls for each county Board of Elections. We need mandates for full time commissioners as our political calendars demand input and guidance year round. These guidelines can be established and monitored by our State Board of Elections to maintain the independence we need of our Boards of Elections while assuring that counties and New York State give the vital resources for us to accomplish our mission.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to testify today. I hope that we can count on the legislatures support in defending our democracy here in New York.

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