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Groups pressing for state voting reforms

NEW YORK: League of Women Voters seeks allies to push Legislature in 2018.

By Joe Mahoney CNHI News Service Dec 24, 2017



The New York state Capitol in Albany

Hans Pennink



ALBANY — Despite all the passion and hype that often accompany local and state elections, many New Yorkers choose not to vote.

In fact, New York is near the bottom when it comes to voter participation, placing 41st among the 50 states in the percentage of its citizens who cast ballots in the 2016 general election. And that was a move up from its 44th-place finish from the 2012 election.

Now, with the 2018 legislative session slated to open Jan. 3, a coalition of good-government groups and labor unions is pushing to make New York the 38th state to allow early voting. They contend that expanded opportunities for voters to make their choices will pump up participation.

“Our focus is going to be to get some of these reforms into the budget,” said Jennifer Wilson, policy director for the New York state chapter of the League of Women Voters. “We’ve seen in the past that once the budget is completed, it becomes too easy for lawmakers to kick the can down the road.”

Without state financial support to assist counties in opening polls in advance of election days, Wilson said, it would become more challenging to overcome the argument that early voting leaves the local governments with an unfunded mandate from Albany.

Typically, efforts to increase voter participation have been supported by Democrats in the Legislature while the Republicans who control the state Senate are often cool to the proposals, Wilson noted.

The advocates are hoping to get a boost in the coming year from enlisting one of the most influential unions at the statehouse, the New York State United Teachers, which has more than 600,000 members.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat from New York City, is on board with early voting, though it remains to be seen if he is willing to dedicate funding in the state budget he is expected to release in mid-January.

“We have fought for years to break down barriers to democracy, including pushing for early voting,” said Richard Azzopardi, a Cuomo spokesman. “We look forward to working with these advocates to finally make this a reality in New York and get this much-needed reform through the Legislature once and for all.”

Cuomo has also signaled he supports a system of automatic voter registration that would require New Yorkers to opt out if they don't want to be listed as registered voters.

Nine states and the District of Columbia have automatic registration. These systems work by registering eligible citizens automatically every time they interact with a government agency, according to the Brennan Center for Justice, a project of New York University School of Law.

But skeptics say the advocates can't prove that early voting, automatic voter registration or another proposal, same-day registration, would actually increase participation once election day rolls around.

"Automatic registration doesn't bother me, and we virtually have it now," said Gerald Benjamin, vice president of regional engagement at the State University at New Paltz and a longtime observer of New York politics. "But it's not the answer to the problem of people not voting."

Benjamin contended that the real solution to driving up participation is for the state to ensure legislative district lines are drawn fairly, without political bosses controlling the process to favor incumbents, as well as campaign finance reform.

Pointing to the recent special election in Alabama to fill a vacant U.S. Senate seat — a contest in a traditionally Republican state that was won by a Democrat — Benjamin said turnout tends to surge when races get much attention and citizens conclude that much is at stake. He also suggested that the possibility of voter fraud would be a valid concern if same-day voter registration were introduced in New York.

Whether state Senate Republicans warm up to the proposals aimed at juicing voter turnout in New York remains to be seen.

Scott Reif, spokesman for Senate GOP Leader John Flanagan, R-Suffolk County, was non-committal on whether the GOP lawmakers who rule Albany's upper chamber would embrace early voting.

“Our conference has supported electoral reforms in the past and we would expect to do so again,” Reif said. “But we have not discussed that specific proposal recently.”

At the state Board of Elections, an agency that interacts regularly with local elections officials, spokesman John Conklin said there has been no clamor on the part of county governments to have early voting and, in fact, several have passed resolutions coming out against the idea.

“There would definitely be financial impacts,” Conklin said. “Every board has to employ additional personnel for every day your machines are in the field. The cost would fall exclusively on the county taxpayers because that’s who pays for elections.”

The states that have adopted early voting, moreover, have yet to see any significant increase in voter participation rates, he said.

“If the goal is to increase turnout and it doesn’t do it, the question becomes: Why are we spending this money?” Conklin said.

Several states conduct voting by mail to make it easier for citizens to cast ballots. But participation has remained a concern even when ballots show up in the mailbox.

“Too many people are tossing the ballots mailed to their homes instead of filling them out and making their voices heard,” The Seattle Times lamented in an editorial published Dec. 18, in suggesting that lawmakers in the state of Washington redouble efforts to stimulate turnout.

In New York, the advocates for voting reforms have only begun their push, and their lobbyists will be working the Legislative Office Building across State Street from the state Capitol in Albany after New Year’s Day.

“Other states have been able to increase participation through early voting,” said Karl Corn, a spokesman for the teachers’ union. “We shouldn’t be tied down to a single day.”

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