There's a Long List of Voting Reforms New York Can Pass

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http://www.gothamgazette.com/index.php/state/6295-there-is-a-long-list-of-voting-reforms-new-york-can-pass
AG Schneiderman votes (photo via @AGSchneiderman)

Voter participation has been on the decline (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/12/opinion/the-worst-voter-turnout-in-72-years.html) across the country for decades now, but is especially poor in New York, where only 29 percent (http://www.nyccfb.info/media/blog/new-york-state-near-bottom-voter-turnout-rankings) of those eligible cast their votes in the 2014 general elections for state-level positions, including Governor. Whether you measure by eligible or registered voters, the New York numbers are bleak, though they always look worse when using "eligible" - there are nearly 2 million citizens of voting age not registered (http://www.nyccfb.info/media/press-releases/2015-11-12-000000/nyc-votes-nypirg-earn-top-spot-national-voter-registration) to vote in New York. In some countries, even states in this one, citizens are automatically registered to vote when they become eligible, so the two numbers are virtually one and the same.

Automatic registration is among a long list of voting reforms that advocates for more participation in the political process want to see passed in New York and elsewhere.


This week, as a competitive presidential primary arrived in New York for the first time in decades, only 19.7 percent (http://www.thenation.com/article/new-york-had-the-second-lowest-voter-turnout-so-far-this-election-season/) of eligible voters cast a ballot Tuesday, according to data from the Election Project, making New York turnout second-lowest for the presidential primary so far.

Nationwide, New York ranks 46th (http://www.nyccfb.info/media/blog/new-york-state-near-bottom-voter-turnout-rankings) in voter turnout. Worldwide, the United States also ranks next-to-last in voter turnout among similar developed democracies, according to data (http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/06/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/) from the Pew Research Center. In the 2012 presidential elections, voter turnout in the U.S. reached 53.6 percent of voting age population, while in Sweden, it was 82.6 percent in 2014 general elections. Sweden automatically registers voters once they become eligible, as do many other countries that have higher voter turnout, while in most of the United States, the onus is on the citizen to register.

There are a number of factors that contribute to New York’s abysmal voter turnout: registration deadlines far in advance of the election (two of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump’s own children were unable to vote for him in the primary on Tuesday, because, in Trump’s words (http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/04/11/two-of-donald-trumps-children-cant-vote-for-him-in-primary/), they were “unaware of the rules and they didn’t register in time”); long lines at the polls due to a short voting window; a lack of voter engagement;
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Legislation has been introduced time and again in Albany to improve accessibility and participation by making both registering to vote and casting one's vote as easy as possible, yet hardly any legislation to enact meaningful reform to New York's voting system has been signed into law in recent years.

Meanwhile, not only does New York have restrictive voting laws, but in New York City, persistent problems with the Board of Elections came to a head during Tuesday's primary election after the BOE confirmed that more than 125,000 Democratic voters in Brooklyn had been removed from the voter rolls between since November (2015). This year’s primary election gave rise to a record number of complaints (https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20160419/clinton-hill/confusion-affidavits-frustrate-some-voters-at-polls) ranging from issues with poll site opening hours late (http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/ny-primary-voters-outraged-broken-machines-late-polls-article-1.2606810), poorly staffed polling sites, and confusion over poll site locations.

The problems led city Comptroller Scott Stringer to launch an audit of BOE operations and management, announced on primary day, when he called the agency “consistently disorganized, chaotic, and ineffective.”

Mayor Bill de Blasio expressed support of the audit, saying (http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/369-16/statement-mayor-de-blasio) that the BOE’s repeated errors make it clear that “major reforms will be needed to the BOE and in the state law governing it,” as the BOE’s unexplained voter purge “undermines the integrity of the entire electoral process.”

New York State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman has also opened an investigation into the BOE. “I am deeply troubled by the volume and consistency of voting irregularities,” Schneiderman said in a statement. “That’s why we have opened an investigation into alleged improprieties in yesterday’s voting by the New York City Board of Elections.” Schneiderman said his office’s voter complaint hotline “received more than one thousand complaints” on Tuesday - about six and a half times more complaints were received on Tuesday alone than during the 2012 general election (150 complaints total in 2012).

A significant issue that the primary shined a light on is New York’s registration deadlines - in order to vote in the party primaries, registered voters had to change or declare party affiliation before a deadline in October of last year; while anyone registering anew had until March 25 of this year - reasonably recent, but not the up-to-and-including day-of registration that some want to see enacted.

The state Legislature is now in session, and with three more elections coming up this year, lawmakers could take action on a number of reforms that may help modernize the voting process and improve voter turnout.

Bills have been introduced in the Senate and the Assembly to make voter registration automatic, expand online voter registration, improve New York’s confusing ballot design, allow for early voting, extend registration deadlines, consolidate the state and federal primary election dates, and more. Several resolutions (http://benkallos.com/press-release/elections-and-civic-engagement-targeted-upgrades-ny-city-council) have been introduced in the New York City Council calling on the state to pass some of these reforms,
including consolidating election dates and allowing a period of in-person voting prior to election day.

"Voting is the most basic and essential act in our democracy - but the truth is, too few of us bother to do it," City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito said during her Feb. 11 State of the City address, at which time she called on the state to enact several voting reforms, including automatic registration, early voting, no-excuse absentee voting, and same-day registration. "Part of the blame for low voter turnout rests with antiquated voting laws that have failed to keep up with improvements seen in other states," Mark-Viverito said.

It is entirely within the state government’s power to make voting easier and more accessible, and most of the proposed reforms would also make the voter registration system more accurate and efficient and would reduce costs involved with maintaining the voter rolls and administering elections. Still, the political will has not been there.

Assemblymember Brian Kavanagh, a Manhattan Democrat, believes many of the problems with Tuesday’s primary “stem from bad, outdated election laws."

“We ought to modernize the election laws so that both registering initially and maintaining and updating the registration can be done online and automatically,” Kavanagh told Gotham Gazette, “both to give voters more control over the process and to minimize the extent to which there are errors in the rolls resulting from clerical errors from paper applications.”

Kavanagh has sponsored several voting reform bills in the Assembly, including legislation that would enact automatic voter registration, extend registration deadlines, and allow for same-day voter registration. Though year after year some of these bills have been introduced and passed in the Democrat-led Assembly but not the Republican-controlled Senate, Kavanagh is optimistic that “what has happened leading up to the presidential may be a spur for many real changes.”

Increasing voter engagement and education is as important as increasing accessibility, some say, and a number of initiatives to do just that are underway in New York. There are also efforts that combine the two, including National Voter Registration Day and Student Voter Registration Day - the latter took place in New York City on March 18 this year and got 8,500 students registered to vote.

Besides enacting commonsense voting reforms, officials looking to increase voter turnout should be studying what factors have led to the higher participation rates that exist in certain areas of New York, says Gerald Benjamin, professor of political science and director of the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz.

“There are places in New York that have very high turnout - what can we learn from those places?” Benjamin said. “They’re mobilizing organizations to get out to vote, the issues are passionately held and very important to people, so we get highly competitive elections. That’s what gets people to vote.”

“It has to do with old fashioned competition,” Benjamin continued, “meaningful elections, high stakes stuff going on - that drives participation." Perhaps the most effective ways to increase voter turnout, Benjamin says,
are to “increase competitiveness, make the issues locally relevant, and create mobilizing institutions to turn out voters.”

**Improving Voter Registration**

**Voter Empowerment Act**

One of the more comprehensive voting reform efforts that has been introduced in the state Legislature in recent years is the Voter Empowerment Act, which seeks to make the antiquated registration process more efficient by expanding online registration and modernizing the way voter information is collected, processed, stored, and shared.

The Voter Empowerment Act would allow certain government agencies that interact with voters to automatically register citizens to vote (unless they opt out); require the state Board of Elections to make certain registration information available to voters online so they may update their information over the internet; automatically update registrations of New Yorkers who move within the state; allow people to register or change their party later in the election cycle (10 days before an election); and permit pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds.

Democratic State Senate Deputy Minority Leader Michael Gianaris, the bill’s sponsor, has pushed for the Voter Empowerment Act to be passed in the Senate for years, as has Assemblymember Brian Kavanagh, who has sponsored the Assembly bill to enact the VEA. While one bill to enact the act failed in committee when the Senate Elections Committee voted against it in May of 2014, the latest versions of the bills are currently awaiting committee action in both the Senate and the Assembly.

“Our current voter registration system makes it far too difficult for New Yorkers to get themselves registered and get to the polls,” Kavanagh said in a press release.

“Handwritten forms, data entry errors, arbitrary deadlines, and other defects in the system all too often make it difficult or impossible for voters to vote.”

Should the Voter Empowerment Act pass, the legislation would improve the accuracy of New York’s voter rolls by reducing the number of outdated or duplicate registration records. Additionally, switching to a modern voter registration system that transmits voter registration information electronically would save the state and counties money by reducing the costs involved with processing voter registration and maintaining an accurate list with the current error prone paper-based voter registration system.

**Automatic voter registration**

Automatic voter registration would be major step for New York that could dramatically increase the number of...
registered voters and, likely, the number of ballots cast. In March 2015, Oregon became the first state to pass legislation to automatically register eligible citizens who interact with the DMV to vote (unless they opt out), and California’s governor signed a bill modeled on Oregon’s law not long after.

Speaking with City and State last year, Senator Gianaris said automatic registration “would register over 2 million people in the state who are eligible but unregistered right now. By way of comparison, in [the 2014] gubernatorial election, a little over three-and-a-half million people voted, so you can imagine what kind of an impact adding over 2 million people to the rolls might have in a situation like that.”

In January, Governor Cuomo announced a proposal that would make New York the third state to adopt automatic voter registration through the DMV. “Why do we make it so difficult for the people to participate? Voter registration should be a presumption, not a hurdle,” Cuomo said during his State of the State address. “Let’s flip the paradigm and automatically enroll voters when they get a driver’s license. They can always opt out.”

Yet concerns have been raised about how the automatic voter registration through the DMV could “skew the electorate in ways that are not desirable or fair,” as Kavanaugh told the Daily News, since it would significantly increase the number of registered voters in more suburban areas of the state and upstate New York, but would do relatively little to increase the number of registered voters in New York City, where car ownership rates are lower.

That issue could be fixed by expanding the number of state agencies, including social service and health-related agencies, that offer voter registration, so that New Yorkers could be automatically registered to vote through a variety of government interactions. The Voter Empowerment Act would include the State University of New York, City University of New York, the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, public housing authorities in the state, and the Division of Military and Naval Affairs as agencies that offer automatic voter registration.

New York City Council Member Ben Kallos has sponsored a number of bills aimed at increasing voter access, including bills that were signed into law by Mayor Bill de Blasio in December 2014 that expanded the number of city agencies required to offer voter registration forms.

Yet ultimately, the power to decide how and when citizens may register to vote and cast a ballot mainly rests with the state.

Pre-registration
Separate bills to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to pre-register to vote passed in the Assembly in 2014 and have since been reintroduced.
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(https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2015/A2529) during this legislative session, but are awaiting committee action in the Senate (https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2015/s857). These bills would also require local education boards to adopt policies that promote student voter registration and pre-registration. A resolution (http://nyc.councilmatic.org/legislation/res-695-2015/) calling upon the New York State Legislature to pass, and the Governor to sign the bills (A2529/S857) has been introduced in the City Council.

City Council Member Helen Rosenthal, with colleagues, community organizations, NYC Votes, and others, launched the city’s first Student Voter Registration Day on March 20, 2015, during which time 17- and 18-year-olds were encouraged to register to vote in their schools. After large year two growth, 10,500 students have registered to vote through the program.

Pre-registration is an important part of increasing voter turnout, advocates say (http://www.gothamgazette.com/index.php/government/5642-student-voter-registration-push-targets-new-yorks-turnout-crisis), because allowing young people to access the voting system can help to form a lasting habit of civic engagement.

“We know that the earlier you start voting, the more likely you are to maintain that practice,” said Umair Khan, Deputy Counsel to Public Advocate Letitia James and member of the New York City Campaign Finance Board’s Voter Assistance Advisory Committee, during the committee’s Dec. 15 public hearing.

**Same-day registration**

Same-day registration allows eligible voters to register to vote and cast their ballots on the same day. In New York, eligible voters must register at least 25 days (https://www.usvotefoundation.org/vote/sviddomestic.htm?submission=true&stateld=35) before the election date in order to cast their vote.

Currently, eleven states and the District of Columbia allow same-day voter registration (http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/same-day-registration.aspx) (also known as Election Day registration), and three other states have passed same-day registration laws that have yet to go into effect. Voter turnout is much higher (http://www.nonprofitvote.org/america-goes-to-the-polls-2014/) in states that have same-day registration than in those that do not. According to a report on voter turnout in the 2014 midterm elections by Nonprofit VOTE, voter turnout in states with same-day voter registration averaged 12 percent higher than states that do not have such an option.

Making same-day registration a reality in New York would require a change to the New York State Constitution, and bills have been introduced by Gianaris and Kavanagh in the Senate (https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2015/S2391) and the Assembly (https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2015/A5891), respectively, to do so. Legislation to implement same-day voter registration is also needed, and bills Gianaris and Kavanagh have introduced legislation to allow same-day registration (in addition to other reforms) in the Senate (https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2015/s2483/amendment/a) and the Assembly (https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2015/A8305) a number of times. Both bills were referred to their respective election committees at the beginning of this year.

In New York City, meanwhile, the City Council’s Committee on Governmental Operations recently laid over
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a resolution calling upon the state Legislature to pass and the Governor to sign legislation amending the Election Law to establish same-day and online voter registration.

Lowering the voting age

A nationwide campaign to lower the voting age to 16 was launched in December by the nonpartisan group Generation Citizen, which promotes youth participation in civic affairs. In New York, that would require a change to state law (though city-specific enabling legislation may be a possibility).

A number of other countries, including Argentina, Germany, and Norway, allow 16-year-olds to vote. Two cities in Maryland have already lowered their voting ages to 16 in recent years, and efforts to do the same are currently underway in San Francisco and Washington, D.C.

Across the United States, 16- and 17-year-olds pay taxes on income and can drive in most states. In New York, they are tried as adults in criminal courts. A white paper from Generation Citizen suggests lowering the voting age to 16 could drive demand for better civic education in schools and could ultimately help America’s voter turnout problem.

“We know from our work with young people throughout the City that many of them are eager to have their voices heard when it comes to public policy debates and who is going to represent them in government,” said David Pechefsky, New York City site director for Generation Citizen, at an April 8 rally calling for state lawmakers to enact election reform.

One key argument to lowering the vote age is to help young people develop the habit of voting before they go to college, which often takes them to another geographic area. Voting before college may make people more likely to vote during college, whether by absentee ballot or another means.

Restoring voting rights to paroled felons

Fourteen states and the District of Columbia automatically restore voting rights to individuals convicted of a felony upon their release from prison (the state legislature in Maryland narrowly overturned Governor Larry Hogan’s veto of a bill to extend voting rights to felons before they complete probation and parole in February, restoring the right to vote to some 40,000 recently released Maryland felons). Four states permanently disenfranchise citizens with a past felony conviction, and require a petition to the government to get the right to vote restored.

In New York, voting rights are restored automatically upon discharge from parole after those who have been convicted of a felony have been released from prison (those on probation can vote). Yet legislation
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Bills to restore voting rights to felons out on parole were referred to election committees in January in both the Assembly (https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2015/a7634) and the Senate (https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2015/S2023A). According to the New York Civil Liberties Union (http://www.nyclu.org/files/Disfranchisement7bw.pdf), as of 2010, “an estimated 122,018 people with felony convictions are barred from voting in New York,” with 46 percent of those disenfranchised out on parole. That disenfranchisement, supporters of restoring voting rights to felons say, disproportionately affects communities of color and hinders the reintegration process.

Proponents of a change say that allowing voting while in prison and upon release would aid in reintegration and that loss of voting rights has never been a deterrent to committing a crime.

In New York City, a resolution (http://nyc.councilmatic.org/legislation/res-870-2015/) calling on the state Legislature to pass and the Governor to sign the Assembly bill related to voting rights for convicted felons was laid over by the Committee on Governmental Operations in February.

**Improving the Voting Process & Election Day Operations**

**Open primaries**

New York is one of the eleven states that have closed primaries, meaning voters must be registered with a political party in order to cast a primary election vote, which excludes independent voters and those who failed to realize they must be registered with a party.

Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders criticized (http://www.npr.org/2016/04/14/474185167/new-york-s-closed-primary-presents-a-challenge-to-sander-s-campaign) New York’s closed primary system during a rally in Washington Square Park on April 13, saying, "We have a system here in New York where independents can’t get involved in the Democratic primary."

“Young people who have not previously registered and want to register today just can’t do it,” Sanders continued in front of a crowd of many young people, "So this is going be a tough primary for us."

According to the state Board of Elections (http://www.elections.ny.gov/NYSBOE/enrollment/county/countynov15.pdf), out of 10.7 million active voters in New York state, nearly 3 million are not registered with either major party.

New York also has the earliest change-of-party deadline (http://www.nyccfb.info/PDF/news_media/PartyAffiliationDeadlines.pdf) in the country among states with closed primaries. New York is the only state where the deadline to change one’s party does not even fall within the same calendar year as the primary (this time the deadline was October 9), forcing voters to make a critical choice regarding their party enrollment long before many have even had much of a chance to get to know the candidates.
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Independent voters protested [protest link] New York's closed primary system on April 14, gathering on the steps of City Hall at a rally organized by nonpartisan groups like IndependentVoting.org and Open Primaries to call on lawmakers to adopt an open primary system.

A bill [bill link] to establish an open primary system for all state and congressional elections is awaiting committee action after first being introduced in the Assembly. Legislation to shorten the change-of-party deadline to 25 days before any election has been introduced in both the Assembly [assembly bill link] and the Senate [senate bill link].

Better ballot design

New York ballots can often be confusing, causing voters to make mistakes which in turn render their votes invalid [invalid link]. The Voter Friendly Ballot Act [ballot act link], sponsored by Assemblymember Kavanagh, would set clear requirements for how ballots should look and create a ballot layout that is easy for voters to read and use.

In 2010, tens of thousands of votes [tens of thousands link] cast in New York were voided after voters filled out their ballots incorrectly. Statewide, roughly 20,000 votes for Governor were thrown out and between 30,000 and 40,000 votes for other candidates were voided, according to a report [report link] by Sundeep Iyer and Larry Norden from the Democracy Program at NYU's Brennan Center for Justice [center link].

The Voter Friendly Ballot Act has passed [passed link] in the Assembly three times [three times link], but "died in Senate [died in Senate link]" in January and has returned to the Assembly.

Early voting

Early voting allows eligible voters to cast their ballots before election day. The small window of time voters have to get to the polls on Election Day, which typically falls on a Tuesday, can result in long lines, and can exclude a number of New Yorkers who simply cannot make it to the polls while they are open.

New York is one of the few states that completely prohibits early voting in any form - 34 states and Washington D.C. allow in-person early voting [early voting link]. Early voting can begin as many as 45 days ahead of an election in some states or simply the weekend before an election in others. According to a report from New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer's office, in 2012 "approximately 31 percent of all votes nationwide were cast prior to Election Day in November."
A number of bills to enact early voting are currently pending in Albany. Assemblymember Kavanagh and Senate Minority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins have sponsored bills that would establish a 12-day early voting period that ends the Sunday before election day. Another bill, sponsored by State Senator Tony Avella, would change the days of voting for primary and general elections from Tuesdays to the first Saturday and Sunday after the first Friday of September and November, respectively.

“While early voting does require some investment and a change in the way resources are allocated, analysis of data in early voting states shows a number of gains that ultimately eased pressure on Election Day,” said Art Chang, member of the New York City Campaign Finance Board and chair of the Board’s Voter Assistance Advisory Committee, during testimony before the Assembly Election Law Committee on Dec. 10.

“Allowing an ample early voting period allows poll workers to gain more experience and troubleshoot problems that occur at the polling place, such as malfunctioning voting machines or bottlenecks in line management,” Chang added. Early voting typically designates a smaller number of polling places that are open during the run-up to election day.

According to a poll conducted by the Census Bureau, 28 percent of those registered voters who did not vote in the 2014 midterm elections said they failed to do so because they were “too busy” (this was the answer with the most frequent response). Early voting and other measures to expand the amount of time citizens have to cast their vote could help to alleviate chronically low voter turnout.

In fact, expanding voting before Election Day was recommended by the Presidential Commission on Election Administration in 2014. The report suggested that, “in order to limit congestion on Election Day and to respond to the demand for greater opportunities to vote beyond the traditional Election Day polling place, states that have not already done so should expand alternative ways of voting, such as mail balloting and in-person early voting.”

“Virtually everywhere early voting has been enacted, voter participation has increased significantly,” Chang said during a Dec. 15 Voter Assistance Advisory Committee public hearing.

Currently, New Yorkers can vote early by submitting an absentee ballot, but voters are only allowed to do so if they meet certain qualifications, like begin absent from the county on Election Day, or physically unable to get to the polls due to a disability.

The Vote Better NY coalition has launched a petition calling on Governor Cuomo and the state Legislature to pass the Voter Empowerment Act, the Voter Friendly Ballot Act, and legislation to allow early voting in New York.
Cuomo is supportive of early voting, and included a proposal for early voting in an outline of his 2016 agenda [https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-outlines-2016-agenda-signature-proposals-ensuring-new-york-and-will-continue-be#top]. The proposed legislation to require every county to offer access to at least one early voting polling place that will allow New Yorkers to cast their vote for 12 days leading up to Election Day for every election.

“I think we have a reasonable shot” to get some voting reforms passed this year, Kavanagh said during an April interview, adding that “the governor effectively put my early voting bill in the budget this year...the governor is on board with some of this.”

Absentee voting
Similar to early voting, absentee voting allows citizens to cast their votes ahead of election day, though without necessarily making a trip to the polls. Absentee voting can reduce long lines at the polls and increase accessibility by making it possible for citizens who, for lack of time, transportation, or physical ability, simply cannot make it to the polls.


Twenty states allow absentee voting only if the voter can provide an excuse that meets the state’s requirements for allowing absentee ballots. New York is one of those states.

With absentee voting, the voter may turn in their ballot by mail or in person. Voting reform advocates support [http://www.lwvny.org/advocacy/election-law/2015/Testimony-to-NYSA-Election-Law-Early-Voting-No-Excuse-Absentee_111815.pdf] allowing no-excuse absentee voting in New York, which would require a state constitutional amendment in addition to legislation, though bills to enact no-excuse absentee voting have yet to pass in either the Assembly [https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2015/a2644] or the Senate [https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2015/s5442].

Voting by mail
Voting by mail is on the rise [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/10/07/us/voting-by-mail.html] in some Western states, with supporters arguing [https://www.supportthevoter.gov/files/2013/11/Vote-by-Mail-Reform-Memo.pdf] that voting by mail is a more cost-effective way to administer elections and improves voter participation by making it more convenient to vote. Washington, Oregon, and Colorado conduct their elections entirely by mail, and 19 other states allow some elections to be held by mail.

Oregon has one of the highest voter turnout rates in the country, with 69.5 percent [http://www.oregonlive.com/politics/index.ssf/2014/11/voter_turnout_of_695_percent_i.html] of registered voters casting their vote in the 2014 general election. Both Washington and Oregon saw significant increases in voter turnout after transitioning to “all-mail” elections, according to the Washington Post [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2014/09/12/with-a-win-on-the-line-in-colorado-democrats-hope-to-mail-it-in/]: “In Oregon, turnout rose from 59 percent in 1998, the midterm election before the state went all-mail, to 69 percent in 2002. Washington’s turnout rose from 64.5 percent in the 2006
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midterms to 71.2 percent in 2010, the first year elections were conducted entirely by mail.”

A bill [https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2015/s2739/amendment/original] sponsored by Senator Liz Krueger, also a Manhattan Democrat, to instruct the state board of elections to study the feasibility of voting by mail, and authorize a pilot program for such voting during the study is currently awaiting committee action. Legislation [http://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2015/s4353] to allow qualified voters to vote by mail in New York has also been introduced in the Senate.

Consolidating election dates
Frequent elections can result in voter fatigue and decrease voter turnout. New Yorkers dedicated to casting their vote will make four trips to the polls in 2016 (five for those living in New York City’s 17th City Council District, where a special election occurred in February).

As the New York Times editorial board wrote [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/07/opinion/voter-fatigue-in-new-york.html] in December, “There is no reason the state primary can’t be held on the same day as the congressional primary, thus eliminating the extra election and saving the state $50 million.” Congressional primaries are slated for June, state-level primaries for September.

There has been support for consolidating the state and federal primaries in the Assembly, as Assemblymember Cusick pointed out at a Dec. 10, 2015 State Assembly hearing on enhancing the voter experience. “We do have a bill that we have passed [http://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2013/a8198] almost every year in the Assembly to combine [the dates]...That is the goal of our committees, to get the primaries in one day, so we can save the state and municipalities money.”

Holding so many separate elections is not only fiscally wasteful, but also reduces voter turnout. For years, Assembly Democrats have repeatedly introduced legislation to move the primary elections for state-level offices from September to June. In February, the Assembly passed a bill [http://assembly.state.ny.us/leg/?bn=A.9108&term=2015] to designate June 28, 2016 as the state’s primary election date for state and federal offices.

One month later, the Republican-controlled Senate passed a bill [https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2015/s6604/amendment/original] designating Aug. 19, 2016 at New York’s primary election date for state and federal offices, to the dismay of Democrats, who questioned why Republicans would move the primary to a month typically used for vacation time by many people.

Instant Runoff Voting
Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) allows voters to rank candidates by order of preference. If no candidate passes the minimum threshold needed to win the election, the candidate in last place is eliminated, and votes are redistributed according to the preferences on the ballots. The process repeats until a candidate passes the threshold.

IRV is already used in mayoral elections in cities like San Francisco and Oakland, and even London. Ireland uses IRV in its presidential elections. Supporters of the process say that IRV saves taxpayers millions of dollars by
eliminating the need to hold runoff elections, which are typically even more poorly attended than the original election.

In 2013, the Democratic primary for New York City Public Advocate resulted in a runoff which cost New York City $13 million [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/30/nyregion/high-cost-runoff-for-public-advocates-post-prompts-calls-for-reform.html?_r=0] and had significantly lower voter turnout than the initial primary itself - only 5.7 percent, or 345,089 registered Democrats turned out to cast their vote in the runoff election.


Better training and conditions for poll workers
Difficulties at New York City poll sites was an all-too-frequent occurrence during Tuesday’s primary, with reports [http://gothamist.com/2016/04/19/ny_primary_live_updates.php] of poll sites opening late, jammed ballot scanners, and poll workers instructing voters to fill out affidavits when ballots weren’t scanning. Some problems can be traced to the fact that the city BOE struggles to recruit and train the 30,000 plus workers necessary to run the city’s poll sites during election days.

Although New York passed a law allowing poll workers to serve “half day” or eight hour shifts years ago, the “BOE has been very reluctant to implement it,” Assemblymember Kavanagh said, due to the “sincere but misguided belief that it will make their lives harder and not easier.” According to Kavanagh, the BOE is now piloting half-day shifts in some places.

It is understandably difficult to find 30,000 people who are willing and able to remain at poll sites from about 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. and accept $200 for about 17 hours of work on one or a few individual days in a given year.

Because of this, few meet the criteria for a recruitable poll worker, creating a situation where, after poll workers are given a “competency test at the end of the training, and [the BOE] often ends up having the poll workers who passed the test and the ones who failed the test work the polls anyway because they don’t have enough people,” Kavanagh says.

A bad experience at the hands of incompetent poll workers can discourage voters from casting a ballot again in the future, or worse - “if that problem is widespread, it can actually affect the outcome of an election,” Kavanagh said.

Comptroller Stringer and others have suggested that the BOE should implement half-day shifts, improve training for poll workers, and raise the wage from $200 per day ($12.50 an hour) to at least $240 ($15 an hour) to improve election day operations.

Reforms to improve engagement
Promoting civic engagement and voter education is also a critical component of improving voter turnout. Bills
have been introduced in the City Council that would require the New York City Board of Elections to provide email and text reminders (http://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=1891009&GUID=D2E74CB2-75AC-4479-AC5B-0854708379E3&Options=&Search=) about poll site locations, hours, and upcoming elections; mail voter’s their voting histories (http://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=2364121&GUID=FF23D7F0-842D-4A6E-BBC6-A31049DA1EBE&Options=&Search=), place notices on all discontinued poll sites (http://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=1672694&GUID=A844C071-0F53-4F3C-B746-9D54BC71F9F0&Options=&Search=) to direct voters to the proper poll site, and provide a voter guide (http://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=1946638&GUID=9A573B0A-0E7E-4D56-9D03-15C7B8908059&Options=&Search=) for all elections.

NYC Votes (http://www.nyccfb.info/nyc-votes/about-nyc-votes), the New York City Campaign Finance Board’s voter outreach and engagement arm guided by its Voter Assistance Advisory Committee, runs a number of programs with community partners and city agencies designed to engage with voters in the hopes of increasing civic participation. Some of those programs include National Voter Registration Day, the city’s official nonpartisan Voter Guide, Student Voter Registration Day, the Youth Poet Laureate program, “I Voted” stickers for city poll sites, NYC Votes Advocacy Day at the state Legislature in Albany, and the citywide Debate Program.

Other election-related reforms
The huge amount of money spent on election campaigns in the United States has led many voters to become frustrated with the corrupting influence of money in politics. In New York, the many calls (https://www.brennancenter.org/closing-new-york-llc-loophole) to close the LLC loophole - which allows limited liability companies to circumvent New York’s campaign donation limits and give large sums of money to candidates through various LLCs - have not yet led to reform. New York City is moving ahead on reforms to its campaign finance system (http://www.gothamgazette.com/index.php/government/6036-reforms-to-city-campaign-finance-system-advance-ahead-of-2017-election-cycle), which already offers public matching funds and is seen as a state and national model. A package of eight bills was introduced to the City Council in November and will be discussed at a hearing in May (http://www.gothamgazette.com/index.php/city/6282-campaign-finance-reform-bills-to-be-heard). The legislation aims to strengthen the system and adjust it to recent developments outside of city control. Restrictions on gerrymandering would also help remedy issues with New York’s voting processes, as less gerrymandering would encourage more competition in elections, and thus more engagement. Through a ballot referendum, New Yorkers did pass a new redistricting process last year that will go into effect after the next census.

There's a Long List of Voting Reforms New York Can Pass

(http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/recall-of-state-officials.aspx) and Washington, D.C. currently allow voters to recall state officials if a significant number of voters are dissatisfied with the job their elected official is doing.

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