



Legislation Text

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Res. No. 1805

Resolution calling on the New York State Legislature to examine the feasibility of amending the New York State Election law to enact universal voter registration in the State of New York.

By Council Members Felder, Brewer, Dickens, Garodnick, Gerson, Jackson, James, Palma and Sanders Jr.

Whereas, Voting is a fundamental right of all American citizens; and

Whereas, In 2001, a report entitled “Report of the Task Force on the Federal Election System” issued by a commission chaired by former Presidents Carter and Ford concluded that the voter registration laws in the United States are among the world’s most demanding, placing the onus of registering to vote on eligible citizens unlike other industrialized democracies where the government facilitates voting by producing the voter registration rolls; and

Whereas, According to the U.S. Census Bureau (“Bureau”), in November 2006, 32% of eligible Americans, or over 65 million citizens, were not registered to vote and unable to vote on Election Day; and

Whereas, According to 2006 data from the Bureau and the New York State Board of Elections, about 21% of qualified voters in New York State, or more than 3 million qualified voters, were not registered to vote; and

Whereas, The current voter registration procedures place the burden on individuals to opt in to participate and require numerous registration steps, which can lead to unintended errors and disenfranchisement; and

Whereas, According to the Bureau, only 61% of African Americans and 54% of Hispanic populations were registered to vote for the 2006 General Election; and

Whereas, Voter registrations based on income for the year 2006 were: (i) 82% of people earning over

\$100,000, (ii) 67% of those who earn between \$30,000 to \$39,999, (iii) 66% of those who earn between \$20,000 to \$29,999; and (iv) 56% of those who earn less than \$20,000; and

Whereas, According to the Brennan Center for Justice’s policy summary entitled “The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty,” in our highly mobile population where one in six Americans moves every year, most within a state, flaws in the system are exacerbated, resulting in more than two-fifths of nonvoters in 2000 becoming ineligible because they had moved and did not re-register; and

Whereas, The policy summary also states that the populations that are more likely to relocate include low-income citizens and those who are less educated, which results in a disproportionate impact being felt in those communities by the burden of being required to register in each new location; and

Whereas, Now that federal law requires states to maintain voter registration databases, there is no reason to require voters to re-register every time they cross county or other internal state boundaries; and

Whereas, Currently, there are laws designed to increase voter participation, such as The Higher Education Act, which among other things, requires all colleges in good faith to provide voter registration forms to students on campus and the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), also know as the Motor Voter Law, which requires the DMV and some social service agencies to provide voter registration services; and

Whereas, In 2003, the City Council’s Investigation Division report entitled “Voter Registration Forms Not Available Here: NYC Community Boards & City Agencies,” investigated compliance with Local Law 29 of 2000, which requires certain city agencies to make voter registration forms available to New Yorkers, and found that more than half of the Community Boards and designated City agencies were not complying; and

Whereas, In addition to the lack of enforcement of and compliance with voter registration laws, voter registration procedures pose another barrier to voting; and

Whereas, Several newspaper articles recently revealed procedural voter registration problems such as registrations wrongly sent to the State Board of Elections and unprocessed registrations at the New York City Board of Elections (“Board”); and

Whereas, Because the Board received nearly 204,000 voter registration forms between October 1st and 15th, 2008, the Board was forced to implement mandatory overtime for its staff and authorize a contract worth approximately \$25,000 with Premier Group Temporary Agency to provide assistance in the data entry of voter registrations; and

Whereas, The Board also missed the deadline for entering all voter names in the poll books, prompting the Board to print and send “supplemental” poll books to election districts with an additional 60,000 to 70,000 names; and

Whereas, The current costly and inefficient voter registration system also causes voting problems on Election Day, which according to The Brennan Center for Justice could be resolved by modernizing the voter registration system into a system in which the government makes sure that every citizen is automatically registered; and

Whereas, To achieve universal voter registration all eligible citizens would automatically be registered through a system linked to existing government databases that already include all the information necessary to determine voter eligibility; and

Whereas, Existing laws like the Motor Voter Law should be enforced and modified to automatically register citizens as they obtain or renew licenses and services from agencies; and

Whereas, Similarly, Assembly bill A.4346, introduced in 2007, among other things, seeks to automatically register those who will attain the age of eighteen years on or before the next general election by requiring the DMV and the Department of Taxation and Finance to forward pertinent information to the State Board of Elections; and

Whereas, In order to capture newly eligible voters, registration should be made an automatic part of becoming a citizen, attaining voting age, or being discharged from parole; and

Whereas, A system of universal voter registration will be more efficient and less costly to administer than the current system; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Council of the City of New York calls upon the New York State Legislature to examine the feasibility of amending the New York State Election law to enact universal voter registration in the State of New York.

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