Good afternoon. I am Laura Ladd Bierman, Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of New York State (League). The League is a non-partisan political organization working to promote civic responsibility through informed and active participation of citizens in government. We have 49 local leagues throughout the state registering and educating voters, on local and state issues. Advocacy, especially advocacy focused on enhancing the right to vote, has also been an important facet of League activity since our founding as an outgrowth of the women's suffrage movement 100 years ago. On behalf of the League, I want to thank Senator Myrie and this committee for this opportunity to present testimony about implementing an automatic voter registration system for New York State.

For a state that prides itself on being one of the most progressive in the nation, New York has one of the lowest voter registration and turnout rates in the entire country. For years, good government advocates including the League have placed much of the blame on our extremely burdensome voter registration system. Nationally and locally the League was a big promoter of the national motor-voter bill enabling registration at the Department of Motor Vehicles (“DMV”) and social service agencies. A few years ago we applauded when an additional step was taken toward easier and more accurate voter registration when online registration was allowed through
the DMV website. However, at the time it was clear that DMV-only online registration stopped short of reaching all New Yorkers eligible to register to vote.

We strongly recommend that New York State take the next more comprehensive step and follow 15 other states and the District of Columbia in adopting a system of automatic voter registration that automatically registers citizens to vote when they interact with government agencies unless they decline or “opt-out.” Automatic registration would provide substantial cost savings and administrative benefits and ensure that more eligible New Yorkers are registered to vote. Under this new registration system, county boards of elections would also automatically and electronically receive the information necessary to add citizens to the voter rolls when they interact with New York State government agencies. Citizens are provided the opportunity to “opt out,” and no information enters the registration rolls without approval. The system should cover as many government agencies as possible and be designed to minimize the risk that noncitizens are inadvertently registered to vote.

Automatic voter registration has three main benefits: (1) it increases the accuracy of the rolls; (2) it saves administrative costs and therefore taxpayer money; and (3) it boosts registration rates and turnout. A recent report by the Brennan Center for Justice concluded that in every jurisdiction that implemented automatic voter registration, the policy increased the number of registrations.¹

New York already has a system to electronically transfer voter registration information from the Department of Motor Vehicle offices directly to election officials. Automatic voter registration is the logical next step. It creates a process that is more convenient and less error-prone for voters, government-agency staff, and election officials.