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Contact: Jonathan Timm, 313-618-7005, jt.nysenate@gmail.com

SENATOR ZELLNOR Y. MYRIE LEADS PUBLIC HEARING ON AUTOMATIC VOTER REGISTRATION

ALBANY, NY—The Senate Majority today held a public hearing on automatic voter registration. Senator Zellnor Y. Myrie, Chair of the Elections Committee led the hearing.

Senator Zellnor Y. Myrie said, “Voting is the right that protects all other rights, yet New York is consistently ranked among the worst in the country in voter turnout. At a time when voting rights are under assault at the federal level and across the country, it is more important than ever to expand and protect our democracy in New York. Automatic Voter Registration is a straightforward and evidenced-backed policy that would remove barriers between voters and the ballot box and make it easier for people to make their voices heard.”

“At a time in our country when voting rights are under assault, New York must live up to its potential as a progressive leader,” said Senate Deputy Majority Leader Michael Gianaris, sponsor of S1278. “Access to the ballot box should be easy and fair, and enacting automatic voter registration would go a long way towards improving our democracy.”

The hearing on Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) is only the latest in Senator Myrie’s efforts to expand voting rights in New York State. On the first day of the legislative session, Senator Myrie sponsored S1102, a bill to allow Early Voting which was later signed into law by the Governor and then funded in the Enacted State Budget. In February, Senator Myrie later sponsored legislation to allow electronic poll books and helped to negotiate funding for the measure in the budget. In March, he led a hearing on Public Financing of elections.

One of the main focuses of the hearing was to hear arguments on the strengths and weaknesses of front-end and back-end approaches to Automatic Voter Registration. In a front-end system, such as that proposed by Senator Carlucci in S139, potential voters who interact with state agencies would be given the option to be automatically registered during their interaction. In a back-end system, such as that proposed by Senator Gianaris in S1278.
potential voters who interact with an agency would be automatically registered and then sent a notice with a pre-paid reply envelope that would give them the option to opt-out.

Shortly before the hearing, Senator Myrie rallied in support of AVR with advocates and electeds including Deputy Majority Leader Mike Gianaris, Assemblymember Bobby Carroll, Executive Director of Common Cause/NY Susan Lerner, and Sean McElwee, Co-Founder of Data for Progress.

15 other states and DC already have some or plan to implement some form of AVR.

The hearing on Automatic Voter Registration was held in Albany on Thursday, May 30th, at 1:00 PM in the Legislative Office Building Hearing Room A, 2nd Floor.

QUOTES FROM WITNESSES
"New York's voter registration system must move from a 'horse and buggy' reliance on paper and pens. A modern elections system uses technology to make it easy for eligible would-be voters to register. A system relying on an automatic voter registration helps do just that," said Blair Horner, NY Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) Executive Director.

“The CFB is supportive of automatic voter registration, and we are optimistic it will engage more New Yorkers in our democracy,” said Amy Loprest, Executive Director of the New York City Campaign Finance Board. “There are roughly 800,000 New York State residents who are not registered to vote. Automatic voter registration is an effective way to ensure our government is doing everything it can to ensure all eligible New Yorkers can vote.”

“NALEO Educational Fund shares the conviction of AVR will expand easy access for voter registration and engage many more New Yorkers in our democracy,” said Monica Vargas-Huertas, Northeast Deputy Director of NALEO Educational Fund. “We urge Senators to design modernized voter registration policies in the way that makes more sense for the diverse state that New York is.”

“For decades, working-class people of color across New York have been deprived of an equal voice in our democracy by out-of-date voter registration laws,” said Javier H. Valdés, Co-Executive Director of Make the Road New York. “Automatic Voter Registration is an important reform that New York should prioritize to ensure that all eligible voters are registered and make their voices heard.”

“It is imperative that New York legislators pass automatic voter registration as soon as possible,” said Sean McElwee, founder of Data for Progress and AVR NOW. “This is about the fundamental question of who has access to the ballot box. At a time when states across the country have passed voter suppression laws to deny people of color, low-income citizens, and
young people the right to vote, New York must take the lead in defending the democratic process by passing this critical policy.”

“Automatic Voter Registration is the fastest growing election reform in America,” said Dustin Czarny of the NYS Elections Commissioner Association. “Making AVR a reality in NY State will eliminate the first hurdle many potential voters face, the initial registration. By moving to an opt out rather than opt in system, not only we will we have a more robust voter role, it will be more accurate and save NYS Boards of Elections untold costs in return mail and affidavit ballot processing. It is a necessary reform for NYS to complete its electoral transformation.”

“With more than 40 years of experience in state and national election, I can tell you that New York is behind the curve, said Henry T. Berger, election lawyer and former Special Counsel to the New York City Mayor. “We rank 46 out of 50 in registration and 43 in turnout. While the reforms passed earlier this year were a significant down payment on fixing this problem, AVR is the logical next step, both to increase turnout and improve the safety and security of our electoral system. I’m grateful to the Senate for holding these hearings and urge them to use the opportunity to pass AVR this session.”

“The League of Women Voters of NYS strongly recommends that New York State follow 15 other states and the District of Columbia in adopting a system of automatic voter registration (AVR) that automatically registers citizens to vote when they interact with government agencies unless they decline or ‘opt-out,’” said Laura Ladd Bierman, Executive Director, League of Women Voters of NYS. “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. AVR will facilitate voter registration and, thereby, encourage more New Yorkers to vote.”

“New York has for too long ignored pernicious gaps in registration and turnout rates between white voters and voters of color, as well as voters over age 65 and those under age 34,” said NYCLU voting rights attorney Perry Grossman. “Automatic voter registration is one crucial step our state can take to diversify our democracy and uplift voices often unheard in New York’s halls of power. New York must make our voter registration processes more accessible and equitable, while keeping them secure for those who cannot be or don’t want to be registered – the state and United States constitutions demand nothing less.”

“After historic wins on early voting and same day voter registration, automatic voter registration is the logical next step,” said Susan Lerner, Executive Director of Common Cause/NY and founding member of Let NY Vote. “Automatic voter registration will streamline the way eligible New Yorkers vote, while providing adequate safeguards to protect the most vulnerable populations. We thank the Senate for holding this hearing on automatic voter registration and look forward to working together.”
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