

Advocates Call For Reform Of Runoff Elections

by {ga=ggstaff}

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Fewer than 200,000 New Yorkers turned out to vote in the costly Democratic primary runoff for public advocate that saw Letitia James take the party nomination.

Referring to the pitiful return on investment of spending some \$13 million spent on a one-race election, government reformers and elected officials gathered today at City Hall to call for instant runoff voting.

“The current system is not working,” said City Councilwoman Gale Brewer, who is the lead sponsor of a bill that would mandate instant runoff voting for absentee and military voters. “The runoff process isn’t working.”

Citizens Union, the sister organization of Gotham Gazette, helped organize the press conference and called for substantive action from lawmakers.

“It’s high time we ditch expensive, low-turnout runoff elections and give New Yorkers a simple solution that enables more voters the opportunity to weigh in on the candidates running for office,” Dick Dadey, executive director of Citizens Union, said in a statement.

Instant runoff voting, or IRV as it is sometimes called, would allow New Yorkers to rank candidates on a ballot that would then be scanned on the day of the primary,

Brewer says she’s wrangled 27 other Council members to sign onto her bill, Intro 1108, which would allow New Yorkers eligible for absentee ballots and service members to rank their candidates in order of preference.

A second bill introduced by City Councilman Brad Lander might need more convincing. With 18 other co-sponsors, Intro 1066 would expand instant runoff voting to all city elections.

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“We can achieve better, smarter, fairer, more inclusive, higher participation, less divisive elections for less cost by moving to instant runoff voting,” Lander said.

The bills still need to go through the government operations committee, currently chaired by Brewer, and make it through the Council Speaker’s office to make it to a vote on the floor. While it’s unclear if Brewer’s bill will require a referendum vote, Lander explained that his would have to pass both through City Hall and go to a public vote as a referendum.

Current election law forces a runoff whenever one candidate does not breach 40 percent of the vote in the primary.

Advocates argued that the city Board of Election could easily incorporate instant runoff voting into the current optical scanning system to yield faster results. But a spokeswoman for the board said that, in addition to amending election law, the BOE would need to modify firmware on all its electronic voting machines, which then would need to go to the state Board of Elections for testing and certification.

Lander and Brewer both indicated their bills could make it to the Council’s chambers this year. Whether or not Speaker Christine Quinn takes it up in her last few months at the body’s helm is unclear. Quinn previously indicated during her mayoral campaign, however, that she supported citywide instant runoff voting.

A spokesman for the speaker did not respond by time of publication, nor did a spokesman for Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

If the bills don’t make it through the current administration, a new Council — minus Brewer as she takes up the office of Manhattan borough president — and mayor would likely take the bills up.

Republican candidate Joe Lhota supports citywide instant runoff voting. Democratic nominee Bill de Blasio is more measured in his response.

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“I certainly love the notion of saving the money,” de Blasio said to Brian Lehrer of WNYC last week, adding it that it should be looked at closely.

“What I think is problematic about it is that you have a very different discussion when it comes down to two candidates,” he added. “There’s something about IRV that doesn’t fully represent the choices that people need to make in real time.”