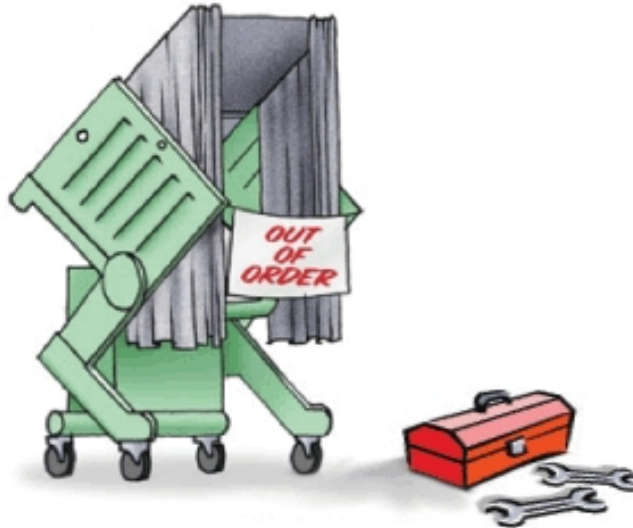


Election Day Voter Registration

by Scott Stringer

Monday, March 01, 2004 12:00 AM -

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They call it Super Tuesday, but to too many voters, there is nothing super about it. These are the voters who will be barred from voting simply because they did not register in time.

The New York City Board of Elections requires registration at least 25 days before an election. That means that New York City residents wanting to vote in the March 2nd presidential primary had to be registered by February 6th. The effect of this rule is to lock out from the process new voters who had recently moved or just turned 18. But it also excludes people who did not become interested in the contest until things started heating up in the last few weeks.

This is why it makes sense for New York to follow the lead of six other states and allow for voters to register and vote on Election Day.

Unlike other states that are able to enact Election Day registration through legislation alone, New York must also amend its constitution to allow for it. It is worth doing it. **HELPING VOTER TURNOUT**

The New York State Constitution currently requires eligible voters to register at least 10 days before an election. The requirement has real consequences for electoral participation.

New York ranked near the bottom (41st in the nation) in turnout of voting age population in the 2000 presidential election, according to the Federal Election Commission. In the 2002 mid-term election, turnout was dismal: Only 32.3 percent of New York's voting age population bothered to vote, a four percent decrease from the 1998 mid-term election.

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Election Day registration allows people to register on Election Day at their polling site and then vote by affidavit or paper ballot. The six states (Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Wyoming) that permit this have average turnout rates of 63 percent, which is as much as 10 percentage points higher than the national average -- and 13 percent more than New York State. These six states also have up to 90 percent of eligible voters registered and seven out of ten people actually vote, according to the FEC. The Committee for the Study of the American Electorate showed that Election Day registration states had an average turnout increase by about five percent between 1996 and 2000. By comparison, in all 50 states, the average turnout increase from 1996 to 2000 was less than half that -- about two percent.

Opponents of Election Day registration cite fears concerning election fraud to argue that it does not belong in New York. However, this is not the experience of the six states that permit it. They have not reported any increased cases of election fraud since implementing Election Day registration. Instead, their experience demonstrates that Election Day registration is a proven method for increasing voter participation.

Election Day registration in New York would certainly include stringent requirements to protect the integrity of New York's voting process. An example may be the requirement that a new voter present two forms of identification when registering on election day, which is a more stringent requirement than the current regulations. New York should also allow for registration at the polling place, not the central board offices, to encourage new voters to feel more integrated into the electoral process.

No one can know, of course, how many more people will vote as a result of Election Day registration in New York, but by looking at the turnout rate of the voting age population in the six states that currently permit it, New York could potentially see the participation of more than a million new voters.

CHANGING NEW YORK'S CONSTITUTION

While a constitutional change is a lengthy process that presents a healthy challenge, it does create ample time for debate and consensus building. In order to become law, legislation amending the state constitution (the bill number is A.5800) will have to pass both the Assembly and the Senate in two different legislative sessions and, then, be put before the voters in a statewide ballot. This substantial requirement for enactment guarantees that the proposal will be vetted thoroughly and supported by a wide range of interest groups across the state.

The goal is democratic and the benefits are proven. Imagine having an election where everyone could participate and eligible voters could wait until Election Day to decide to register and vote. Candidates would have to campaign in all parts of their districts and take nothing for granted. Injecting this uncertainty into often-lackluster campaigns would make incumbents work harder to be more responsive to the needs of all of their constituents.

In the wake of the 2000 presidential election fiasco that led to mass confusion and doubt about vote counting procedures and the electoral system as a whole, New York State should take bold measures to restore and strengthen the public's confidence. Election Day registration is an appropriate and timely measure that will revitalize democracy in a state that has maintained a poor turnout record for years.

Scott Stringer is a member of the New York State Assembly, representing the Upper West Side.