



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Malcolm Smith

Senate Elections Committee begins series of five hearings across New York on Election Reform bills and oversight

MALCOLM A. SMITH April 22, 2009

| COMMITTEE: **ELECTIONS**

Public Invited to Weigh in on Proposals to Reform the State's Voter Registration Laws and Regulations

(Buffalo, NY) Thursday, the Senate Standing Committee on Elections held the first in a series of five statewide public hearings to solicit feedback on recently introduced and forthcoming election reform proposals. Today's hearing emphasized bills to establish an effective and inclusive voter registration process.

Those who testified about the need for voter registration reform included: Commissioner Dennis Ward, Erie County Board of Elections (BoE); Commissioner Tom Ferrarese, Monroe County BoE, Chair, Executive Committee of the Election Commissioners Association; Jim Ostrowski, election law attorney and founder Free New York; Robert Volpe, Citizens for a Better NY and others. The second voter registration hearing is scheduled for tomorrow in New York City and will include testimony from Rock the Vote Executive Director Heather Smith and Douglas A. Kellner, New York State BoE, Co-Chair.

"This series of hearings will open the legislative process to the public," said Senator Joseph P. Addabbo Jr., Elections Committee Chair. "We, in the Senate, are committed to allowing citizens' voices to be heard on matters that are of the utmost importance to the health and vitality of our democracy. Accordingly, we will address election issues with a deliberate approach, with hearings on voter registration, absentee ballots, election day and voting issues, campaign finance reform, Board of Elections oversight, new voting machines and other related matters."

These hearings will highlight the necessity of individual participation in the electoral process, and provide voters with critical information on election procedures. Currently, more than 33 percent of eligible voters in New York are not registered, according to US Census data compiled by Dr. Michael McDonald, associate professor of public and international affairs at George Mason University.

Senate Majority Leader Malcolm A. Smith said, “Through these hearings and the work of the Elections Committee, the Senate is taking significant steps to improve the election process by proactively including voters at all stages. By soliciting feedback now, we are ensuring that as the Committee proceeds, reform is made with the best interest of New Yorkers in mind. By educating voters on important issues such as voter registration and Election Day protocol, we continue to demonstrate that above all else, this legislature is working for the people.”

This new dialogue between lawmakers and the public is part of the Senate’s continued commitment to openness and transparency and increasing public participation.

“Currently, eligible voters are not placed on electoral rolls unless they first take the initiative to register and satisfy state-imposed requirements for voter registration,” said Senator Antoine Thompson. “Citizens must take responsibility to vote, but government should do its part by clearing away obstacles to their full participation. The current voter registration system is the largest source of such obstacles.”

Senator Addabbo concluded, “I am hopeful that through these hearings we will assure the people that they will be able to participate in the most fundamental process in our democracy and instill confidence in the voters that their votes and voices matter.”

The bill package for the April public hearings includes legislation to:

REFORM VOTER REGISTRATION

- Voters will be able to register on Election Day through a Constitutional amendment. Additionally, the deadline by which a registration must be received would be reduced from 20 days to 10 days before an election.
- Require the State Board of Elections to address registration forms to local county board when a voter downloads the form from the Web-site.

EDUCATE THE INCARCERATED

- Educates the incarcerated and those released but serving sentences about their voting and absentee ballot rights, and provides for assistance in registering and voting by absentee ballot.

INCREASED FLEXIBILITY IN PARTY ENROLLMENT

- Reduces the deadlines for changing party enrollment and provides an additional opportunity for new registrants to indicate choice of party enrollment where original choice was omitted or void.

Thursday's hearing took place at the Erie County Legislature in Buffalo. Tomorrow's hearing is scheduled to take place from 10 AM to 1 PM in New York City at 250 Broadway, 19th floor.

Future hearings in May, June, September and November will highlight election reform proposals for: casting a ballot and poll sites; campaign finance reform; Board of Elections oversight; election code reform; and oversight of elections in November.