

## COMMON CAUSE/NY 2020 PRIORITIES

It is unquestionable that the 2019-2020 legislative session was one for the history books. New York passed progressive legislation that expanded voting rights, strengthened environmental laws, increased tenant protections, and made substantive progress on criminal justice reform.

In many ways, the myriad accomplishments did the hard work of righting the ship after decades of inaction in Albany. As we look ahead, now that New York's laws and values are finally starting to converge, **it's time to lead the nation and not merely play catch-up.**

Common Cause/NY has been a long-time advocate for a fair, ethical and equitable government. As co-founders of the Let NY Vote coalition, which led the charge in passing over a dozen landmark voting rights reforms last year, we know what we can accomplish when we have true partners in Albany. That's why in the 2020-2021 legislative session we strongly urge Governor Cuomo, Speaker of the Assembly Heastie and Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins to:

### Continue the expansion of voting rights in New York State

While much progress was made last year, there is still more work to be done. The legislature would send a strong message by **PASSING AUTOMATIC VOTER REGISTRATION (AVR) IN THE FIRST FEW WEEKS OF SESSION.** There are 1.1 million New Yorkers who are eligible to vote but are not registered. Our outdated voter registration system must be modernized to ensure accurate voter rolls and all eligible New Yorkers have a say in our democracy.

AVR does this by transforming voter registration from an opt-in to an opt-out model when New Yorkers interact with government agencies. AVR simplifies voter registration and is a popular pro-voter reform that has been implemented in 16 states across the country.

### Invest in our democracy's infrastructure

**EXPEDITE CENSUS FUNDING & QUICKLY LAUNCH A STATEWIDE PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN:** New York is not on track for an accurate and complete census. Not only is state funding for outreach efforts woefully delayed, but the state has shortchanged it as well. The current funding level for outreach, \$60 million, is much less than what is needed in a state of nearly 20 million. By comparison, California, which has a population of over 39 million, appropriated \$187 million towards census outreach, while Illinois, which has a population of over 12 million, appropriated \$30 million.

The state has allocated \$40 million to dozens of state agencies and public authorities to kick start a public awareness campaign using existing resources, and \$20 million in direct aid to counties/cities for Census outreach. Of the \$20 million in municipal aid, \$15 million will be distributed among local municipalities, while

the remaining \$5 million (25% of available local census funds) will be distributed once the census count begins and will target specific communities where additional census outreach is needed.

*Based on the current timeline, the money allocated towards municipalities will not be received until mid-February, a scant 2 weeks before the Census starts, at the earliest.* This means that hard-to-count communities are at an even greater risk of undercounting come Spring. The state needs to judiciously expedite funding to municipalities and provide concrete guidelines for local governments to ensure immigrant communities, LGBTQIA+ communities, children under 5, the elderly, people with disabilities, the homeless, racial/ethnic minorities, and people living in group homes are counted in the 2020 census. State agencies and local authorities need to launch a multilingual advertising campaign for the census immediately and provide comprehensive, enforceable plans to state agencies on the implementation of census assistance centers.

Voters approved a new redistricting process in 2014 with the hopes that congressional and state legislative districts would be fair, equitable and reverse the highly gerrymandered state legislative maps from 2010. A complete and accurate census count is essential for a fair redistricting process.

**ALLOCATE SUFFICIENT FUNDING FOR 27 DAYS OF EARLY VOTING IN 2020:** 33 states provide some form of state funding to support local or statewide elections. Until last year, New York was one of the states that did not. Last year's budget allocation of \$24.5 million for early voting implementation and electronic pollbooks for counties was unprecedented. As budgets are inherently political statements, and with the 2020 election cycle fast approaching in an atmosphere of anxiety, New York must signal a firm commitment to strengthening and protecting our democracy. It is hard to reconcile that while funding for elections continues to be an aberrant blip on the radar, the Olympic Regional Development Authority, a state agency that was created to manage skiing facilities upstate, continues to see its budget balloon from \$10.2 million to \$78 million in a mere three years.

In 2020, there will be at least three major elections statewide: the presidential primary in April, the state/federal primary election in June, and the general election in November. Counties will have to manage and fund 27 days of early voting next year. It is vital that counties have the resources they need, as all three elections are anticipated to have record-breaking turnout at a time when our democracy is under stress and our election system under attack. Early voting, when properly implemented and well-publicized, helps ease the pressure on poll sites on election day. The state must do its part by providing additional funds, so New Yorkers can continue to reap the full benefits of early voting.

**ENDORSE A FAIR REDISTRICTING PROCESS:** The revised redistricting process adopted in 2014 has unusual aspects which raise questions as to whether it will achieve its goal of implementing a fair and equitable redistricting process in New York for the upcoming redistricting cycle. We urge the Governor and the leaders of both legislative houses to reaffirm their commitment to end gerrymandering and commit to support and advance fair redistricting that is transparent, non-discriminatory, and politically impartial.

**ENSURE OUR ELECTIONS ARE RUN ONLY USING VOTER-MARKED PAPER BALLOTS:** Voters must have the highest confidence that the machines they use in casting their votes are safe, secure and will count every vote accurately. Yet, vendors who make those machines have every incentive to cut corners. In fact, our state has been asked to certify machines that use the outmoded Windows 7 operating system, and which failed to accurately record tens of thousands of votes in an election this past November. Their request has highlighted major flaws in the process the state uses to certify new voting machines. We urge the Legislature to reform the certification process and ensure that we use only the most reliable technology – voter marked paper ballots – for our elections.



**REIMAGINE INDEPENDENT ETHICS OVERSIGHT:** The Joint Commission on Public Ethics (JCOPE) was created as a result of scandals and public dissatisfaction with its predecessor ethics commission. Recent events make it clear that it is time, once again, to seriously recast ethics oversight in our state. We urge the Legislature to conduct public hearings into ethics oversight. We further recommend that the Governor and Legislature engage in an open process of exploring more effective models of ethics oversight which can be adopted in New York State and develop a plan for truly independent ethics oversight.

### **Enforce the recommendations of the 2018 New York State Compensation Commission and uphold the ban on outside income for state legislators**

Last year, the New York State Legislature saw a substantive and warranted pay increase, the first in over 20 years. State legislators saw their salaries rise by near 40% when wages rose from \$80,000 to \$110,000 annually. Due to ongoing litigation, it remains unclear if further salary increases will be implemented down the road. However, it is vital that the legislature uphold the other half of the Commission's recommendations and give up their outside income.

