

# THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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### **\*\*\*PRESS RELEASE\*\*\***

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## **ELECTED OFFICIALS AND GOOD GOVERNMENT ADVOCATES PRESENT REFORM AGENDA IN RESPONSE TO ELECTION DAY PROBLEMS**

### *Put Forth Ten Key Steps to Improve Elections in New York City*

NEW YORK, NY, November 13th, 2012: Today, elected leaders in City and State government joined on the steps of City Hall to propose an agenda of legislative and policy reforms that would overhaul the elections process in the five boroughs. The announcement comes a week after a problematic Election Day amid ongoing concerns about impediments to New Yorkers' political franchise. To address these issues, a group of elected officials, including Council Member Gale A. Brewer (D-Manhattan), Council Member Jumaane D. Williams (D-Brooklyn) and Assemblymember Brian Kavanagh (D-Manhattan), joined by Common Cause/NY, NYPIRG, Citizens Union, Women's City Club and other good government advocates, identified a series of remedies to improve coordination with the Board of Elections and streamline the voting experience.

"New Yorkers turned out in droves to vote last week, which should be applauded," said Council Member Gale A. Brewer, Chair of the Committee on Governmental Operations. "Unfortunately, this high voter turnout also led to long lines, ballot scanner breakdowns, and confusion at many poll sites across the city. Adding to the confusion was an Executive Order signed by the Governor late Monday afternoon which created an unforeseen demand for affidavit ballots. The understaffed Board of Elections did work hard to alleviate many of the problems, but the complications we saw are indicative of a larger issue. I plan to work with the Board of Elections and my colleagues in the City Council and the State Legislature to pass meaningful reforms that will improve the voting process for all New Yorkers."

At polling sites across New York City, frequent complaints from voters included excessive waiting times, some greater than six hours, confused or inaccurate information from poll workers, poor poll site layout, problematic registration books, and ballots that were hard to read and difficult to comprehend. Some of these problems echo alarms that were raised just a few months ago following the primary election in September. The Board of Elections did heed some recommendations posed by elected officials and good government advocates at that time, including increasing ballot font size and mailing an additional notice to voters to make clear that their poll site may have changed due to redistricting. However, the problems encountered on Election Day, November 6th, make it clear that greater reforms are needed.

"The right to vote is the foundation of our democracy, but on Election Day that foundation showed some serious wear and tear," said Council Member Williams. "It is not acceptable for one New Yorker to think they are being disenfranchised, which is why it is so troubling that thousands share that view due to the

disorganization they encountered at the polls. We can and must do better in advance of next year's citywide elections, but to achieve that we must join with the Board of Elections to institute a common-sense plan that ensures effective management of each polling site, as well as reforms that make voting easier and smoother for all."

- One key proposal is the formation of a working group involving representatives from the Board of Elections, the City Council, the State Legislature, and the good government community to resolve issues that arise from statutes, Board policies, and practices of election workers, with the goal of improving election administration overall.

"We recognize that the effects of Sandy posed particular challenges for administering last week's elections, but we also know that many of the problems voters experienced are perennial and many resulted from the ways the new paper-ballot system was implemented," said Assemblymember Brian Kavanagh, Chair of the Subcommittee on Election Day Operations and Voter Disenfranchisement. "If we're going to protect people's most basic right to participate in our democratic system, we need to transform the way we run elections from the moment someone tries to register to the moment all ballots have been counted. I'm proud to stand with Gale Brewer, Jumaane Williams, and our many elected colleagues and good government advocates who are committed to such a transformation."

"Election reform will be one of the first real tests of leadership in Albany in the next legislative session -- whomever that leadership may be. The reality is Hurricane Sandy exacerbated many of the election-day problems that have New Yorkers rightly outraged, but created none of them. Long lines, broken machines, poorly-trained workers, archaic and unclear ballot designs, and shortages of necessary materials have become fixtures of elections in New York City and have afflicted other jurisdictions around our state. In the coming months, we must have a thorough discussion and decisive, practical action to make sure every eligible New Yorker can vote without incident, confusion, or hindrance." Senator Liz Krueger (D-Manhattan)

The other nine reforms presented by the elected officials and advocates include:

- Fixing the voter registration system, by enacting legislation like the Voter Empowerment Act (A1712C/S1974C), making it easier for voters to enroll and keep their registration up to date, thereby eliminating confusion and disenfranchisement that occurs when voters' information is missing from voter rolls on election day.
- Requiring better notice to voters of polling places and dates for upcoming elections, currently only required once in an election year, in August, and making greater use of alternative forms of notification such as email, text messages, and automated phoning.
- Eliminating voter cards, a relic of the lever voting system; the State Board of Elections has said they are unnecessary now that voters receive paper ballots; removing them would speed up the voting process.
- Recruiting enough poll workers for each poll site and ensuring they are properly trained and have mastered the tasks needed to function effectively, including the basics of making ballot scanners function, correcting jams, etc.; ideas include allowing 8-hour rather than 16-hour shifts, allowing college students to take time off from classes, making serving as a poll worker an alternative to jury duty (A5885) or a pro bono option for attorneys, and encouraging more City and State employees to serve.
- Increasing the use of technology at poll sites, such as a tablet-based system for expediting the signing in of voters standing in line.
- Improving ballot design and readability by enacting the Voter Friendly Ballot Act (A7492D), already approved in a resolution by the City Council and passed by the State Assembly in 2012.
- Combining electoral districts into fewer, larger districts to reduce bottlenecks and confusion at larger poll sites; this would mean fewer different "tables" to direct voters to within poll sites, in most cases eliminating the need for voters to wait on two lines before receiving a ballot; fewer distinct ballot styles to design, print, and account for; fewer numbers to tally up at the end of the night; and more flexibility in staffing poll sites by function, rather than having a separate team for each election district. The current limitation on electoral district size is a vestige of the old lever machines, which could only count up to 999 votes in each election.
- Enacting legislation to introduce early voting (i.e., A5153) and no-excuse absentee voting (A05911/S1563) options for voters.

- Enacting the Election Night Procedure Bill (A10175B), approved earlier in 2012 in a Council Resolution and passed by the State Assembly, streamlining the Board's process of tabulating and reporting unofficial election results, and enabling the Board to divert fewer skilled election workers from poll sites.

"After last week's chaotic election day in New York City, the public is not interested in a blame game but in practical solutions," said Susan Lerner, Executive Director of Common Cause/NY. "We can all agree on one thing: there is no excuse not to do better. We look forward to working with the City and State Boards, members of the City Council and the State Legislature, the Mayor and the Governor to quickly adopt the short term fixes and identify the long-term reforms that will bring New York's election administration into the 21st century."

On Election Day, Common Cause/NY helped staff a voter hotline with NYPIRG which received over 1,000 calls and complaints about the voting process in New York State, some of which were able to be promptly resolved by the Board of Elections in response to notification. In addition, Common Cause/NY fielded over 50 volunteer poll monitors assigned to 12 of the busiest polling places in New York City to help voters.

"New Yorkers were literally left out in the cold on Election Day," said Council Member Jessica Lappin (D-Manhattan). "Those who could wait were forced to spend hours waiting in long lines outside of polling stations. Those who had to go to work and couldn't wait were disenfranchised. That's not acceptable."

"The Board of Elections' abysmal performance this Election Day is no surprise. While Hurricane Sandy made conditions more difficult than usual, most of the problems we saw a week ago began long before the storm hit," said Assemblymember Dan Quart (D-Manhattan). "This year, the Board of Elections closed poll sites for no reason, didn't adequately inform voters of these changes and failed to process absentee ballot applications within the timelines that they themselves specify. These problems disproportionately affect voters who already have a difficult time voting, including the elderly, the disabled and non-English speakers, effectively disenfranchising them. This is unacceptable and must change. We cannot allow the Board of Elections to continue to operate in a way that's counter to the best interests of voters."

"President Obama was right when he made his heartfelt comments last Tuesday that we need to fix the problems that are keeping many from voting," said Council Member Brad Lander (D-Brooklyn). "Let's implement some common sense reforms today so that every eligible New Yorker is able to vote in the next election."

"Citizens Union looks forward to continuing to work with the City Board of Elections, the NYC Council, the Mayor's Office and State government to improve election administration. While the persistent voter was able to cast a ballot on Election Day, there were a number of issues that need to be addressed including at some poll sites long lines, late poll site openings, disorganized poll sites, and uninformed poll workers," said Alex Camarda, Director of Public Policy and Advocacy at Citizens Union. "We call on the Board and all levels of government to go beyond calls for reform and to use their own powers to modernize our election system."

These ideas and others will be raised during an oversight hearing of the Committee on Governmental Operations on Wednesday, December 5th at 10AM. The Committee will also continue to discuss a number of pieces of pro-voter legislation, including bills authored by Council Members Brewer, Lappin and Williams, aimed at improving the electoral process.

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