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Make Voting Easier in New York

Laws are designed to keep turnout low and protect incumbents. Rewrite them.

By [The Editorial Board](#) – NY Times

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Image

CreditCreditNiv Bavarsky

This is part of a series on what is at stake in New York's primary elections on Thursday, and in the general election on Nov. 6.

New Yorkers pride themselves on being among the most politically engaged citizens in the country. So why don't they vote?

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From Buffalo to the Bronx, voter turnout in New York is abysmal. In November 2016, when everyone in America seemed to have a strong opinion about Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, [only 57 percent](#) of the state’s registered voters showed up at the polls. That was lower than 40 other states. But it was at least better than New York’s [turnout for the 2014 midterms](#) — 34.4 percent, 48th in the nation. Only Oklahoma and West Virginia did worse.

The picture in federal and state primaries is starker yet. Because New York’s electorate is heavily Democratic, the primaries effectively decide many elections. And yet in last year’s primary for mayor of New York City, only 12 percent of eligible voters [bothered to weigh in](#).

Why is it so bad? For starters, blame the state’s [“stupid policy,”](#) as a political scientist described it to The Times recently. Sure, there’s reason to criticize other states for cutting back on polling places or hours, or passing voter-ID and proof-of-citizenship laws that make voting harder, especially for minorities and other vulnerable groups. But who are New Yorkers to judge? Their own electoral laws and practices are mired in the Dark Ages, prevented from entering the 21st century by lawmakers trying to protect their jobs.

It’s made worse by the city and state election boards, which run federal, state and local elections — a crucial job that needs to be done by professional, nonpartisan agencies. In New York, the boards are [rife with incompetence](#).

There are easy fixes, which have been associated with higher turnout in many other states that have adopted them.

Early Voting

This is a no-brainer for the millions of Americans with work, school or family commitments that prevent them from getting to the polls on Election Day. Today, 37 states and the District of Columbia let their voters cast ballots for a period of days or even weeks. Not in New York. Here, as in states like Mississippi, Alabama and Kentucky, it’s Election Day or bust.

No-Excuse Absentee Ballots

New York allows a registered voter to cast an absentee ballot, but only for an absurdly short list of reasons, like being out of the state on Election Day or being the primary caregiver for a disabled person. Voters should be able to cast an absentee ballot for any reason at all, as [27 states and the District of Columbia allow](#).

Automatic Voter Registration

Probably the most effective approach to getting more voters to the polls is to register people automatically whenever they interact with a state agency like the Department of Motor Vehicles. Since Oregon took the lead in 2016, 12 other states and the District of Columbia [have passed or](#)

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[began to implement the practice](#). Automatic registration in New York could add as many as two million new voters.

Automation also improves the accuracy of voter rolls, which reduces the likelihood of fraud as well as of big administrative missteps, like [the purge of more than 100,000 New York City voters](#) from the rolls ahead of the 2016 elections.

Same-Day Voter Registration

Another simple fix for a common problem. Seventeen states and the District of Columbia [permit people to register and vote on the same day](#); all but two of those also permit registration on Election Day. In New York, first-time voters must be registered no fewer than 25 days before a general election. The deadline for voters who want to change their party affiliation to vote in a primary is also 25 days before the general election ... [of the previous year](#).

Lawmakers could easily pass most of these reforms, as well as others to make voting easier, including pre-registering 16- and 17-year-olds; keeping polling places [open longer, particularly upstate](#); designing clearer ballots and making important voter information available in more languages; providing better training for poll workers; and holding federal and state primaries on the same day.

But while bills have been introduced in Albany, they've gone nowhere. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has given lip service to voting reform, but he's done almost nothing, with the exception of his decision earlier this year [to restore voting rights to 35,000 New Yorkers on parole](#).

As long as Albany dithers, cities and localities have the power to enact many reforms themselves. New York City did that with its [small-donor matching funds program](#), which has reduced the power of big money in city politics and opened the door to a much wider and more diverse slate of candidates.

It's true that when voting is easier, more people vote. But New Yorkers can't blame bad laws and self-interested lawmakers entirely for their failure to show up at the polls. Even states with more aggressive anti-voter laws have better turnout than New York. By all means, let's change our comically bad election laws. But all the reforms in the world mean nothing unless New Yorkers get out and vote.

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