

Testimony by
Bronx Borough President
FERNANDO FERRER
To the
NYS Assembly/Senate Task Force on Election Modernization
Thursday, October 25, 2001*** to be rescheduled Jim Cantwell 518-474-9886
10:00 a.m.
Hempstead Town Hall, 350 Front Street

Thank you for this opportunity to offer recommendations on how to improve the conduct of elections. By ensuring a fair and transparent election system, including the widest and easiest access to registration, government both increases voter confidence and participation.

Last month, New York City voters experienced first hand the need to improve and modernize voting. We also saw anew the need to ensure the accuracy and fairness of elections.

Frankly, voting represents one of the ways that citizens participate in civic life and government. Access to voter registration expands public access and participation in government. In New York City, City Hall must encourage this important form of civic and political involvement through easing participation in the political process. The city can take meaningful steps to encourage voter registration through the appropriate use of our public schools, colleges, and other educational institutions and community and faith-based organizations. In addition, reforms at the Board of Elections will also work to encourage voter participation.

Public officials can only make a positive contribution to our community when they work to ease, expand and encourage public participation in the electoral process. A recent local law supported such efforts by helping to increase access to voter registration through free and wide distribution of voter registration forms at city agencies. At locations where people may seek public services, it makes sense to provide them with an opportunity to register. However, nothing prevents city government going further than the new local law. Here's how:

Designate New York City public schools as agencies for voter registration. Let's build on the example of CUNY where institutions follow a legal mandate to make voter registration forms available to its students. This year alone, thousands of New York City high school students will reach the voting age while they are still enrolled in school.

By actively making voter registration forms available to young people, we empower them, and encourage them to become active and concerned citizens. Voter registration also builds on existing citizenship curricula in our schools.

The availability of voter registration forms at public schools also benefits the parents and/or guardians of city public school students. Parents and/or guardians could

have access to voter registration forms when they visit schools to enroll their children or attend PTA meetings. Afterschool programs, Beacon Schools and other educational resource centers offer opportunities to engage eligible voters as well. It's important to note, while we can mandate registration in public schools, we can and should also encourage parochial, yeshivot and other non-public schools to engage in the process.

Furthermore, let's support voter registration through our faith-based institutions and civic organizations that are not connected to designated agencies. This process need not and should not interfere with the separation of church and state. Churches are an integral part of our community and it would be extremely short sighted to shun any opportunity to encourage involvement.

I also support the recommendation by NYPIRG, Common Cause and others, of a citywide mailing of voter registration forms and election information during presidential elections years. The Board of Elections already annually conducts mailings to registered voters. A mailing including registration forms would be extremely effective. The most direct way to reach potential registrants is at their homes.

With specific regards to the Board of Elections, I advocate efforts to modernize the Board of Elections to increase voting and ensure the accuracy and timely reporting of the election results.

This includes adding resources to improve training poll workers and better pay to attract and keep qualified workers, as well as modernization of voting procedures. Increase pay for Inspectors to \$250 per day and (poll-site) Coordinators to \$350 per day (from \$130 and \$200 respectively). This requires amendment to Section 3-420 of the NYS Election Law by the State Legislature. The last increase was 1997.

In addition to modern machines that timely provide the count to avoid the 1997 runoff fiasco and the lengthy Florida uncertainty (not to mention the Manhattan State Senate seat), the Borough President wants to review the use of the internet to widen participation. The State and Federal governments, due to their interest in the integrity of state and federal elections should provide the necessary funds

I also support Election Day same-day registration and the counting of Absentee Ballots where intent of the voter is clear, also advocated by the State Attorney General.

One final thought, not for legislation, but for the legislature to add its considerable prestige and influence behind: strongly recommend that each of the state's political parties establish clear standards and procedures about fair play and opposing the stereotypical attacks in elections. It's one thing to criticize a record or a vision, its another – and it proves hurtful and a discouragement to voter participation, to introduce innuendo and play on stereotypes concerning race, religion, ethnicity, sex, sexual preference or any other self-identification. Join me in condemning such practices.

Thank you.