

2008 New York State Public Policy Agenda

As an independent, nonpartisan force dedicated to promoting good government and political reform in the city and state of New York, Citizens Union has served as a watchdog for the public interest and an advocate for the common good. We work to ensure fair elections, clean campaigns, and open, effective government that is accountable to the citizens of New York. With those goals in mind, presented below are our positions on a wide range of state reform issues important to the citizens of New York. With reforms long overdue to the state's redistricting practices, campaign finance laws, and judicial selection process at the top of the list, New York is hopefully now poised to realize genuine reform.

In order to build on recent successes in the area of ethics and budget reform, we urge the State Legislature and the Governor to address successfully the following issues:

LEGISLATIVE REDISTRICTING REFORM

- **Create an independent redistricting commission** that is fairly chosen and would operate independently of the legislature and political parties in drawing congressional and legislative district lines.
- Develop **fair and sensible redistricting guidelines** to ensure that district lines are not drawn to favor or oppose any political party or any incumbent, and provide for fair and effective representation of racial and language minority groups.
- **Ensure adequate public disclosure** in proceedings, including hearings throughout the state and online access to the redistricting plans and the data used to prepare them prior to their adoption.
- Create a mechanism for passage that encourages the approval of the independent redistricting commission's plan.

ELECTION REFORM

- Ensure that the **testing and certification of new voting machines is not compromised and proceeds in a transparent manner** with the high standards set by the state to **ensure secure, accurate, and accessible voting systems** required under the Help America Vote Act (HAVA).
- Repeal the **"Full Face Ballot"** provision that requires voters be able to see in one singular view the entire ballot containing all the offices and candidates.
- Ensure that flexible matching practices are used to verify voters in the statewide voter database so that **eligible voters are not inadvertently removed from the voter rolls and disenfranchised at the polls**; database inaccuracies, such as incomplete information or failure to verify registration forms, should not serve as barriers to registrants or to disenfranchise or discourage voters at the polls.
- Develop an extensive **public education program to prepare for the shift to new voting machines when selected** to familiarize voters with the changed process of voting before election day.
- **Work with local election boards to expand training and recruitment of poll workers** to ensure that each county has an adequate number of workers, all of whom are capable of performing the tasks required of them; **training must reflect sensitivity to non-English speaking and disabled voters**, and must emphasize the revised poll site procedures, including provisional ballot requirements, required under HAVA.
- Remove **burdensome ballot access requirements and create a less problematic signature challenge process** to encourage candidates to run for elected office.
- **Restructure the State Board of Elections and local boards** to remove political party control of election administration and create a nonpartisan operating structure.
- **Increase voter participation at the polls** by instituting election day voter registration.
- Reform the **selection process by which elected official vacancies are filled**, by holding either nonpartisan elections or a special party primary and general election, both with instant run-off voting. Elections should be held for vacancies of the Comptroller and Attorney General during the September primary and November general elections following the appointment of interim officers by the legislature.

- Continued on Page 2 -

CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM

- **Significantly lower campaign contribution limits** and institute a **public campaign finance system** similar to the New York City model.
- Strengthen the **ban on the use of campaign contributions for personal use**.
- Implement **pay-to-play restrictions** on contributions from entities that do business with the state.
- Require **greater disclosure and reporting** of campaign contributors and expenditures.
- Develop **more effective enforcement mechanisms**, including greater fines for exceeding contribution limits and violations of campaign finance disclosure laws.

GOVERNMENT REFORM

- Strengthen the newly formed **Commission on Public Integrity** by **giving it jurisdiction over legislative ethics violations** and change its representation so no one elected official makes a majority of the appointments.
- **Further reform the governance and oversight of the state's public authorities**; conduct a thorough review of current authorities and subsidiaries to assess their merit; require stronger controls and reporting on finances and issuance of debt.
- Revise the Municipal Home Rule law to **limit the ability of a mayoral charter revision commission to "bump" other local referenda** from appearing on the ballot.

JUDICIAL REFORM

- Create an **appointment system** via constitutional amendment for the selection of judges for all New York courts of record, including Supreme Court justices.
- Establish **judicial qualifications commissions** that reflect the geographical, racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of New York to evaluate candidates' qualifications for office for all of New York's courts of record. Bar associations and civic organizations should be entrusted to appoint some or all members to the commissions.
- Develop and conduct a **more expansive voter education program** regarding judicial elections.
- Restructure the state's court system to **consolidate the nine trial courts into a two-tier system**.
- **Increase the salaries of the state's judges** and establish a Compensation Commission which would meet on a quadrennial basis to consider increasing salaries for all state elected officials.

BUDGET REFORM

- **Revise the budget's format to facilitate and encourage public and legislative review** by requiring that documents reasonably group appropriations into programmatic areas and allow comparison to past and expected spending.
- **Require the Governor's budget presentation provide a clear, comprehensive, and consolidated picture of the full scope of the state's financial condition**, budget operations and fiscal obligations, including those of public authorities.
- Establish an **independent nonpartisan budget office** to provide revenue projections and economic and policy analysis.
- Improve **long term, multi-year budget planning** by linking the operations and capital budgets to a strategic plan.
- Establish a **later start date for the budget year** that would more accurately account for tax receipts from the prior year.
- Require greater **public availability of all final budget bills before scheduled votes**, allowing sufficient time for analysis, discussion, and debate; provide the public with better information and opportunities for participation.
- Require regular **reporting on lump-sum appropriations and member items that includes detailed information** regarding all Memorandums of Understanding and other agreements, funds distributed, legislative sponsor, and recipients.
- Incorporate **performance budgeting with outcome measurement** to determine whether or not programs have met stated goals and rationalize the appropriation of state funds.
- **Discourage "messages of necessity"** that allow lawmakers to vote quickly on budget bills instead of waiting three days.
- **Limit the ability of the Governor to enact and modify terms and conditions** that govern the use of resources in appropriation bills by requiring that such bills be consistent with existing law or proposed changes in separate legislation.

LEGISLATIVE REFORM

- **Reinvigorate legislative committees** by providing more reasonable means of discharging bills, increasing the ability of members to call for public hearings, and promoting the routine use of conference committees.
- Allow for **greater public access and accountability** by giving the public a greater opportunity to provide testimony at committee meetings and requiring committees to have more thorough public reporting of their activities.
- Establish a **more equitable distribution of funds to legislators** for staffing and resources regardless of party affiliation.