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**MAYOR BLOOMBERG ISSUES REPORT SHOWING NEW YORK STATE LAST IN
VOTER ACCESS – PROPOSES EARLY VOTING AND OTHER REFORMS TO MAKE
VOTING EASIER FOR NEW YORKERS**

*Proposed changes to state law would create an early voting period, extend registration deadline
and simplify ballot*

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg today announced a set of reforms designed to make voting more convenient and flexible for all New Yorkers and issued a report showing that New York has the most restrictive election policies in the country and decades of declining voter turnout. The proposal calls for four changes to New York State election law, including: creating an early voting period; allowing New Yorkers to fill out their ballots at home and bring to a polling site; modernizing registration process and extending registration deadline from 25 days to 10 days before Election Day; and simplifying the ballot design with plain language instructions. New York is the only state in the union that does not offer any of the following voter access reforms: early voting, no excuse absentee voting, same day registration, online registration or party switch within six months of a primary. The Mayor was joined by State Senator-elect Michael Gianaris, State Assembly Members Brian Kavanagh, Karim Camara, Michael Benjamin and Jonathan Bing, Council Member Gale Brewer, Former City Council Speaker Peter Vallone, Sr., Reverend Al Sharpton, Citizens Union Executive Director Dick Dadey, Common Cause New York Executive Director Susan Lerner, NYPIRG Senior Attorney Gene Russianoff, New York State Bar Association President Steven Younger, Deputy Director of the Brennan Center for Justice's Democracy Program Wendy Weiser, New York City Corporation Counsel Michael A. Cardozo and New York City Voter Assistance Commission Executive Director Onida Coward Mayers.

"Voter turnout in elections for all levels of government is unacceptably low, and the State's antiquated election laws are part of the problem," said Mayor Bloomberg. "Reforms like early voting and extended registration deadlines will help New Yorkers make their voices heard."

The report issued by Mayor Bloomberg found that New York's election laws are the most restrictive in the country. New York is among only four states with closed primaries that have not adopted any policies to expand voter access. These include same day registration, online registration, no-excuse absentee voting or early voting. Among these four most restrictive states, only New York requires voters to wait more than a year to vote in a party primary after changing party affiliations.

(more)

For the past several decades, New York voter turnout in municipal, state and federal elections has been declining, and is now lagging behind the rest of the country. In the last three state and federal election cycles, New York ranked 47th among states in average voter turnout.

“New York City is part of the greatest democracy in the world. Yet our democracy is only as strong as the election system we have in place to support it,” said Speaker Quinn. “The Council’s Governmental Operations Committee citywide voter survey found that more than 1 in 3 surveyed voters had difficulty reading the ballot on General Election Day. This figure raises a red flag for local elected officials and good government advocates. Together, we must work with the State, to improve voter access and experience at the polls.”

“Low voter turnout in the past election serves to highlight the need to modernize New York’s election system,” said Senator Joseph P. Addabbo, Chairman of the Senate Elections Committee. “I am pleased to work together with Mayor Bloomberg, Speaker Quinn and my colleagues in the State Legislature to fight for reforms including early voting, easing voter registration and simplifying the ballot. Each of these important reforms will encourage greater participation in our democratic process.”

“It is an embarrassment that New York, a state so rich in the history of American democracy, ranks near the bottom in voter participation,” said State Senator-elect Michael Gianaris. “While everyone should take the time to vote on Election Day, we must do all we can to make the voting process more convenient. Significant election law reforms are needed to increase voter turnout and give more people a say in choosing their representatives.”

“I’m proud to join Mayor Bloomberg, our colleagues in government, and some of New York’s great advocates for democracy in calling for these reforms. We’ve recently gotten some high-tech voting machines in New York, but voting here has not otherwise kept up with the times,” said Assembly Member Brian Kavanagh, who chairs the State Assembly subcommittee responsible for election operations and voting rights. “Citizens have a right to expect that we’ll do everything we can to make voting convenient and accessible. That means a far more reliable registration system, fewer arbitrary deadlines and restrictions on the time and method of voting, and ballots that are easy to read and use. Each of the voter friendly reforms we’re calling for today is already the norm in many other states; I’m confident we can get them done here.”

“I fully support this effort to modernize and improve the election process in New York to make voting easier for our residents and to increase voter participation,” said Assembly Member Karim Camara. “The overwhelming support from such a wide range of elected officials, government reform groups and community activists demonstrates that the time to act is now. We must do everything in our power to reverse the trend of alarmingly low participation amongst eligible voters.”

“Recently, it was reported that New York earned the ignominy of having the lowest voter turnout in the nation. This is shameful. In many states, voters can vote by mail, there is no-excuse absentee voting, and residents can register and vote on Election Day,” said Assembly Member Michael Benjamin. “Early voting is a solution to low turnout. In 2009, I introduced legislation authorizing early voting in General Elections. I’m glad that Mayor Bloomberg is supporting this and

other measures to increase voter participation and turnout in New York. Mayor Bloomberg has led the way in education reform and today he is leading the way in election reform.”

“Voting is a privilege of which far too few Americans take advantage,” said Assembly Member Bing. “In New York, our residents ability to exercise their voting power is hampered by outdated laws. That’s why I’ve introduced a number of measures to improve this situation, including bills to allow for electronic submission of voter registration forms and absentee ballot applications. I am proud to stand with my colleagues today and applaud Mayor Bloomberg for bringing attention to this critical issue.”

“The Council is wholly committed to improving our city’s election administration system and giving New York City voters the greatest opportunity to let their voices be heard at the ballot box,” said City Council Governmental Operations Chair Gale A. Brewer. “I thank Speaker Quinn and the Mayor for their push today to improve voter access in the State of New York and I look forward to working with advocates and policy groups on their ideas for reform.”

“I wholeheartedly endorse Mayor Bloomberg’s plan to wake up the State Legislature and the Board of Elections to get New Yorkers back to the polls,” said Former Council Speaker Peter Vallone, Sr. “Too many have given their ‘Lives, Fortunes and Sacred honor’ just so we can vote!”

“The National Action Network and I support every effort to make voting more accessible,” said Reverend Al Sharpton. “Many voters struggle to find the opportunity to vote when they are busy balancing the demands of work and family. These reforms would make a powerful difference in the lives of many citizens who want to participate but have been unable to do so because of restrictive voting rules. This is an important step in making voting more accessible for all.”

“Citizens Union commends Mayor Bloomberg for contributing to this needed discussion and providing an important blueprint for modernizing the election system in New York,” said Dick Dadey, executive director of Citizens Union. “For far too long, New York has lagged behind other states in making needed reforms to update electoral administration and open up the process of voting. We now have one of the worst rates of participation by eligible voters because we lag behind in reforming our election system. By establishing early voting, easing the process for voter registration, and designing ballots more clearly by increasing the font size and removing the full face ballot requirement, more voters will participate in our democracy and be assured that their votes not only count, but matter. We call on the Governor and state legislature to enact these reforms recommended by the Mayor and long supported by Citizens Union and other election reform organizations. New Yorkers deserves a 21st Century election system.”

“Common Cause/NY shares the Mayor’s concern regarding declining rates of voter turn-out in New York,” said Susan Lerner, Executive Director of Common Cause/NY. “It is past time for New York’s voter access rules to catch up to the rest of the country’s. We look forward to working with the Mayor to bringing these common sense reforms to New York.”

“New York City faces a crisis of declining voter participation,” said Gene Russianoff, senior attorney for the New York Public Interest Research Group. “Mayor Bloomberg’s proposals for early voting and moving up the registration deadline would make it easier for city voters to register and cast their ballots.”

“New York’s voting system is broken, but it is not damaged beyond repair. Reforming and upgrading the system must be our top priority,” said Deputy Director of the Brennan Center for Justice’s Democracy Program Wendy Weiser. “By upgrading the process of voter registration to a modernized system where all eligible citizens are automatically and permanently registered to vote, we can finally remove the bureaucratic obstacle that has disenfranchised millions.”

“The New York State Bar Association agrees with the Mayor that our laws should encourage maximum voter participation in elections,” said Steve Younger, President of the New York State Bar Association. “The more voters who participate, the stronger our democracy. The Mayor has put forth specific suggestions as to how to achieve this objective. The Association will examine each of these recommendations carefully.”

“I applaud the Mayor for taking the initiative to improve our election process,” said Samuel W. Seymour, President of New York City Bar Association. “The dismal voter turnout in New York City in recent elections underscores the need for serious reform of the elections process. The City Bar has made recommendations to that effect in the past and looks forward to reviewing the Mayor’s proposals and working with him to achieve meaningful change.”

“The Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, as the leader of Election Protection, the nation’s largest non-partisan voter protection coalition, applauds Mayor Bloomberg’s call to expand access to voting through common sense reforms,” said Marcia Blanco, Co-Director of the Voting Rights Project of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. “Based on recent experience in New York, we strongly believe that implementing early voting and expanding voter registration opportunities are important first steps towards a truly accessible election system.

“The Voter Assistance Commission is committed to enhancing and simplifying voter registration and voting in New York,” said Onida Coward Mayers, Executive Director of the New York City Voter Assistance Commission. “The proposed reforms will help further our mission to empower New York City voters and we commend the Bloomberg administration for their efforts to enhance our democratic process.”

The following proposed reforms would increase convenience and flexibility of voting in New York:

Creation of an early voting period: 35 states currently offer early voting in some form, generally 1-2 weeks before Election Day at a selected number of “super poll sites.” An early voting period would give New Yorkers a much greater degree of flexibility as to where and when they vote.

At-home ballot completion: The newly redesigned paper ballot system can provide a unique opportunity for voters to complete their ballots in the privacy of their homes and then bring them to the polling site for scanning and submission. This will ensure New Yorkers spend more time making informed decisions and less time waiting in line at the poll sites.

Streamlining voter registration: New York State has some of the most cumbersome registration laws in the country. But we can immediately improve this situation by taking three simple steps. First, the law should be changed to allow registration ten days before

Election Day, as is permitted by the New York State Constitution, rather than the 25 days permitted now. Second, modernizing the registration process by linking existing state and local databases to the Board of Elections would eliminate duplicative data entry and reduce the time required for processing. Lastly, New York State should allow voters to change their party affiliation, and participate in the primary of their choice, without having to wait over a year for the process to take its course. Such a reform would put New York State back in the mainstream, as 20 out of 25 states that require party affiliation to vote in primaries allow for changes within 30 days of Election Day.

Simplified Ballot Design: Guaranteeing that ballot instructions are readily visible and in plain language will ensure that voters are better able to understand the process. Streamlining the ballot by eliminating unnecessary and uninformative text will make it easier to read.

Additional enhancements: Identifying and acting on additional reforms that may require a constitutional amendment should also be reviewed. For example, the current and ongoing efforts of the legislature to pass an amendment allowing for no-excuse absentee voting would also give voters additional flexibility and options on Election Day.

In 2005, Mayor Bloomberg created the Election Modernization Task Force to look into voting and election policies. Led by Corporation Counsel Michael A. Cardozo, the Task Force recommended ways to improve the Board of Election's operations, productivity and overall efficiency and to modernize the City's voting machines.

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