

EDITORIAL

# Time to get voting rights right

Blue wave has led to the best chance yet to reform state's archaic election laws

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

History was made last week in Albany.

Time to make some more.

The legislative session that opened Wednesday was the first to feature a woman at the helm of one of New York's two legislative bodies. Democrat Andrea Stewart-Cousins became majority leader of the State Senate, a result of November's big blue wave that gave the party control of all three levers of government.

All the pieces are in place to move forward a raft of long overdue legislation. There can be no more excuses, finger-pointing and one-house bills that die. On Tuesday, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's budget address is likely to feature the legalization of recreational marijuana and sports gambling, and outline the always-controversial mechanism of school funding. These complicated topics will require time and deliberation to get right.

One issue can be handled much more quickly. It would engage more citizens and voices in our process of governing — and also would make history by bringing New York into the modern era: Voting reform.

New York is one of the most backward states in the nation when it comes to voting laws. Year in, year out, its turnout is among America's worst. Partly, that's due to laws that make it harder to vote, when the default situation should be: yes, you can vote.

- 34 states offer early voting in person. Not New York.
- 27 states allow anyone to file an absentee ballot. Not New York.
- 15 states have automatic voter registration. Not New York.
- 49 states held their state and federal primaries on the same day last year. Yup, New York was the only holdout.

Obstruction from the Republican and Conservative parties, who preferred to suppress the vote rather than craft an agenda that would appeal to more voters, is now a relic of the past. Now New York can join other states that have made executing our civic duty easier. As both chambers tackle a slate of voting reforms on Monday, here are



New York Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul, left, gives the Senate gavel to Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins (D-Yonkers) during opening day of the 2019 legislative session on Wednesday.

our recommendations:

**Early voting:** Polls should open a limited amount of time, including at least one weekend, before Election Day to give voters more chances to cast ballots.

**Automatic voter registration:** This would occur when someone has business before one of several state agencies, according to one measure that also includes an opt-out provision.

**No-fault absentee balloting:** Anyone should be able to vote by absentee ballot without declaring a reason.

**Consolidate primaries:** Cuomo wants to hold state and federal primaries the same day instead of months apart, which confuses voters and depresses turnout. Moving state primaries to June to coincide with primaries for members of Congress is a no-brainer.

**Voter preregistration** — New York should join the 22 states that specifically allow some form of preregistration for 16- and 17-year-olds. One Senate bill would require local boards of election to encourage the policy, including by working with high schools to conduct preregistration, a way to stress the importance of the obligation to vote.

**Party enrollment changes:** A Senate bill would let voters change party registration up to 25 days before an election, remedying a long-standing problem of voters discovering far too late that they are not eligible to vote in a primary.

**Ban fusion voting:** The practice of candidates receiving cross-endorsements from multiple parties allows minor parties to hold no principles of their own while extorting Democrats and Republicans for their ballot lines. It confuses voters and allows minor parties to thrive without standing for anything. Forty-seven states ban a candidate's name from appearing on multiple ballot lines. New York should join the club. Then lawmakers should re-examine the minimum number of votes a party needs to draw in a gubernatorial election to automatically stay on the ballot. Right now it's 50,000. One more reform in this vein: The words "independent" and "independence" should be banned from party names. Many people mistakenly register or vote for the intellectually bankrupt Independence Party.

**Independent redistricting:** The

power to draw lines for voting districts must be taken away from political parties. Democrats must resist the temptation to keep the unfair status quo now that they're in total control. An independent commission would require another constitutional amendment but it is a necessity, and undergirds all other changes worth making.

Other election reforms include closing the loophole that allows secretive limited liability companies to make big campaign donations and banning corporate campaign contributions. Also, take a hard look at public campaign financing. Cuomo also wants to make Election Day a state holiday. That would allay concerns about strangers entering polling places in schools that are in session, but financial and logistical implications must be determined.

New Yorkers have waited too long for these sensible changes that would put real power back in the hands of the citizenry, not the political bosses. Passing these reforms now as the session begins would set a promising tone for this auspicious year.