

The Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of New York State
New York State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

December 1, 2021
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The Honorable Andrea Stewart-Cousins
Majority Leader of the New York State Senate
188 State Street, Legislative Office Building, Room 907
Albany, NY 12247

The Honorable Carl E. Heastie
Speaker of the New York State Assembly
198 State Street, Legislative Office Building, Room 932
Albany, NY 12248

Dear Governor Hochul, Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, and Speaker Heastie:

This year we have witnessed a disturbing rise in threats to American democracy. The Stop the Steal movement's promotion of the Big Lie fomented a violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th. Arizona's phony audit undermined public confidence in our elections and inspired similar efforts in at least five other states. Vote suppressors in legislatures nationwide have been determined to make it harder to vote, especially for [Native American voters](#) and [voters of color](#), enacting dozens of bills to further restrict access to the ballot.

Our systems of democracy are in dire need of reinforcement, and New York can be a leader in that effort. Despite our state's progressive bona fides, we are not immune from the [dangers](#) of misinformation and vote suppression in our own communities. Earlier this year opponents of two voting reforms that were on the ballot launched a multi-million dollar campaign right out of the Stop the Steal playbook to depress support for the two questions. As we look ahead to 2022, New York must fortify its voting and campaign finance systems to combat anti-democratic efforts and ensure all New Yorkers have a voice in our politics.

Thanks to your leadership, over the last two years New York has enacted several significant democracy reforms, including small donor public financing and automatic voter registration. We hope that next year, you will double down on your commitment to strengthening our democracy. The defeat of same-day voter registration and no-excuse absentee voting in November, and continued election administration failures statewide, prove there is more to do to ensure an equitable and just democracy for all. In 2022, the legislature should restart the process for the two constitutional amendments, pass the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New York, and enact common-sense improvements to local and state boards of elections to remove still-standing

barriers to voting. We also urge you to take all necessary steps to ensure that the reforms you passed over the last two years will be successfully implemented.

Below we list some key steps the state must take to ensure New York maintains the momentum for democracy reform that began just two years ago.

Small Donor Public Financing: In 2020, New York became [the first state](#) to enact a small donor public financing system since the Supreme Court's 2010 decision in *Citizens United*. The program provides a multiple match on small contributions from New York residents to participating statewide and legislative candidates. It will strengthen the diversity of candidates running for office in New York, creating [more opportunities](#) for people of color and women to raise competitive sums from small donors in their communities. Similar public financing programs elsewhere have [increased small donor diversity](#) and [strengthened the connections](#) between elected officials and constituents. This system can only make our democracy more representative and equitable if it is funded sufficiently in advance of its first cycle, the 2024 legislative elections, for which candidates can begin opting in next November. In 2022, we urge you to begin funding the program with \$67 million, approximately half of the [estimated](#) cost for the 2024 cycle, to build candidate and voter confidence in the program's solvency and readiness to plan their campaign and support strategies around it if they wish. Furthermore, should Congress pass the Freedom to Vote Act, New York must be prepared to opt into the legislation's small donor [public financing system for congressional candidates](#).

Automatic Voter Registration: Last December, New York became the nineteenth state to adopt automatic voter registration, which will increase opportunities for eligible New Yorkers to register to vote through various state agencies. The Department of Motor Vehicles will implement the policy in January 2023, with other agencies following in [2024 and 2025](#). In 2022, the State Board of Elections needs sufficient funding and resources to create the online voter registration platform that will enable participating agencies to easily enroll voters.

Same-Day Voter Registration and No-Excuse Absentee Voting: In November, ballot proposals that would have enabled same-day voter registration and authorized no-excuse absentee voting did not pass. Despite the facts that both reforms have been in place [for decades](#) elsewhere in the country and polls showed [majority](#) support for their adoption in New York, they failed after opponents [spent millions of dollars against them](#) in a largely unanswered campaign that echoed national Stop the Steal efforts. Given that most New Yorkers did not vote on these questions (only one in five registered voters in the state even answered them), we urge you to give state voters another opportunity to consider these important measures. In 2022, the legislature must begin the amendment process again, which entails passage by two consecutive legislatures and a majority vote on a statewide ballot. In the meantime, the legislature should amend state law to move the voter registration deadline to ten days before Election Day and

allow for same-day registration on the first day of early voting, which does not require a constitutional amendment. This will show New Yorkers that it is a simple, yet helpful reform.

The John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New York: In the absence of strong federal protections for voters in New York and beyond, the legislature should enact the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New York in 2022. The legislation will ensure all voters are able to cast their ballots and expand access for voters of color who have historically faced systematic hurdles to political participation. If enacted, the bill would be the [strongest voting rights law](#) to fight race-based voter suppression in the United States. Among other provisions, the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New York would establish a preclearance program, improve language assistance, create protections against voter intimidation, and establish a statewide database for election and demographic data to increase transparency and inform best practices in election administration.

Election Administration Reform: Year after year, mismanagement of elections by local boards of elections and the State Board of Elections creates unnecessary barriers for voters trying to cast their ballots, including long lines, voter registration problems, and confusing communications about basic voting information. These issues burden voters statewide in urban, suburban, and rural counties. If New York's leadership wants to fully deliver on the significant reforms passed in recent years, they must ensure elections are administered well. Failures in administration not only disserve the state's 13.3 million voters but provide [fodder](#) to [bad faith actors](#) seeking to undermine the integrity of elections. New York needs a comprehensive legislative package that addresses the structural flaws in our system, including improvements to commissioner appointments, staff hiring and merit-based worker protections, training, accountability, information sharing, and funding.

If prioritized in 2022 and beyond, these improvements will fundamentally change New York's voting and campaign finance systems for the better. As our country's democracy continues to face attacks, New York should set the gold standard for elections in the twenty-first century. Now more than ever, we need to implement reforms that push back against this nationwide anti-democratic wave.

We look forward to working with you to enact bold democracy reform that will set an example for the nation and restore power to the people.

Sincerely,

504 Democratic Club
Adirondacks Indivisible
Bay Shore Babylon Huddle

Bethlehem NY Indivisible
Brennan Center for Justice
Brooklyn NAACP
Brooklyn Resisters
Brooklyn Voters Alliance
CCoHOPE Indivisible
Center for Popular Democracy
Citizen Action of New York
Communications Workers of America, District 1
CUNY Rising Alliance
Downstate New York ADAPT
Downtown East For Progress
Dutchess County Progressive Action Alliance
East End Action Network
Empire State Indivisible
Fair Elections for New York
Future Coalition
Generation Vote
Greater New York Chapter of Disabled in Action
Indivisible Binghamton
Indivisible Cayuga
Indivisible Cortland County
Indivisible Harlem
Indivisible Mohawk Valley
Indivisible Nation BK
Indivisible Scarsdale
Indivisible Upper East Side
Indivisible Westchester Districts 6&7
IndivisibleWeStand UWS
Inwood Indivisible
Larchmont/Mamaroneck Indivisible
League of Women Voters of New York State
Long Island Progressive Coalition
Make the Road New York
Mamaroneck Indivisible
March On
Metro New York Health Care for All
NAACP New York State Conference
National Action Network
National Urban League

Broome County Urban League
Buffalo Urban League
Long Island Urban League
New York Urban League
Rochester Urban League
Westchester Urban League
New York Communities for Change (NYCC)
New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG)
New York Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC-NY)
New York Working Families Party (NYWFP)
Northwest Bronx Indivisible
NY02 Indivisible
Oblong Valley Indivisible
Open Buffalo
Organize for Action WNY
Professional Staff Congress-CUNY
Progressive Schenectady
Reinvent Albany
Rise and Resist
Show Up Long Island
Stand Up America
Suffolk Progressives
Together We Will Long Island
United Auto Workers Region 9A
VOCAL-NY
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