



Legislation Text

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Res. No. 1390

Resolution calling upon the New York State Legislature to pass, and the Governor to sign, legislation that would expand language access to the New York State Board of Elections and Department of Motor Vehicles' telephone and online voter registration services.

By Council Members Cabrera, Maisel and Chin

Whereas, The right to vote is the most fundamental right of citizens in a democracy; and

Whereas, According to the United States Census Bureau, nearly six million people living in New York State speak a language other than English at home, and approximately two and a half million people in the State have limited English proficiency; and

Whereas, According to the United States Census Bureau, approximately 73 percent of limited English proficient New Yorkers live in New York City; and

Whereas, According to the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA), immigrants comprise about 37 percent of New York City's population; and

Whereas, According to MOIA, 56 percent of immigrants in New York City are naturalized citizens who have the right to vote, and 40 percent of those naturalized citizens have limited English proficiency; and

Whereas, The State Board of Elections' statewide voter hotline, mandated by law to provide voters with information regarding their voter registration, only provides telephone services in English and Spanish; and

Whereas, Downloadable voter registration forms on the State Board of Elections' website are only available in English and Spanish; and

Whereas, The online voter registration form on the Department of Motor Vehicles' website, currently the only mechanism by which New York residents can register to vote online, is only available in English; and

Whereas, On October 6, 2011, in recognition of the millions of limited English proficient New Yorkers whose limited English proficiency presents potential barriers to accessing important government programs and services, Governor Cuomo issued Executive Order 26, the Statewide Language Access Policy, requiring that executive State agencies that provide direct public services translate vital documents and provide interpretation services in the top six non-English languages spoken in New York; and

Whereas, Executive Order 26 does not cover the State Board of Elections; and

Whereas, Pursuant to the federal Voting Rights Act, the New York City Board of Elections' voter hotline provides telephone interpretation services in Spanish, Chinese, Bengali, and Korean; and

Whereas, Pursuant to the federal Voting Rights Act, the New York City Board of Elections provides voter registration forms, which the New York City Campaign Finance Board (NYCCFB) makes available for download on its website, in Spanish, Chinese, Bengali, and Korean; and

Whereas, In coordination with MOIA, the NYCCB also makes voter downloadable registration forms available in 11 other non-English languages, but the forms must be completed in English in order for the City Board of Elections to process them; and

Whereas, According to the New York City Campaign Finance Board, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting inability to conduct in-person voter registration activities has resulted in a 50 percent decrease in the number of new voter registrations in the first six months of 2020 compared to the same period for 2016; and

Whereas, Voting rights activists, particularly those that work with limited English proficient communities, have said that language barriers at the State level have made the voter registration process difficult to navigate for people who struggle with English; and

Whereas, In a presidential election year in which the State expects high voter turnout, it is vital that the voter registration process be as accessible as possible to limited English proficient New Yorkers, the vast majority of whom live in New York City; and

Whereas, At a minimum, the State Board of Elections should offer its voter hotline telephone services

and downloadable voter registration forms, and the Department of Motor Vehicles should offer its online voter registration form, in the same languages offered by the City Board of Elections' voter registration forms; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Council of the City of New York calls upon the New York State Legislature to pass, and the Governor to sign, legislation that would expand language access to the New York State Board of Elections and Department of Motor Vehicles' telephone and online voter registration services.

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