

Assembly election reform draws GOP fire

By CRAIG MCGUIRE

Gazette staff writer

Rapid approval of an election reform bill by the Assembly has some senators questioning the sincerity of the lower house as well its concern for the pocketbooks of voters.

But the legislation, dubbed A-1 as the first Assembly bill considered this year, proposes sweeping reforms in voter registration, balloting access and campaign contribution limitations. And it has the approval of good government groups.

The Assembly vote came a day after The Institute for Southern Studies released a report placing New York State in the "Dismal Dozen" in nationwide voter turnout.

"Last year's election sent a clear message that New Yorkers want a change," said Assembly Speaker Saul Weprin adding, "the Assembly and the governor are saying, 'We hear you.'"

Staten Island Republican Sen. John J. Marchi took exception with the report, noting that his county had a 77 percent voter turnout. "I suspect there are other counties which may have equally strong or better records of exercising the franchise," said Marchi.

Another Republican senator took exception to the Assembly action. "Assembly Democrats are simply pandering to special interest groups," said Joseph L. Bruno, former chairman of the Senate Elections Committee.

Representatives from the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG), Common Cause, and the League of Women Voters didn't see it that way. They praised the reform package and its chief sponsor, Weprin.

"This bill promises everything that last year's 'reforms' did not deliver," said Travis Plunkett from NYPIRG, referring to similar reforms considered in 1992.

The Assembly election reform vote came along party

lines, with Democrats in favor and Republicans opposed.

"Moving this bill now underscores its priority and the commitment of Assembly Democrats to make 1993 the year New Yorkers finally gain the reformed electoral process they deserve," said Assembly Election Law Committee Chairman Eric Vitaliano.

"If Assembly Democrats were really sincere about enacting substantive election reform, they should have had the courtesy to send a copy of the bill to the Senate Elections Committee and then negotiated the bill in good faith," said Bruno.

The A-1 package would provide public campaign funds for candidates through a \$3 check-off on state income tax forms.

Vitaliano said that the bill "recognizes that money has become too important in campaigns and levels the playing field by restricting spending and providing public financing for candidates who agree to keep within strict limits."

But Bruno said it would be "fiscally imprudent" to even consider using state tax revenues to fund partisan political campaigns in these hard economic times.

A spokesman for Weprin said that this bill is fiscally responsible. He estimated it would cost taxpayers \$25 million over four years.

Sen. Michael Nozzolio, newly appointed chairman of the Elections Committee, said that any call for using taxpayer dollars to finance election campaigns "is simply misguided."

John McArdle, spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Ralph Marino, said the Senate believes that publicly funded campaigns are too expensive, but other parts of the package will be considered. The Senate will introduce its own proposal.

"The real abuse we've seen is the direct expenditures by Political Action Committees (PACs) to influence an election," McArdle said. "Those are not contributions but are direct expenditures used to influence campaigns."

Nozzolio said he will turn his attention to "political organizations establishing independent PACs which allows them to circumvent the election law by disregarding campaign donation limits."

The Senate has not yet voted on an election reform package.