

# Chairs predict there'll be more election reform

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Encouraged by recent Justice Department approval of the State Election Reform Act, the chairs of the Legislature's Elections Committees say they will continue to press for reform.

But the sides also exchanged partisan barbs over what kinds of reform there should be.

Sen. Michael Nozzolio, RC-Fayette, called Justice Department approval "extremely good news" for the people of New York. But he also questioned the motives of Assembly Democrats who earlier this session approved additional reform legislation.

Assemblyman Eric Vitaliano, D-Staten Island, said he was encouraged but questioned Senate conviction for true reform.

The Election Reform Act of 1992, Chapter 79, upgrades ballot access, encourages voter registration and outreach, and puts

limits on campaign financing.

The Assembly reform package (A-1) approved earlier this session is a Democratic priority, said Vitaliano. "The Senate should either negotiate A-1 or pass a bill in their own house."

Several advocates of reform who were critical of last year's legislation, say they support the Assembly action.

The New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) said that despite passage of the so-called Election Reform Act of 1992, New York's election laws remain "scandalously . . . intact."

Earlier this year the Institute for Southern Studies ranked New York State in the "Dismal Dozen" in statewide voter turnout. Common Cause said the study was done after last year's minimal electoral changes.

Sens. Joseph Bruno and Nozzolio both criticized the Assembly legislation as "pandering to special interest groups." Nozzolio

said his priority is legislation that would make eligible voters want to vote, and that, he said, is sadly absent from the Assembly's election reform plan.

Vitaliano rejected that, noting there has been no Senate action to match the rhetoric of their press releases.

But Nozzolio said he plans an aggressive outreach program to educate schoolchildren about the importance of voting.

Nozzolio said it is not enough to just increase the number of people registered to vote. "We have to make people want to vote."

Agency-based registration programs, created under the 1992 legislation, may be the answer, according to Nozzolio. This requires any state agencies that have daily contact with the public, such as the Departments of Labor, Social Services, Motor Vehicles and others, to make voter registration forms available.

Nozzolio called the program immediately successful with 57,000 registration forms distributed since its inception last August.

Congress is considering an election reform bill of its own. Among other reforms, the "motor voter" bill would improve existing agency-based registration by implementing programs such as attaching registration forms to motor vehicle documents and providing on-site assistance to aid registrants.

Nozzolio said he is concerned that some reforms, such as employee assistance in registration, might compromise the integrity of the process.

Reforming the federal election laws has Assembly support, said Vitaliano. "Passage of this bill in Congress would roundly shake up the New York state Senate" and encourage action.