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Primaries are costly, confusing

By Elliott Auerbach, Commentary Published 6:32 pm, Thursday, February 4, 2016

2016 is the year of the election in New York. We will have local, state and federal races that will draw great public interest in a presidential election year, each with the potential of a primary. So along with a sizable number of elected offices comes the significant financial burden for our counties and municipalities as well as confusion for the voting public.

Democracy is both messy and expensive, and in New York we have our fair share of both. In some areas, residents could vote on a number of different days in the presidential primaries, the Congressional primaries, the local and state primaries and finally in the general election. In fact, it is likely that some voters could even get to vote for the same candidate in both the Congressional primaries and the state primaries. Candidates for state and federal office have the opportunity to run for office twice, because New York has not combined these election dates since 2012. The result of this inaction hurts local budgets and voter participation.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo's 2016 State of the State address showed a commitment to empowering voters by modernizing the voter registration system and making New York the third state in the nation to adopt automatic voter registration at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

The governor took this commitment one step further by proposing legislation that will permit New Yorkers to vote early in all elections. This legislation will

require every county to offer residents access to at least one early voting polling place that will allow individuals to vote during the 12 days leading up to an election.

It should come as no surprise that the state would renew its commitment to the voting public. New York has 19.8 million residents, yet only 11.7 million New Yorkers are registered to vote. We see massive drop off in participation when it comes to local races. The irony, of course, is that in many ways your local elected official has the ability to impact your daily life in a capacity far greater than that of the president of the United States.

Participation is down even among those who do enter the ballot booth. In 2014, when constitutional amendments were on the ballot, roughly one in four people opted to not even vote on items that would greatly impact the future of our state for generations to come.

I applaud the governor's effort to curb the non-voting epidemic and I am left to scratch my head as to why we still have separate primary dates. One of the few benefits I can glean from this inaction is the ability for a member of the state Legislature to run for Congress, potentially lose and still be able to run for re-election. This is something that we have seen a number of times since the two primaries have been split.

For this luxury for politicians, we burden voters by subjecting them to continued voter fatigue while requiring towns, cities, counties and ultimately the taxpayer to foot the bill. It is time we combine these races and continue to look for other measures to make voting as accessible as possible.

Elliott Auerbach of Ellenville is the Ulster County comptroller.

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