

Citizens For A Better New York (CFBNY)
Testimony before The New York State Senate's
Temporary Committee on Rules and Administration Reform
Long Island, NY
February 27, 2009

Good morning Senator Bonacic and Senator Valesky. Good morning too to other members of the committee and the legislature and staff.

My name is Stuart Berger, President of Citizens for a Better New York (CFBNY). I live at 82 Brittany Circle. Rochester, NY.

In lieu of attending your hearing in Long Island, I submit this testimony as a member of Citizen's for a Better New York, a volunteer not-for-profit organization based in Rochester with members throughout the New York State. Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony. I am proud that I am the fourth person from our organization to address the questions your committee faces. We have presented testimony at every hearing because we think that legislative rules changes are the most critical question facing New York's governance.

As you conclude your hearings and begin to deliberate, I think that it's important to see the critical connection between making rules changes and assuring New York's vibrant future. Rules changes are just the tip of the iceberg.

Changing the rules of the Senate can lead to other changes in our public structures. People normally think of public structures as highways, bridges, and parks. Public structures also include our courts, our regulations, and our legislature. The most important public structure is our legislature. A critical role of the legislature is to look after all of these public structures to make sure they are doing their job. You and all the other members of the Senate have the great opportunity to improve the Legislature. This improvement will assure that we have a state where all citizens can happily live, work, learn, play, and prosper.

New York's serious problems are not being addressed now because several public structures are broken.

- The Legislature doesn't work because the rules give absolute power to the Assembly Speaker and the Senate Majority Leader. This concentration of power excludes our representatives from open debate and decision making, and silences the voice of the people represented by the legislators.
- Gerrymandering of legislative districts by party leaders assures virtual lifetime employment to incumbents.
- Campaign finance laws with excessive contribution limits and weak governance give inordinate power to party leaders and powerful special interests that fund election campaigns and turn off voters.

Our members believe that New York's governance can be fixed and the well-being of New York's citizens can be enhanced with the "4R's".

The "4R's" are:

- **Rules Changes in the Legislature:** so that the legislative process is transparent, fair, democratic, deliberative, effective, equitable and accountable to citizens. A better legislative process enables better legislative results.
- **Redistricting:** to require an independent, non-partisan commission to establish competitive legislative districts that make sense and ensure accountability to the citizens.

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- **Reclaim Fair Elections:** to implement Clean Money/Clean Election laws that provide public money for state election campaigns if a candidate agrees to strict spending limits and to reduce the campaign contribution limits from all sources.
- **Referendum and Initiative:** to establish a check-and-balance process that gives citizens greater voice for influencing public policy.

Implementing the “4R’s” will lead to better outcomes - such as a tax burden that is closer to the average of all other states and a quality health care system that is accessible and affordable. New York State citizens will also benefit from decisions built on the principles of the “4R’s” by delivering a quality education system – an education system that sees more young people graduate and an economic environment that keeps and attracts private-sector employers with good paying jobs.

Your committee stands on the threshold of assuring a new New York. Please demonstrate bold leadership and recommend the powerful, and for some, painful, Senate rules changes needed to best serve the interests of all New Yorkers, not just the special few. Demonstrate your courage and commitment by sharing your recommendations with the Assembly. You can make it happen. New Yorkers need to have it happen. We will be watching for implementation of these essential improvements.

Thank you.

Stuart Berger

www.cfbny.org