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NYPIRG STATEMENT ON DEMOCRACY REFORMS INCLUDED IN THE BUDGET AGREEMENT

(Albany, N.Y.) Early Saturday morning, the Senate and Assembly approved a state budget. In many ways, the *process* by which the budget agreement was cobbled together was an example of Albany at its worst: the budget was negotiated almost entirely behind closed doors – leaving the public and many of the lawmakers in the dark. The agreement was rammed through with Messages of Necessity, thus depriving a few days of meaningful review of the agreement itself, and the final debates were conducted too often in the dead of night.

The *product* of the budget left a lot to be desired in the area of democracy. The governor and state lawmakers agreed to get rid of the much-maligned ethics watchdog – the Joint Commission on Public Ethics – and replace it with a new entity, but one that is essentially chosen by the state’s top elected officials. Thus, the new entity follows the same failed path of the leaders choosing their own ethics regulators. It hasn’t worked in the past and is unlikely to do so in the future.

On a brighter note, reforms were included in the budget. Starting this November, students who live on campus will now be able to vote in polling places at their colleges. Undoubtedly, that will increase voter participation rates for young voters, among those who have the lowest rates now. In addition, the budget establishes a “database of deals” to better help oversee the state’s vast economic subsidy programs. That reform is not without its weaknesses, most notably that it will only include subsidies received after mid-October 2022 and the database will not include a way for the public to view a list of all types and amounts of benefits that a single company has received, among other limitations.

Unfortunately, important reforms were left out of the final budget agreement. For example, the governor's proposal to lower New York’s voter registration deadline from 25 days in advance of Election Day to the state constitutionally required 10 days was left out, there were no changes to the partisan-controlled boards of elections, and no reforms of the loop-riddled campaign finance system.

The following statement is attributable to Blair Horner, Executive Director for NYPIRG:

“Ethical controversies, scandals, resignations, and corruption convictions have for too long been a hallmark of how Albany operates. Adding to that an elections system that is too often marred by incompetence, and there can be no doubt about the source of New Yorkers’ growing cynicism about their own government. The new governor has promised changes and this budget delivers on some, but the ethics deal is way too weak and will not work. When lawmakers return at the end of the month, further measures to ensure the independence of the leadership of the new ethics agency must be at the top of the ‘to-do’ list.”

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