

# On Anniversary of Death of Martin Luther King, Jr., Civil Rights Leaders Call on New Yorkers to Increase Participation in Elections

**April 4, 2017** – New York, NY. The Drum Major Institute (DMI) – originally founded in 1961 by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Harry Wachtel to support the mission of the civil rights movement – today called for a year of concerted efforts to increase political engagement by all Americans, leading up to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr. King’s assassination on April 4, 2018. They called on New York – which has typically lagged in voter participation – to lead the way.

“Each year on this date, my father’s life work is remembered. This year more than ever we must remember that the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the crowning achievement of the civil rights movement, was intended to ensure easy access to voting for all Americans. Decades later, president after president bemoans our broken voting system and promises to fix it but nothing gets done,” said Martin Luther King, III, co-founder of DMI.

“New York has produced many great American leaders, and as the home of the Statue of Liberty and host of the United Nations, it has a duty to represent the best of American democracy,” said former U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young, Chairman emeritus of DMI. “But New York has not lived up to this obligation. Today we are proposing a battery of steps to make New York a leader in voting.”

DMI pointed out that in the 2013 Democratic mayoral primary – which effectively chose the next mayor – just 691,000 voters participated, **a mere 15%** of registered voters. (The winner received 282,000 votes – just 6% of the City’s total eligible voters.) The vast majority of New Yorkers opted not to have a say in who would lead the City. The same is consistently true in statewide elections, in which turnout among City residents significantly lags turnout in other parts of the State. And it’s getting worse. Indeed, despite efforts by past mayors, including a detailed proposal by Mayor Bloomberg in 2010, in each mayoral election this century, fewer people voted than in the election before.

DMI’s plan to increase voter participation in City races includes three simple common sense solutions:

1. Deputize high school principals and college presidents as election registrars, thereby ensuring that more of the hundreds of thousands of eligible students in NYC register to vote.
2. Recruit a wide array of businesses to offer rewards to consumers who shop on election day wearing an “I Voted, Did You?” sticker.
3. Ensure that employers obey the law by informing their workers that they are permitted to have time off to vote and ensure that workers are aware of this right.

Reverend James Forbes, board member of DMI, said: “New York City has ways to improve voter participation. That record is a rotten spot on the beautiful big apple; this is the city I call home and will forever love, so the time is now to end this shameful downward spiral. To

paraphrase New York's unofficial anthem, 'if we can do it here, we can do it anywhere'...and we will."

Eric Gioia, board member of DMI, will be leading DMI's efforts to increase registration and participation of young voters. As a City Council member, Gioia sponsored the Young Adult Voter Registration Act\* in 2004.

DMI's New York City initiative follows its efforts to improve access to polls and voter turnout nationwide. Its sister organization, WhyTuesday.Org, launched an initiative on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Voting Right Act in 2005 to move election day to the weekend to improve turn-out. WhyTuesday's founder William Wachtel noted that "there are now only 13 states where you can ONLY vote on a Tuesday and guess which is one of them....New York." The Weekend Voting Act, which was co-sponsored by then Senator Hillary Clinton, was just reintroduced in Congress with 40 co-sponsors and the endorsement of Common Cause.

Norm Ornstein, board member of DMI, said, "I am proud to support the Drum Major Institute and Why Tuesday to follow in the great tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr. and support common sense and powerful reforms to open up voting to every eligible American."

DMI's leadership met with President Donald Trump before his inauguration to urge that he end the dispute over voter identification laws by ensuring that the federal government make available a photo ID – such as a social security card with a photo – to any citizen who needed identification.

DMI board member Scott Rechler said: "This common sense and easy to implement solution to the photo ID battle that is going on in more and more states has garnered the support of Presidents Carter, Clinton and Bush for one simple reason; it makes perfect sense and can be done by the stroke of a pen on an Executive Order."

Mr. King, referring to a photo-bearing social security card as the "Trump Card" added: "He promised to make fixing our broken voting system a top priority. So, while we look forward to helping New York become a leader, we continue to look to the President to stay true to his word by at the very least implementing the Trump Card by Executive Order. Low voter participation is no minor illness in our electoral system, it is a fundamental obstacle to true democracy that a president must cure. If President Trump doesn't act faithfully and swiftly, the 50th anniversary of my father's death will be marked only as an incident of history, rather than a fulfillment of our obligation to today's Americans in the spirit of the 'fierce urgency of now.'"

\* This law, modelled on the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, as well as President Carter's Election Reform Message to Congress of 1977, required every graduating senior to receive a voter registration card along with their high school diploma. Notably, when Jimmy Carter was Governor of Georgia, he deputized high school principals as election registrars and encouraged a statewide competition amongst the high schools.