





2011–2012

VOTER ASSISTANCE

ANNUAL REPORT

April 2012



 New York City Campaign Finance Board
 Voter Assistance Advisory Committee

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NEW YORK CITY CAMPAIGN FINANCE BOARD 2011–2012 VOTER ASSISTANCE ANNUAL REPORT

All New Yorkers have the right to choose our leaders through free, democratic elections. Over the past century, many Americans have fought and died to preserve or extend that right in wars abroad and here at home. Hard-won political and legal struggles have helped open the political process to practically every American who wishes to take part.

Yet too many New Yorkers are sitting out our elections. Compared to other large cities, New York City has a fairly dismal record: fewer of its citizens are registered to vote, and a smaller percentage of registered voters actually come out on Election Day to cast their ballots.¹ For years, many civic-minded groups have worked to reverse the trend with little progress. New Yorkers continue to be disconnected from their government and the electoral process. The challenge is to make New Yorkers reconnect to their government. The New York City Campaign Finance Board (CFB) and its newly created Voter Assistance Advisory Committee (VAAC) are working to take this important challenge head on.

The goal is to engage New Yorkers more directly in civic life, using all the tools available in this technologically connected age. Achieving real, measurable growth in civic engagement requires a commitment to widespread efforts to engage with large numbers of voters by leveraging new technologies and building partnerships throughout the city to foster civic discussion on a grand scale. In this way, New York City can help build stronger social ties among its citizens, encourage a deeper commitment to civic participation, and lead the country by being a model for 21st century democracy.

Change won't come overnight, but the potential is boundless. We must leverage the tools we have to reach a statistically significant portion of New York City's six million voting-age citizens, to engage, educate, inform, inspire, and activate them as voters. There will always be a need for grassroots registration and engagement drives—because that is the gateway step to voting in our society—but the members of VAAC believe that voter engagement requires a citizenry that participates in the civic discussion at all levels, throughout the year—not just at election time. In order to engage the population on a large scale, there needs to be a multi-faceted approach to reaching people on their own terms, whether that is through technology, through community partners that reflect their interests and culture, or through government agencies that they interact with daily. The CFB and VAAC are committed to sending a message to all New Yorkers—NYC Votes!

¹ For more information, read last year's annual report: New York City Campaign Finance Board, "2010–2011 Voter Assistance Annual Report," April 2011, page 9, http://www.nycfb.info/PDF/var/2010-2011_VoterAssistanceAnnualReport.pdf#page=13



A new brand that clearly expresses the goal to engage and educate voters was developed for all voter assistance efforts. Not only do we brand our materials with this logo, but our partners are incorporating it in their materials as well. As they go about their daily lives, New Yorkers will see the message NYC Votes! on television, Taxi TV screens, bus shelters, bumper stickers, posters, publications and on the web.



VOTER ASSISTANCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

This was the first year in existence for the newly formulated Voter Assistance Advisory Committee. VAAC was created to advise the CFB on its voter outreach work as it took up the mission of the Voter Assistance Commission as the result of a New York City Charter referendum in November 2010. Reaching a full complement of members took almost the entire year, but that didn't stop VAAC from moving forward with its vision of transforming voter assistance and engagement in New York City. As one of its first acts, VAAC agreed to open all its meetings to the public so that the public would be part of the conversation on voter engagement from the start. VAAC is working with CFB staff to develop and create initiatives to engage citizens in the voting process.

VAAC holds its open meetings bi-monthly and its work is also communicated to the public via press releases and social media. The public is encouraged to attend public meetings and engage in conversation through the [@NYCVotes](#) Twitter handle and the [NYC Votes!](#) Facebook page.

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

From its inception, VAAC has been concerned that technology has been underutilized as a tool for voter outreach and that the media hasn't been leveraged as an amplifier for those efforts. VAAC, under the direction of its Chair, Art Chang, has started to explore new ways to encourage civic engagement via a joint public-private effort. He gathered some of the best minds in the NYC technology community to form the Digital Action Working Group (DAWG), a private sector subcommittee organized by Art and DAWG's Chair, Jed Alpert, Founder and CEO of Mobile Commons, a civic technology company based in New York City. DAWG pairs members of VAAC with interested partners from the private and non-profit sectors who seek to leverage technology to increase voter awareness and participation in civic life.

One of VAAC's first endeavors was a town hall entitled "Why Vote?" on WNYC radio, which regularly has roughly one million listeners per week. Held one week before Election Day, this special event broadcast live from WNYC's Greene Space, hosted by Brian Lehrer. Activists, scholars, and experts in voting behavior, as well

as a bipartisan panel of consultants whose work centers on turning out the vote, participated in the panel discussions. Joseph Stremiau of the Carter Center spoke about his experience with elections in developing nations around the world, particularly in Africa. He spoke at length on his experiences in Liberia, which had a 71 percent turnout for its recent elections. This exciting conversation solicited feedback on how to improve voter participation in New York City, both from the live studio audience and from listeners across the city who participated with over one thousand by telephone, text, Twitter, and Facebook messages.

This event kicked off a new era of conversation between government and the public. During the town hall, 2,500 people watched the live stream, over 200 tweets used the hashtag #NYCVOTES, and 440 text messages were received. The conversation continued after the show with over 700 tweets throughout the day.

Public participation in the voter town hall spurred VAAC to open up its post-election hearing in a similar fashion. The December hearing was promoted on the CFB's website as an opportunity for New Yorkers to weigh in, even if they could not attend in person, by watching the livestream and tweeting questions and comments using the #NYCVOTES hashtag. A live Twitter feed was projected in the hearing room and online. VAAC will continue to invite the public to participate using social media.

These efforts are part of a broader vision to connect New Yorkers more directly with each other and with the process of choosing the direction of their city government. In recent years we've witnessed a revolution in the way people access, receive, and share information. But these new tools have yet to be utilized effectively to broaden civic participation at the local level. Too many potential voters—especially young people—are tuning out of the conversation about local issues.

Through DAWG, VAAC and the CFB are beginning the process of collaborating with NYC's tech community to envision a platform that provides a civic space for neighbors to organize online, linking the formal democratic process directly to our social networks, and giving every New Yorker an equal voice in the conversation about our city's future.

WHY VOTE?

Panel Participants

Adrienne Kivelson,
League of Women Voters

Rachel Bishop,
League of Young Voters

Chung-Wha Hong,
NY Immigration Coalition

Lucia Gomez-Jimenez,
Director, La Fuente

Larry Norden,
Brennan Center for Justice

Michael DuHaime,
political consultant (R)

Doug Forand,
political consultant (D)

One basic assumption is that people connect with voting through the issues that matter in their everyday lives. In a 21st century democracy, every New Yorker should have the tools to access and share information about voting, government, and public issues from an independent source through their online social networks and mobile phones.

In January 2012, DAWG invited technology innovators to brainstorm about how technology can support this vision of a 21st century democracy. Invitees brought friends, and altogether about two dozen people took part. The attendees represented a strong cross-section of the intersection of technology, democracy, and academia, including representatives from Google, Tumblr, Foursquare, NY Tech Meet-up, Digital Democracy, the Pew Center on the States, OpenPlans, Civic Commons, and Code for America, and technologists who had worked with the military, federal, and local government.

LEVERAGING PARTNERSHIPS

New York City has a voting-age population of over six million across five boroughs, of whom nearly half are not registered to vote.² Engaging these New Yorkers, unregistered and registered, and motivating them to vote is a monumental task which one agency cannot accomplish on its own. Therefore, the CFB has developed and will continue to cultivate partnerships with public and private organizations to exponentially increase its voter engagement reach and effectiveness. Getting people to register is always the first step in getting them to vote. The CFB asks every new partner to improve its voter registration efforts, and provides tools to help them do so. Dozens of public and private organizations are already working with the CFB, and more organizations join each month, doing their part to increase voter registration, awareness, and participation amongst their constituents, employees, and customers by:

- ◆ Holding voter registration drives
- ◆ Making voter registration forms and poll worker applications available at their offices and events
- ◆ Emailing voter registration forms to their clients and staff
- ◆ Posting Voter Spotlights on their websites, which provide links to timely voter information
- ◆ Inviting the NYC Youth Poet Laureate (YPL) or a YPL ambassador to perform a voting-themed poem at their event.
- ◆ Hosting a demonstration of the new voting procedures
- ◆ Distributing Voter Guides
- ◆ Adding a link to NYC Votes! (www.nyccfb.info/nycvotes) on their website and promoting the site as a source for voting information in their printed materials.

The CFB provides assistance and tools to these partners, including:

- ◆ **Voter Awareness Kits.** The CFB provides partners with kits to support their voter outreach activities, including tips for hosting a successful voter registration drive, voter registration

2 Thom File and Sarah Crissey, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008," United States Census Bureau, May 2010, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p20-562.pdf>

forms, poll worker applications, “Register Here” signs, and *Registering & Voting in NYC* pamphlets in multiple languages. Currently 40 partners are using our kits in their voter outreach efforts.

- ◆ **Voter Spotlights.** The CFB produces and distributes graphics highlighting important election dates and linking to content on the CFB website for partners to place on their homepage. So far, 23 partners are featuring the Voter Spotlight on their websites, which collectively receive millions of hits each year. These initial partners are mostly other government agencies, with efforts underway to partner with private organizations and corporations to reach a vast new audience. The city’s main website, NYC.gov, which has 35,000 visitors per day, prominently displays these spotlights on its homepage prior to important election deadlines.
- ◆ **Train-the-Trainer sessions.** Voter Assistance Unit staff teaches individuals from partner groups how to perform outreach in their communities. These classes include training on how to identify their audience, conduct voter registration drives, and raise voter awareness. Partners take these lessons back to share with others in their organizations.
- ◆ **Feature Articles.** The CFB is developing short articles about voting that organizations can publish in their newsletters and e-communications. To date, the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation has published an article on its intranet, and other agencies are planning to use this resource in the coming months.
- ◆ **Community Meetings.** CFB staff hosts meetings at its offices and out in the community, bringing civic groups and community leaders together to discuss how voter engagement and outreach can become part of their agenda. In addition, the CFB sends staff to speak to groups about how they can get involved in voter engagement upon request. Several of these were held for the special election and this service is growing as outreach efforts expand.



Some organizations have unique expertise, capabilities, or constituencies that make them perfect partners for targeted voter outreach. The CFB works with these partners to develop programs, campaigns, and sponsorship opportunities that leverage their unique resources. These efforts are highlighted throughout this report.

District 28/Special Elections

The CFB and VAAC hit the ground running in 2011. There were a number of special elections in Queens and Brooklyn including Congressional District 9 following the resignation of Congressman Anthony Weiner, Queens Assembly Districts 23 and 27, and a City Council race in District 28. These “off-schedule” elections are often under the radar for voters, so the CFB created a comprehensive voter engagement plan to raise voter awareness. The CFB saw an opportunity to try some grassroots programming to get the word out about these races and provide voters with information about the candidates so they could make an informed choice at the polls. These new community-based outreach opportunities can be replicated for elections in 2012 and 2013.

Numerous community groups partnered with us to raise awareness of the special elections in Queens, including:

Jacqueline Boyce,
Community Board 12

Derek Johnson,
*Neighborhood Housing
of South Jamaica*

Sarah Capers,
*Ruby S. Couche “Big Sister”
Educational Action & Service
Center, Inc.*

Luis Mares,
Jamaica YMCA

Brenda Rivera,
*Jamaica Service Program
for Older Adults*

Ella Smith,
*United Neighbors Civic
Association of Jamaica, Inc.*

Greg Mays,
A Better Jamaica

Wynelle Jackson,
*National Sorority of
Phi Delta Kappa, Inc.*

James Heyliger,
Ameny, Inc.

Tyra Emerson,
Cultural Collaborative Jamaica

Stephen S. Jones,
Candidate for City Council

Everly Brown,
Candidate for District Attorney

Vishal Persaud,
Queens Courier

Queens Public Television (QPTV) has a longstanding commitment to informing Queens residents about local elections. The CFB partnered with QPTV to produce a Video Voter Guide (VVG) for Council District 28. All the candidates taped two-minute statements for the VVG, which aired nine times before the primary election on the QPTV’s Time Warner Cable, RCN, and Verizon FIOS channels. The candidate videos and transcripts in four languages were incorporated into the CFB’s [online Voter Guide](#). In addition, 47,000 printed voter guides covering this Council race were distributed to voters in the 28th district.

The CFB also assisted QPTV and the *Queens Courier* in their production of a Candidate Forum for each of the four Queens elections. These Forums aired in early September and gave Queens voters a rare opportunity to hear the candidates’ views in these low-visibility elections. To bolster awareness of these Forums, over 110 Queens-based organizations were invited to be part of the live audience. The broadcast schedule was promoted by the Queens partners, in the City Calendar, and on NYC.gov. Voters who didn’t see the Forums on TV could watch the videos on QPTV’s website, www.qptv.org.

The CFB also invited organizations in Queens to help raise awareness of these elections. Thirteen potential partners attended the CFB’s community meeting, where Voter Awareness Kits and voter education materials were distributed and a follow-up training was scheduled. CFB staff brainstormed with representatives of these local groups on how they could reach their constituents and encouraged them to utilize the CFB tools to assist with voter registration drives and education.

For the first time, the CFB’s online Voter Guide covered not just the City Council race, but also the state and congressional special elections in Queens, Manhattan, and Brooklyn, with links to campaign websites and social media accounts, as well as candidate profiles obtained from nonpartisan sources such as Vote 411. According to the CFB’s website analytics, the online 28th Council District Primary Guide had over 8,000 unique page views, and the Congressional and State Special Elections section had nearly 1,900 unique page views.

Although voter turnout was still low, these combined efforts raised voter awareness and created a model for future non-citywide elections.

Youth Voters

Reaching youth voters is key to increasing voter participation in the future.

According to the United States Census Bureau, 57 percent of United States citizens aged 18–24 were registered to vote in 2008, compared with 71 percent of the general population, and less than 50 percent of 18–24 year olds voted in the two most recent presidential elections.³ Both nationally and within New York State, less than 25 percent of 18–24 year old citizens voted in the 2010 midterm election.⁴

Many youth voter registration programs target college students, but 43 percent of US citizens have no college experience. Looking at 18–24 year olds, only 27 percent of non-high school graduates and 40 percent of high school graduates voted in 2008, compared with over 70 percent of their peers that have a bachelor's degree or greater.⁵ Voter engagement programs that target youth while they are still in high school can be a vital step to improving youth participation and engagement in American democracy.

The CFB is committed to improving registration and participation among New York City youth. One effort targeting this demographic is the Youth Poet Laureate (YPL) program for city teens. YPL was developed in partnership with Urban Word NYC, a nonprofit organization dedicated to youth development and leadership through free and uncensored writing, college prep, and performance opportunities. The YPL program has three main elements: workshops to hone writing skills and teach leadership; community service requirements; and a voter-themed poetry competition for the title NYC Youth Poet Laureate.

Selecting the Youth Poet Laureate, however, is just a first step. Throughout the year, the Youth Poet Laureate performs throughout the city to raise civic awareness.

Queens Public Television (QPTV) and the Queens Courier provided invaluable assistance by producing the Video Voter Guide and Candidate Forums that aired on QPTV before the September election. The CFB wishes to thank:

QPTV

Daniel Leone,
Executive Director

Clifford Jacobs,
Deputy Executive Director

Roslyn Nieves,
*Community Development
Manager*

Emilia Paradela,
*Community Development
Assistant*

Madeline Johnson,
Community Relations Director

Queens Courier

Victoria Schneps-Yunis,
Publisher

Vishal Persaud,
Reporter and Writer

3 Thom File and Sarah Crissey, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008," United States Census Bureau, May 2010, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p20-562.pdf>

4 The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, "The Youth Vote in 2010: Final Estimates Based on Census Data," Tufts University Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, April 2011, <http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/The-CPS-youth-vote-2010-FS-FINAL1.pdf>

5 Thom File and Sarah Crissey, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008," United States Census Bureau, May 2010, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p20-562.pdf>

2012 NYC Youth Poet Laureate Program

Partners

Urban Word NYC

Michael Cirelli,
Executive Director

Jamila Lyiscott,
Program Associate

Mikal Amin Lee,
Program Director

Penmanship Books

Sponsors

AT&T

Con Edison Inc.

HOT 97

The Rockefeller Group

Skullcandy

Youth Poet Laureate

Ishmael “Ish” Islam

Youth Poet Ambassadors

Amani Breanna Alexander

Lauren Anderson

Gabriel Barralaga

Yashira Castillo

David Fasanya

Nataja Flood

Jah-don “J-D” Hart

Ashley Johnson

Mercedes Ortiz

Sydney Parsons

Giovanni Quattrochi

Amanda Quiles

Desiree “Dizzy” Williams

Because a single poet can only reach so many people, in 2011, the CFB asked all 11 competition finalists to serve alongside Justin Long Moton, the 2011 Youth Poet Laureate, as “Youth Poet Ambassadors.” With 12 teen poets ready to spread the message of civic engagement, the CFB reached out to partner organizations that work with youth to expand performance opportunities at schools, bookstores, libraries, and other special events. This broader visibility kept the youth poets engaged in the goals of the program long after the competition was over. The 2011 YPL team has energized and inspired thousands of teens at events such as:

- ◆ Poem in Your Pocket Day at Bryant Park (over 2,500 students)
- ◆ NYC Department of Youth & Community Development’s Annual Youth Conference (500 students)
- ◆ Global Kids (a not-for-profit partner) Global Media and Technology Conference (300 students)
- ◆ Library tour (100 attendees across five appearances)
- ◆ Performances at the High School of Art and Design (125 students)
- ◆ Performance at Barnes & Noble (25 attendees)



2012 Youth Poet Laureate Ishmael “Ish” Islam at the YPL Final Slam

This year's 3rd annual YPL program exceeded expectations, with 66 teens participating in workshop, 25 advancing to the semifinal round, and 14 competing for the 2012 YPL title. Longtime sponsors Con Edison and AT&T were joined by HOT 97, and Skull Candy provided promotional materials. Over 250 people attended the final slam on November 5, 2011. Ishmael "Ish" Islam was named the 2012 NYC Youth Poet Laureate for his winning poem, "Daydreaming at the Voting Booth." The newly crowned Youth Poet Laureate and Ambassadors are getting ready for Poetry Month in April 2012, planning a high school voter registration tour, a second annual Public Library tour, a new Parks & Recreation tour with outdoor performances in city parks and at their recreation centers throughout the summer of 2012, and speaking engagements at schools and events around the city, energizing their peers about the importance of civic involvement.



left to right: Onida Coward Mayers, Jane Kalmus, Annette Freeman, Jason Hayes, Ishmael "Ish" Islam, Michael Cirelli, Art Chang, Amy Loprest

Military Voters

New York has a large and diverse population of service men and women, including active duty personnel, reservists, and veterans. New York is the third largest military state with 90,000 residents who are in the service. Approximately a third of these are from New York City.

This is an important and growing constituency for voter assistance, especially those just returning to the New York area. The CFB and its new partner, the NYC Mayor's Office of Veterans' Affairs (MOVA), are working together to provide voter assistance and information to this community. Initial projects include partnering with the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) at the United States Department of Defense to:

- ◆ Disseminate voting information to our returning troops, veterans, and NYC active duty soldiers deployed overseas and stateside.
- ◆ Use existing public service announcements produced by the armed forces to promote and encourage voting under the NYC Votes! logo. MOVA and CFB/VAAC will send a web message to military personnel returning to the NY area, welcoming them home and providing them with information on registering and voting.
- ◆ Hold a voter drive and information event onboard a Navy vessel during 2012 Fleet Week (May 23–30).
- ◆ Link to the CFB's online Voter Guide to provide NYC military personnel with one-click access to information on their local elections and candidates.

Your Vote Counts Community Partners

100 Black Women

AARP

Association for a
Better New York

Care for the Homeless

Chinese American
Voters Federation

Coalition of 100
Black Women

City University of New York

Delta Sigma Theta

Emerald Isle
Immigration Center

League of Women Voters

National Latina Institute

New York Institute
of Technology

New York Organ
Donor Network

The Partnership for
the Homeless

Transit Workers Union

Women's City Club

New Citizens

The Voter Assistance Unit engages in regular outreach to new citizens at naturalization ceremonies in Manhattan through its partnership with the United States Department of Homeland Security to:

- ◆ Present a motivational message on the importance of voting
- ◆ Assist new citizens in completing their voter registration forms
- ◆ Offer poll worker applications
- ◆ Distribute voting materials
- ◆ Bring bilingual staff members whenever possible to provide language assistance in Spanish, Chinese, and Russian.

Beginning in October 2011, CFB staff were joined by members of the NYC Commission on Human Rights at these ceremonies to increase our ability to provide one-on-one assistance. This year, CFB staff participated in 14 ceremonies, registered over 1,300 new voters, and collected 115 poll worker applicants. The CFB will continue to attend naturalization and swearing-in events.

Limited English Proficiency Voters

Many of New York's citizens have limited proficiency in English. For many years, the CFB has provided the Voter Guide in Spanish, Chinese, and Korean. To better assist these communities and in partnership with local civic groups, the CFB is increasing the voter materials translated into these languages. Voter Awareness Kits provided to our partners now include Spanish forms and signage, with Chinese and Korean versions available on request. Based on census data and the language requirements of the Voting Rights Act, the CFB will soon begin providing voter materials in Bengali, and, based on testimony from VAAC's December 2011 public hearing, is exploring adding Russian translations.

Women Voters

Although NYC women vote in slightly higher numbers than men, on average, fewer than one in four eligible women voted in the 2010 general election.⁶

Each year, the Mayor's Commission on Women's Issues (CWI) chooses a theme for its efforts to engage women. In an effort to address participation by women voters, the CFB reached out to CWI to make voting its theme for this year. Working in partnership, CWI, NBC 4 New York/Telemundo 47 New York, and the CFB developed a year-long multimedia and community outreach campaign aimed at increasing voting among women in New York City. The "Your Vote Counts" campaign was launched at an event at Gracie Mansion on March 6, 2012.

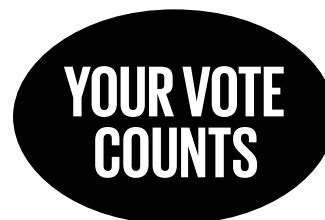
Your Vote Counts sends a positive message on the importance of voting. NBC 4 New York/Telemundo 47 New York created public service announcements (PSAs) of various lengths featuring women stating why voting is important to them and urging all women to "make their voices heard." The PSAs are being aired in English and Spanish on NBC regularly during popular programs including *The Today Show*. The CFB developed a website, www.yourvotecountsnyc.com, which provides comprehensive sources for voter information. Links to this site are featured on NYC.gov and the other partners' websites. Print ads, including those on bus shelters, and social media will also be part of promoting Your Vote Counts.

To further this campaign, numerous city agencies and civic organizations have joined the CFB as community partners and will include voter registration information and assistance at all their events. Since March, 16 partners have signed on.

In commemoration of Women's Equality Day on August 26, 2012, community partners will hold voter registration drives throughout the city. On September 25th, in commemoration of National Voter Registration Day, there will be an additional push by all partners to get women registered and to begin a "get out the vote" initiative. The growing list of community partners and events is available at www.yourvotecountsnyc.com.



NBC 4 New York and Telemundo 47 New York aired the Your Vote Counts PSA 60 times during the month of March. The PSAs were shown regularly during popular shows including *The Today Show*, *Meet the Press* and *Saturday Night Live*.



⁶ Data from the Board of Elections in the City of New York.

Poll Worker Recruitment

Staffing polling sites with qualified, well-trained poll workers is a significant challenge.⁷ The New York City Board of Elections (BOE) reached out to the CFB for assistance in recruiting poll workers and interpreters. CFB responded by incorporating election worker recruitment as part of all its voter engagement activities, including:

- ◆ Adding the poll worker application to its Voter Awareness Kits
- ◆ Providing these applications at voter registration drives
- ◆ Encouraging new citizens at naturalization ceremonies to apply to be poll workers and/or interpreters.
- ◆ Making community groups and our partners aware of this opportunity so they can spread the word to their constituents

LEVERAGING DATA

The CFB's voter assistance efforts aim to increase voting by all New Yorkers. However, the NYC Charter mandates that the CFB focus particular attention on underrepresented groups of voters. The 2010 U.S. Census provides data that will allow in-depth analysis of New York City's voting population, test long-accepted hypotheses, and identify other demographic factors that affect voting in New York City. The CFB reached out to New York University's Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service to leverage its students' expertise and conduct a Capstone project analyzing this data. The results of their work will be released later this year and will help the CFB better target its education and outreach programs.

COMING NEXT YEAR

With important state and national elections on the ballot, 2012 requires exponential growth in our outreach efforts. Longstanding programs will be expanded and enhanced with the help of our existing partners. New partnerships and exciting new endeavors will launch this year, including:

- ◆ **Taxi TV.** The CFB is working with the NYC Taxi & Limousine Commission on two upcoming Taxi TV initiatives:
 - On-screen reminders to vote on the days leading up to election days.
 - A survey about voting that taxi riders can take as they ride to their destination which will air on each election day in 2012.

⁷ "Annual Report 2010," Board of Elections in the City of New York, <http://vote.nyc.ny.us/pdf/documents/boe/AnnualReports/BOEAnnualReport10.pdf>

- ◆ **Incite Votes.** In 2012, Incite New York, the community outreach arm of HOT 97 and 98.7 Kiss FM, launched “Incite Votes”, a year-long campaign targeting 18–24 year olds living in urban communities. HOT 97 joined the 2012 YPL program as a sponsor and were so energized by the commitment of these teens and galvanized by the data on low participation by youth voters that they have committed to making youth voting a priority for their 2012 community programming. With HOT 97’s listenership of almost 2.5 million over the age of 18, it has the power to reach this important demographic on a significant scale. The Director of Voter Assistance, Onida Coward Mayers, chairs the Incite Votes Advisory Board.
- ◆ **Voting rights film.** The NYC Commission on Human Rights, inspired by their participation with the CFB in registering new citizens at naturalization ceremonies, is creating a Human & Voting Rights video to be played in its lobbies and on its website.
- ◆ **Rock the Vote.** The CFB is discussing partnership opportunities with this national organization that mobilizes youth voters.

◆ **Voto Latino.** The CFB has partnered with Voto Latino, a next-generation, constituency based organization that empowers American Latinos to claim a better future by voting. The CFB sought this partnership to help Voto Latino expand its grass roots efforts in New York City. On April 13–16, 2012, the NYC Votes! Youth Team, a delegation from CUNY and the CFB—led by CFB Youth Voter Coordinator Chyann Sapp—attended Voto Latino’s Youth Power Summit in Los Angeles. The team took first place for creating the best voter registration action plan. Ms. Sapp presented on a panel called “Activism: Civics 101,” and 2012 Youth Poet Laureate Ishmael Islam performed for the entire assembly of national student leaders. The CFB will continue to partner with Voto Latino to implement the action plan in NYC and coordinate activities for National Voter Registration Day.



NYC Votes! Youth Team members Kristian Brown, Chyann Sapp, Ishmael “Ish” Islam, and Christopher Walker, with Voto Latino co-founder, Rosario Dawson (2nd from left)

- ◆ **Promoting NYC Votes! and VAAC.** Numerous partners are adding the NYC Votes! logo and website address to their materials, including posters, brochures, and bumper stickers, which will greatly increase the visibility and awareness of this brand. For example, the NYC Department of Environmental Protection is producing and placing NYC Votes! bumper stickers on its fleet of 480 vehicles.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LEGISLATIVE PROPOSALS

Outdated laws and bureaucratic requirements stand as obstacles to simpler, more accessible voting. “Voter registration in the United States largely reflects its 19th century origins and has not kept pace with advancing technology and a mobile society,” according to a report by the Pew Center on the States.⁸ VAAC supports the following recommendations and legislative proposals to make registration and voting more accessible to all.

I. Make Voter Registration Easier

Enable Online Registration

People are used to conducting their personal business online. Instant voter registration over the Internet would be more convenient for many New Yorkers. Paperless voter registration also would be cost-effective and efficient, decreasing printing, mailing and distribution costs. In addition, processing paper registrations can introduce errors; the Pew Center report notes that one in eight voter registrations are invalid or inaccurate.⁹

Several states have already introduced online registration: Arizona, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. Some use information from driver’s license records or other government data sources to determine voter eligibility.¹⁰ In some states, voter registrations are accepted using signatures already on file with the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV); new technologies could also allow voters to register using a touch-screen device to create a signature.¹¹

Permit Voters to Update their Registration Information Online

Indiana, Louisiana, Utah and Washington give voters the ability to update their registration information, such as their name or address, online.¹²

An estimated 12 percent of New York City residents of voting age move each year.¹³ To change their address with the BOE, New York voters must print, fill out, and mail a new registration form—a long and tedious process. Although New Yorkers who move may vote by affidavit ballot at their new polling place, they may not receive information about changes to their poll site or candidates running in their district. Allowing voters to directly update their information online would simplify the process for voters and the BOE, while keeping the voter rolls more accurate.

8 “Inaccurate, Costly, and Inefficient. Evidence that America’s Voter Registration System Needs an Upgrade,” The Pew Center on the States, http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Pew_Upgrading_Voter_Registration.pdf

9 Adam Liptak, “Voter Rolls are Rife with Inaccuracies, Report Finds,” *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/14/us/politics/us-voter-registration-rolls-are-in-disarray-pew-report-finds.html>

10 Christopher Ponoroff, “Voter Registration in a Digital Age,” Brennan Center for Justice, http://brennan.3cdn.net/806ab5ea23fde7c261_n1m6b1s4z.pdf

11 Nick Judd, “New Mobile Voter Registration Technology Could Bridge Online-Offline Gap,” Tech President, <http://techpresident.com/news/21768/new-mobile-voter-registration-technology-could-bridge-online-offline-gap>

12 See individual state election websites for specific rules.

13 United States Census, American Community Survey 5-year estimate for 2006–2010, factfinder.census.gov

Online registration is cost-effective. On average, online registration costs three cents to process; the average paper registration costs 83 cents. In Maricopa County, Arizona, \$1 million was saved over five years by simply using an online voter registration system.¹⁴

Internet-based registration is notably popular among younger voters. In Washington, nearly a third of online registrants in 2008 were between the ages of 18 and 24. Offering online registration is likely to increase registration by younger New Yorkers.

Implement Automated Voter Registration

Government agencies with a broad customer base, such as the DMV or a social service office, are able to pass through voter information to election administrators without requiring the applicant to complete a separate form. Voter registrations have increased in states with automated voter registrations through DMVs.¹⁵ Automated registrations have also proven to be more accurate than paper ones. Assembly Member Brian Kavanagh (D-Manhattan) has introduced legislation in the New York State Assembly to enact automatic voter registration through the state Department of Motor Vehicles and Department of Taxation and Finance. VAAC supports this proposal as a way to get more New Yorkers on the voting rolls.¹⁶

Pre-register Youth Voters

Efforts to engage young people before they turn 18 years old, through programs like the CFB's Youth Poet Laureate competition, can be effective at promoting a lifetime of voting and civic engagement. Allowing young people to register early, when this outreach is fresh in their minds, could help ensure they register and participate as voters. Assembly Member Kavanagh introduced a proposal to allow 16-year-olds to pre-register to vote, either at the Board of Elections or the Department of Motor Vehicles.¹⁷ Pre-registered voters would be placed automatically on the active voter rolls when they turn 18. The bill also would allow pre-registered 17-year-olds to vote in primary elections if they will be 18 by the date of the general election.

Allow Same-Day Registration

Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and Washington, DC allow unregistered residents to register and vote on Election Day by going to their assigned poll site with proof of residence and a photo ID. In New York State, would-be voters need to mail in a completed voter registration form at least 25 days before an election.¹⁸ This long lead time requires potential voters to be familiar with the deadlines or rules for registering well in advance of when many people are thinking about an election.

14 "Inaccurate, Costly, and Inefficient. Evidence that America's Voter Registration System Needs an Upgrade," The Pew Center on the States, http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Pew_Upgrading_Voter_Registration.pdf

15 Christopher Ponoroff, "Voter Registration in a Digital Age," Brennan Center for Justice, http://brennan.3cdn.net/806ab5ea23fde7c261_n1m6b1s4z.pdf

16 Bill #A1727-A.

17 Bill #A7440.

18 "Registration & Voting," Board of Elections in the City of New York, <http://www.vote.nyc.ny.us/pdf/documents/boe/fourlanguages/registrationandvotingenglish.pdf>

An analysis of the 2010 election by the United States Election Project at George Mason University found that turnout among the eight states that offer same-day voter registration averaged above 50 percent, compared to the national average of 41 percent. Turnout in New York State was 35.5 percent for the 2010 general election.¹⁹

II. Improve the Voting Experience

Implement Early & No-Excuse Absentee Voting

Currently, 32 states offer citizens the opportunity to vote in person prior to Election Day.²⁰ The time period to cast a vote varies from state to state, with some states having the option to vote as early as 45 days before the election.

The only form of early voting available to New Yorkers is by absentee ballot, either in person at their Board of Elections Borough office or by mail, which is limited to those who have provided an excuse for why they cannot vote at their poll site on Election Day. (27 states offer a “no-excuse” absentee/early voting option.)

In the 2010 general election, over 19 million people throughout the United States voted early, either by mail or in person—21 percent of all voters cast an early vote.²¹ But in New York State, only 2.5 percent of the votes cast were absentee.

Improve the Electronic Voting System

Electronic voting machines used in New York City elections may not sufficiently warn voters when their ballot has not been completed correctly. When a ballot is marked with two votes for the same office (i.e., an “overvote”) or contains stray marks outside the ovals, the machine gives voters the option to submit their ballot, even though the mistake will invalidate their vote. The error message can be easily misunderstood. “Instead of returning the ballot, as is done in many other jurisdictions,” a report by the Brennan Center explained, “the ballots were retained and the machine displayed a screen message using complex election jargon that gave voters misleading cues about their options. In the 2010 election, this confusing message led to as many as 20,000 lost votes in the [New York State] governor’s contest alone and as many as 60,000 lost votes across all contests.”²²

19 Michael P. McDonald, “2010 General Election Turnout Rates,” United States Elections Project, March 5, 2012, http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2010G.html

20 “Absentee and Early Voting,” National Conference of State Legislatures, <http://www.ncsl.org/legislatures-elections/elections/absentee-and-early-voting.aspx#early>

21 Michael P. McDonald, “2010 Early Voting,” United States Elections Project, March 5, 2012, http://elections.gmu.edu/early_vote_2010.html

22 ReformNY, “Poor Design Leads to Lost Votes,” Brennan Center for Justice, December 7, 2011, http://www.brennancenter.org/blog/archives/poor_design_leads_to_lost_votes/

A simple solution would be to reject overvoted ballots automatically, a process that is as simple as checking a box in the setup file in these systems, and would not require a long testing process.²³ Voters can then receive and fill out a new ballot.

The BOE process for tallying votes on election night can also be improved by changing their election night procedures to fully utilize the capabilities of the voting machines. Nassau County uses the same voting machines as New York City, but uses the machines' flash drives to tally the votes quickly and accurately via computer. Rather than using the flash drives, the City BOE tallies votes by hand, using paper printouts generated by each scanner machine. Using the available technology to compile the votes would make accurate vote totals available to the public more quickly.

Consolidate the Federal and State Primary Election Dates

In 2012, there will be three separate primary elections in New York: the April presidential primary, the June Congressional primary, and the September state primary, as well as the November general election.

The federal Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act requires election administrators to transmit absentee ballots to overseas military voters at least 45 days before a federal election. New York's September primary date is too close to the general election to meet that requirement. When the state legislature failed to reschedule the primary to comply with MOVE, a federal judge ordered that the state's Congressional primaries be held on the fourth Tuesday in June beginning with the 2012 election. However, since the state primary election date hasn't changed, New Yorkers serving abroad may still be unable to cast votes that count in state elections.

The votes of New Yorkers serving overseas must be counted in all elections. Meanwhile, voters in the city should not be obliged to return to the polls four times in one year to make their voices heard. Turnout is likely to suffer and the costs to local Boards of Election will be enormous unless the state legislature consolidates the primary dates.

III. Provide Voters with Better Information

Enable Better Ballot Design

Poor ballot design can confuse and frustrate voters. According to a Brennan Center study, poor ballot design resulted in 60,000 lost votes in New York.²⁴ Current NYS election law contains detailed requirements spread across 30 pages of legislative language that greatly restricts the ability of city and state election officials to design ballots more logically and clearly.

Assembly Member Kavanagh testified at VAAC's December 2011 post-election hearing about several of his proposals on this issue, including a wide-ranging Voter Friendly Ballot Act, which is supported

23 "New York's New Voting System Could Cost Tens of Thousands of Lost Votes," Brennan Center for Justice, http://www.brennancenter.org/content/resource/New_Yorks_New_Voting_System_Procedure_Could_Cost_Tens_of_Thousands_of_/

24 Lawrence Norden and Sundeep Iyer, "Design Deficiencies and Lost Votes," Brennan Center for Justice, http://brennan.3cdn.net/6fbbc223d181f475a4_fkm6ixf0v.pdf

by the Brennan Center and AIGA, the professional association for design.²⁵ “Ballot design in New York,” he told the Committee, “currently does not represent the best practices in this area.”²⁶

The City BOE has also made several specific proposals to add some flexibility to the law. Instead of mandating the width of each column on the ballot, they would require only that names be printed in a uniform size. They would permit the use of mixed-case letters to print candidates’ names; clarify the instructions to voters; use bold lines to separate contests on the ballot; allow write-in spaces to be presented within a dedicated column; and designate each party’s primary with a different color.²⁷

The Federal Election Administration Commission, which administers the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), provides ballot design guidance for legislators and election officials on its website, www.eac.gov. Other published research provides specific suggestions for better ballot design.^{28, 29}

Implement Email Notifications to Voters

City legislation introduced by Council Member Inez Dickens and supported by Citizens Union would require the CFB to provide email notifications regarding upcoming significant dates related to voting for local, state, and federal elections to prospective voters who have provided their email addresses to the CFB.³⁰

Simplify Distribution of Non-English Voting Materials

The Voting Rights Act mandates that voting material be provided in languages spoken by applicable minority groups.³¹ In New York City, materials must currently be provided throughout the city in Spanish, and in certain areas, in Chinese and Korean. Based on information gathered during the 2010 Census, materials now must also be provided in Bengali in certain areas.

Identifying which voters need language assistance is difficult, and over-distributing these materials is costly. Allowing voters to select their language preference as part of voter registration and maintaining this information in the Board of Elections’ voter database would enable distribution of election materials in the language each voter needs.

25 ReformNY, “The Voter Friendly Ballot Act,” Brennan Center for Justice, June 9, 2011, <http://reformny.blogspot.com/2011/06/voter-friendly-ballot-act.html>

26 Testimony to the NYC Voter Assistance Advisory Committee, Public Hearing, December 12, 2011.

27 Board of Elections in the City of New York, “[Recommended Revisions in the New York State Election Law 2012](#),” p. 4–11.

28 Lawrence Norden, David Kimball, Whitney Quesenbery, and Margaret Chen, “Better Ballots,” Brennan Center for Justice, http://brennan.3cdn.net/d6bd3c56be0d0cc861_hlm6i92vl.pdf

29 David Kimball, “Viewpoint: Dos and Don’ts of Ballot Design,” AEI-Brookings Election Reform Project, <http://www.electionreformproject.org/Resources/314eaad7-6dc9-4dad-b6e4-5daf8f51b79e/r1/Detail.aspx>

30 Intro 0613-2011.

31 “About Language Minority Voting Rights,” http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/vot/sec_203/activ_203.php

Enforce the Law Requiring Voting Materials in Russian

In 2009, an amendment to NYS Election Law was enacted to require that certain election materials be translated into Russian.³² To date, these materials have not yet been created. During VAAC's 2011 Post-Election Hearing, members of the Russian-American community advocated for enforcement of this law.

IV. Block Efforts to Enact a Voter ID Requirement

Before 2011, only two states required citizens to show photo ID as a condition of voting. Since then, at least 34 states have introduced bills to enact a photo ID requirement; bills were signed into law in eight states.³³ In New York, four bills have been introduced in the current session of the State Assembly that would require New Yorkers to produce photo ID at the polls.³⁴

Proven cases of absentee ballot fraud, though relatively few and far between, do exist. Elections must be conducted honestly, but in a state that consistently ranks nearly last in the nation in turnout, the lack of voter interest and participation is a much more serious and pervasive challenge. Our focus is on finding ways to remove obstacles to voting, not to add them.

CONCLUSION

An inclusive, active democracy requires educated and empowered voters. To that end, VAAC and the CFB are partnering with the technology community, grassroots activists, and government agencies to reach and engage as many New Yorkers as possible. Together we are also raising our voices to demand changes to outdated New York State laws and bureaucratic requirements that present serious obstacles to a simpler, more accessible voting experience. With a Presidential election in the coming year, the stakes could not be higher. For voters seeking to get involved, VAAC and the CFB will be there to help educate them, engage them, and hopefully inspire them to stay active in our political process long after November.

32 New York State Election Law §3-506.

33 For more background, see Wendy R. Weiser and Lawrence Norden, "Voting Law Changes in 2012," Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, October 2011. See also an appendix to the report updated in December 2011, accessible at http://brennan.3cdn.net/295b370cb7c411bdd0_g0m6b524z.pdf

34 Each of the four bills has been referred to the Election Law Committee. The most recent was introduced January 2012 by Republican Assemblyman Steve Katz, who declared in a press release that he was "prompted to author and introduce this original legislation after the highly-publicized case of widespread voter fraud in Troy, New York went to trial earlier this year." See <http://assembly.state.ny.us/mem/Steve-Katz/story/46219/>.