



New York City Campaign Finance Board

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Testimony of Art Chang Chairman, Voter Assistance Advisory Committee New York City Campaign Finance Board

**City Council Committee on Governmental Operations
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Good afternoon, Chair Brewer and members of the committee. I am Art Chang, chair of the New York City Campaign Finance Board's Voter Assistance Advisory Committee, and I am joined today by Amy Loprest, Executive Director of the CFB.

I last appeared in front of this committee before the June 26 elections, and spoke in support of a change to the law that would improve the way we count votes on Election Night, making common-sense use of the technology we possess.

Quick and accurate reporting of the preliminary election results would provide a level of transparency and comfort that is critical for a relatively new voting system that still confounds many New Yorkers.

Driven by advancing technology, news is reaching its audience at an ever-increasing speed. Most of us are accustomed to receiving news and information practically in real time. A good, speedy count would instill confidence that the system works.

Unfortunately, the June primaries showed us what can happen when the initial reporting for election results is neither quick nor accurate. In Congressional District 13, the byzantine paper-scissors-and-pencil process used to tally our machine-scanned votes led to days of confusion.

Because of transcription errors, many precincts reported zero votes cast in the unofficial count. Results from many of those precincts were still unavailable to the public more than two days after the polls closed.

Without timely or reliable information available, partisans filled the vacuum with speculation. The confusion led to weeks of accusations, court filings, and press conferences before the final, official hand count was concluded.

The problem was not limited in scope to this single election. Other districts, with elections that were not nearly as competitive, saw similar disparities between the Election Night tallies and the official count of the votes cast on Election Day.

Along with public officials and good government advocates, in July we wrote to the Board of Elections to urge that they cast aside the illogical, six-step process responsible for these flawed counts.

To its credit, the Board recognized the problem. They identified changes to their process that do not require a change to the law, and they have designed a solution that uses the flash drives from the ballot scanning machines to compile the initial count. We commend them for it.

We are hopeful the new process will provide results that are delivered in a more accurate and efficient manner.

Providing a timely and reliable count, however, is only one of several systemic challenges facing our election system. This solution should not prevent the Board from reviewing its operations thoroughly as it prepares for our elections this fall.

The overarching, fundamental problem remains to be addressed: most New Yorkers aren't voting.

Collectively, turnout among registered voters in the June primaries was below ten percent. Just four percent of registered Republicans in New York City voted in the primary for U.S. Senate. Even in the most publicized and hotly contested race among the Democratic Congressional primaries, turnout was a mere 15 percent.

The structural challenges are clear. These primaries were the first time in 40 years that New Yorkers have voted in June.

But if 85 percent of registered voters are ignoring even the most compelling elections, we simply need to be working harder to engage New Yorkers in civic life.

Technology can and should play a greater role. We should amend the law so that New Yorkers can register to vote and update their voter information online. States with online voter registration have brought more voters, especially young adults, onto the rolls.

If voters can update their information online, New Yorkers who change addresses can continue to receive the information they need to stay engaged. A study conducted for the CFB by students at NYU's Wagner School of Public Service found that residential mobility was a key factor that can keep New Yorkers from voting.

Many New Yorkers want to be active participants in their communities. They are seeking information about elections, but don't know where to turn.

When good information is not readily available, bad information can fill the void. At our meeting of the Voter Assistance Advisory Committee earlier this week, we learned about misinformation circulating via social media and through church bulletins, telling New Yorkers that they need to re-register if they haven't voted since 2008. This is untrue, and we are working with our partners to counter this message.

Voters can easily check their registration status through an online Voter Lookup tool created by the State Board of Elections. We've posted the link to this simple tool on our Twitter feed (@NYCVotes), our Facebook page, and on our website, and we hope you will help us spread this message.

We will continue seeking to develop new channels of information for New Yorkers to receive official, non-partisan information about the political process.

Our Voter Assistance staff and summer interns are out every day in communities across the five boroughs, registering new voters at events of all kinds. They are collecting "Voter Pledge" cards from New Yorkers, with a promise to contact them with reminders about election dates.

We are working with Code for Change, a program started by NYU's Wagner School, to develop online and mobile tools that will help provide more New Yorkers with authoritative information about the political process at their fingertips—including comprehensive information about the elections and the candidates seeking their votes.

We know that more can be done, and we stand ready to work with the Council, the Board of Elections, and anyone who's interested to ensure New Yorkers stay informed and involved as this fall's elections grow near. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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