



**Voter Assistance Advisory Committee (VAAC) Annual Hearing, December 16, 2013  
Opening Statement, Art Chang, Chairman**

I would like to begin by extending our deep appreciation for the work of all the individuals and organizations who have joined us to celebrate and review the work of the past 12 months.

For those of us working to make it easier for more New Yorkers to become informed, active, and engaged voters, this was a bad-news/good-news election.

**The bad news:** most eligible New Yorkers don't vote.

City government has a greater impact on our lives than any other level of government. The quality of our schools, the safety of our streets, and the landscape of our neighborhoods are all dependent on decisions made in City Hall.

Yet, more than twice as many New Yorkers cast votes for U.S. President than for mayor. Even with wide-open races for all three city-wide offices, fewer than 24 percent of registered Democrats voted in the September primary. In November, for the fourth consecutive election, voter turnout hit a new all-time low for a mayoral general election in New York City; barely 25 percent of all registered voters cast a ballot.

**The good news:** Even with this downward trend, it is clear that this election brought new voters into the political process.

The number of active, registered voters in New York City actually increased since last year's Presidential election, by 51,000. Many of those new voters came into the process to participate in the competitive primary elections; a jump in Democratic Party registrations made up more than 88 percent of the increase. We know from study and experience that new registrants are more likely to follow through and vote. Indeed, even the modest level of participation in the primary elections represented a substantial increase from 2009.

To sustain and increase voter engagement, we need a system that makes it easier for new voters to proceed through each step in the process that begins with registration and ends at their polling place, with a completed, scanned ballot. Together, we must continue striving for a simpler, more responsive, more customer-focused election system.

- New York State election law must be changed to allow for **better ballot design**, so New Yorkers can more easily understand their choices at the polls. The Board

of Elections is seeking ways to increase font size and improve design, but the law must be changed.

- It should be more convenient for New Yorkers to get to the polls. This means following the lead of 32 other states and allowing some form of **early voting** in satellite locations across New York City.
- The state has done a useful and important thing by establishing electronic voter registration through the Department of Motor Vehicles—but only for New Yorkers who possess a state ID. We should build on that success by establishing **universal access to electronic registration**, and creating smart databases that share information with other government agencies to ensure voter records are up to date.

We should also recognize the small but important steps that were made this year towards a more modern, responsive election system.

- Voter registration forms were amended to collect voter email addresses, which is the first step in establishing a more active and interactive relationship between voters and the Board of Elections.
- Election night reporting of the unofficial vote counts was greatly improved, after advocacy over the past 18 months from VAAC and many others.

I would like add to those positive developments the work we've accomplished through VAAC this year. With the assistance of VAAC, the Campaign Finance Board created a brand new campaign for the 2013 election, NYC Votes, which brought together the various strands of its voter education and engagement work under one umbrella.

Tonight, we are celebrating many of our partners who assisted in this important effort; Onida Coward-Mayers, CFB's Director of Voter Assistance, will speak about some of the important work they are doing in communities all across the five boroughs. She and her staff have been tireless in seeking and creating ways for like-minded New Yorkers to advance our mission. I would like to congratulate her, and briefly highlight some of our other significant achievements.

**NYCVotes.org:** We created an innovative mobile tool to help connect New York City voters to the democratic process. NYCVotes.org made it easier for New Yorkers to find their polling places, learn about the candidates on their ballot, and make small contributions to the candidates they support. The project was an historic public-private partnership between the Campaign Finance Board, Pivotal Labs, and Tipping Point Partners. It was a huge success for this election; tens of thousands of New Yorkers used the tool to find their polling place and learn about candidates on the ballot.

**Citywide candidate debates:** NYC Votes held twelve debates among candidates for mayor, public advocate, and comptroller, providing a stage for some of the most dramatic moments of the campaign. The debates were sponsored by media organizations, including WNBC-4, WCBS-2, WNYC Radio, NY1, NY1 Noticias, Telemundo, 1010 WINS, WCBS-880, The Wall Street Journal, Gothamist, El Diario, and civic partners including Citizens Union, Common Cause NY, the Citizens Committee for New York City, the Hispanic Federation, and Transportation Alternatives. As you can imagine, with this impressive array of sponsors the debates were viewed live by hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers, and hundreds of thousands more engaged online through social media.

**Voter Guide:** NYC Votes produced a citywide Voter Guide in print, in video, and online. The print Guide was sent to every household with a registered voter; 3.3 million Guides were printed and mailed for the primary elections, and another 4.2 million for the general election. It is translated into Spanish across the city, and in certain areas, into Chinese, Korean, and—for the first time this year—Bengali. Thanks to the volunteer efforts of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, the Guide was translated into Russian as well. The online edition of the Guide was one of the most-accessed resources on the CFB website. In addition to airing on NYC-TV, the video Guide allowed voters to view statements from the candidates through the online Guide, on the CFB's YouTube page, or via the NYCVotes.org platform. In its various forms, Voter Guide is a valuable resource upon which New York City voters have come to rely.

This year's election has only just concluded, but in just a few months' time another important election year will be upon us. Soon we will be hearing from candidates for state Assembly and Senate, for U.S. Congress, and for governor. We must quickly absorb the lessons of this past election and continue to move forward. I hope what we hear tonight will prod us to take more positive steps towards the modern, efficient, and transparent election system that we deserve.

Thanks again for joining us tonight.

###