



Voter Assistance Advisory Committee

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**Testimony of Art Chang
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New York City Campaign Finance Board**

**Assembly Election Law Committee
November 18, 2015**

Good morning, Chair Cusick and members of the Election Law Committee. I am Art Chang, a member of the New York City Campaign Finance Board, and the Chair of the Board's Voter Assistance Advisory Committee, representing NYC Votes, the Board's voter outreach campaign. I want to thank you all for holding this hearing on how to make voting more accessible for New Yorkers before the start of the 2016 legislative session.

I know you are all aware of the crisis in voter participation in New York State. New Yorkers will have the opportunity to go to the polls *four times* during 2016. If recent turnout figures are any indication, however, most eligible voters will stay home. Year after year, New York State ranks near the bottom in every measure of voter participation.

New York is a national center of innovation in technology, media, and design. Yet when it comes to the most essential functions of our democracy, nearly every other state has passed us by. Our state election law, written for elections held decades ago, badly needs a 21st century upgrade.

As voters nationwide prepare to elect a new president, voting rights will take a prominent place in the national conversation. Now is the time for legislators across New York State to act. I commend this committee for recognizing the urgent need for leadership on voting reform.

For the past two years, NYC Votes has worked with our partners to bring citizens to Albany so that they can meet with their legislators and tell them why voting reform matters. Everyday people have met with dozens of legislators, including many of you on this committee, to share their experiences at the polls and advocate for ways to improve elections

and facilitate participation. This year, we are building on our previous efforts and working with our partners to create a statewide movement: Vote Better NY. We've launched a petition drive advocating for the legislature to pass the Voter Empowerment Act (A5972/S2538A) and early voting. In just a few days, we gathered thousands of signatures from your constituents from all parts of the state. This momentum demonstrates that there is a real desire for reform across New York.

We believe that the first way to improve accessibility to voting is to upgrade our voter registration system. The technology to bring voter registration into the 21st century is readily available. We use it to buy goods and services, learn about the world, manage our finances, and share information with our social circles. Yet for the most part, citizens still register to vote using pen and paper forms.

NYC Votes registers thousands of New Yorkers each year, and we can see the problems this system creates. People might skip or partially

complete fields on a paper form. Others might have handwriting that's illegible. Those paper forms, with their mistakes, omissions, and hard-to-read scribbles, must be passed to local Boards of Elections for the costly, time-consuming, and error-prone process of hand-entering voter registrations into their databases. This creates additional opportunities for typos, other errors, or lost forms. We see too many of our voters who believe that they had registered to vote, only to show up at the polls to find their names are not in the poll book.

We see other pitfalls of relying on pen and paper as well. Nearly 2 million New Yorkers across the state are citizens of voting age, but are not registered to vote. Nearly 1 million of them reside in New York City alone. Additionally, the state has nearly 1 million inactive voters on the rolls. Often, this is due to voters moving and not updating their addresses with the Board of Elections. We have the technology to fix this problem while also eliminating areas for errors or potential fraud.

NYC Votes urges the Election Law Committee to pass the Voter Empowerment Act, which will create more registration opportunities and keep the voter rolls up to date. It will create electronic registration at government agencies that are already collecting all the necessary data to register someone to vote. The bill would allow agencies to seamlessly transmit this data to the state BOE, which would cut down on the errors caused by hand-entering data. Several states are creating these mechanisms at their Departments of Motor Vehicles (DMV), but this bill would take an even more comprehensive approach by designating additional source agencies. Whenever someone completes an applications for services at public assistance agencies or municipal housing authorities, becomes a member of the New York Division of Military and Naval Affairs, or registers for classes at a public university, he or she can consent that this information be used for voter registration purposes.

The Voter Empowerment Act would further create a comprehensive

voter registration system by expanding online voter registration so that voters would not have to be DMV customers to register online. Instead, they could visit the state BOE website and register using a Social Security number just like they already can with paper forms. It will also keep the voter rolls up to date by requiring Boards of Elections that receive notification that a voter has changed his or her address to automatically update the information so that the registration essentially moves with them. As an additional measure, voters would be able to update their voter information, including their addresses, online. Finally, it creates a system that would preregister 16- and 17-year-olds so that their registrations could become active when they turned 18, ensuring that young people can easily enter the political process to become lifelong voters.

NYC Votes also strongly supports early voting. Through our work, we have heard from voters who wanted to make it to the polls on Election Day, but who were not able to vote because they worked long hours at

jobs that were far from their polling locations. Voters in 33 other states are able to cast their ballots in person before Election Day. It is time for New Yorkers to have the same right. Early voting gives voters more opportunities to incorporate voting into their lives and make their voices heard.

By setting a two-week early voting period that includes Saturdays and Sundays, and particularly the weekend before Election Day, we would likely ease long lines and give voters flexibility as they juggle work and family obligations. NYC Votes urges that any early voting legislation under consideration be carefully designed so as not to overburden upstate counties with smaller populations and fewer resources. This could be done by setting a minimum number of polling locations or early voting hours based on population size and ease of access to chosen locations. This will allow voters across the state more flexibility while accounting for local needs.

In addition to these critical changes to voter registration and early voting that must be made legislatively, we ask the committee to look at ways to amend the state constitution to allow for greater flexibility for voter registration. Currently, the state constitution sets the voter registration deadline 10 days in advance of an election. This prevents implementation of same day registration, a reform which is proven to considerably improve voter participation, and is in place in most of the states with the highest turnout. Additionally, the state constitution provides that voters may vote absentee only if they are unable to appear at their polling place on the date of an election due to their absence from their county of residence (or, if residents of the city of New York, from the city), or due to illness or physical disability. Removing these provisions to allow no-excuse absentee voting would allow voters with difficulty making it to the polls to cast their ballot and mail it in — a provision critical for our ever-increasing number of senior citizens. This would also allow upstate counties even greater flexibility in designing a system for early voting by allowing voters to drop off absentee ballots at

specified locations.

Thank you for your leadership, and for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions, and we hope that NYC Votes can be a resource to you moving forward.