



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
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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. I'm here today representing NYC Votes, the CFB's voter outreach campaign. I want to thank you all for holding this hearing on ways to improve the voting experience in New York.

This discussion is sorely needed, because low voter participation has already reached crisis levels. Year after year, voters tell us about the same problems. Too many voters who believe they are registered to vote are missing from the poll books. Machines malfunction, increasing wait times. In both cases, too many voters are forced to choose between casting a provisional ballot, or leaving an overcrowded poll site without casting their vote. Too many voters struggle to understand confusing, hard-to-read ballots, and too many voters end up casting a vote that doesn't count.

Too many voters suffer frustrating experiences at their poll site. As a result, too many New Yorkers stay home on Election Day.

The good news is this: You have the power to fix it. In the coming legislative session, you can

modernize our election laws. If you allow it, readily-available technology can help us lay the groundwork for an election system worthy of the 21st century. These long-overdue changes are common-sense solutions to obvious problems.

To highlight these solutions, we are creating a diverse, statewide coalition around a campaign we are calling “Vote Better NY.” We are gathering tens of thousands of signatures from New Yorkers via Change.org and in person to support the Vote Better NY objectives.

You have the power to upgrade our voter registration system. We can pay bills, make investments, and enroll in school online, so why do we still have a pen-and-paper system that introduces errors at every step along the way? Illegible handwriting and mistakes on the forms can lead to data entry errors by overburdened election administrators. Voter lists that are inaccurate or outdated leave poll workers unable to assist confused voters at the polls on Election Day.

This is why it is so critical we overhaul the voter registration system by passing the Voter Empowerment Act (A5972/S2538A). This bill would help voters register automatically when they interact with a state agency, by requiring agencies to transmit their information electronically to the state Board of Elections.

The VEA would also allow New Yorkers to register online directly with our Board of Elections as is currently the case in 25 other states. This online registration could use social security numbers and allow voters to update their information when they move or change their name. The

Presidential Commission on Election Administration recommended online registration as a way to reduce errors from a paper registration system. Implementing this comprehensive upgrade in New York will cut down on errors and ultimately improve the Election Day experience.

An electronic voter registration system would facilitate a shift to electronic poll books. Right now, poll workers flip through paper poll books to check voters in, adding to the time it takes to vote on Election Day. If a voter is at the wrong location, or their registration is inactive, poll workers using paper lists have no way to locate their registration and provide assistance.

Electronic poll books would cut check-in times, and allow workers to direct voters to the correct locations. The New York City Board of Elections has been proactive about incorporating new technology into the polling places through the purchase of tablets and mobile hot spot devices; these could one day be used as electronic poll books. We think this is encouraging progress, and we urge its expansion.

You have the power to allow early voting in New York State. Voters in 33 other states provide voters some form of early voting. In the last presidential election, nearly one in three voters in those states cast their ballot before Election Day. By stretching voting activity over a longer period of time, and allowing voters to cast their ballot at a time that is convenient for them, early voting leads to shorter lines on Election Day. Administrators in states with early voting have been strong proponents of how it improved the voting experience for their voters.

To that end, we urge the committee to pass A8582, which would require a two-week early voting period. The bill sets minimum standards for the number of polling locations and hours

depending on a county's population size. It also allows election administrators the flexibility to assign more polling locations or hours than the minimum required depending on a locality's needs.

While early voting does require some investment and a change in the way resources are allocated, analysis of data in early voting states shows a number of gains that ultimately eased pressure on Election Day. Allowing an ample early voting period allows poll workers to gain more experience and troubleshoot problems that occur at the polling place, such as malfunctioning voting machines or bottlenecks in line management.

As voters shift to voting earlier in the allowable period, this gives election administrators some flexibility in resource allocation for Election Day, when fewer polling places, poll workers, and ballots may be needed. Due to these benefits, expanding opportunities to cast a ballot early was one of the central recommendations of the PCEA. It is long past time that New York implements this critical reform.

Finally, the Assembly has already taken the important step of passing the Voter Friendly Ballot Act (A3389) earlier this year. New York transitioned from the old lever machines to the new optical scanners in 2010, yet the laws governing ballot design have not caught up. These outdated ballots confuse voters with poor layout, illegible fonts, lengthy instructions, and too much clutter. They cause delays at the poll sites, and they cause thousands of ballots to be thrown out due to overvotes. We commend you and your colleagues for approving legislation that will allow election administrators to apply modern design principles to our ballots, and we

urge the Senate to follow suit.

Improving the voting experience is crucial to ensuring civic participation and giving voters confidence that they cast a ballot that counts. It's time to give our election laws a 21st century upgrade that will allow modern technology and design to improve the end-to-end voting experience for all New Yorkers. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions.