



New York City Campaign Finance Board
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**Testimony of Amy Loprest
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**City Council Committee on Governmental Operations
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Good morning, Chair Kallos and members of the Government Operations Committee. I am Amy Loprest, Executive Director of the New York City Campaign Finance Board. With me today is Eric Friedman, Assistant Executive Director for Public Affairs and Sue Ellen Dodell, General Counsel.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the bills under consideration today. Now that we have entered this pivotal presidential election year, we are happy to see a renewed focus and urgency around the movement to help more New Yorkers make their voices heard in the electoral process.

As you know, the Campaign Finance Board works to promote civic involvement through our voter engagement campaign, NYC Votes. We register New Yorkers to vote, and provide them information about where and how to cast their ballots.

We also provide voters with a wide range of resources to help inform their choices at the polls. The centerpiece of our voter information efforts is the city's official Voter Guide for municipal elections, mandated by the New York City Charter.

The Guide provides an opportunity to all candidates for city office to transmit their message to registered voters, free of charge. We mail a print Guide to every household with a registered voter before every primary and general election for mayor, public advocate, comptroller, borough president, and City Council, and when there is a city referendum on the ballot. The Charter requires the Guide contain biographical information on each candidate, including party affiliation, public offices held, occupation and employer, prior employment and other public service experience, educational background, and a listing of major organizational affiliations and endorsements, as well as statements by each candidate of his or her principles, platform or views.

We publish an edition of the Voter Guide online on our website, www.nycfb.info, which we also publish for state, federal, and special elections. For non-city offices, our online guide includes links out to campaign websites and social media accounts. We are currently exploring a collaboration with Maplight, a nonpartisan research organization, to provide more information on candidates for these other offices. We recently published an online guide with the candidates for last week's special election in Council District 17 with full candidate profiles.

We produce and distribute a video edition of the Voter Guide for city elections, hosted on our website and aired on cable television. In citywide election years, we produce the candidate video statements. For special elections, we work with community television stations to create the video Guide. For instance, we worked with BronxNet to produce Voter Guide videos for the February 23rd special election.

We strongly believe that empowering voters to cast an informed ballot is critical to the democratic process, and we are supportive of initiatives that will provide more voters with more information.

Together, Int. No. 255 and Int. No. 504 would significantly expand our voter information mandate.

Under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act, we currently publish the Voter Guide in five languages: English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, and Bengali. We also translate transcripts of candidates' video statements into these languages.

Under Int. No. 255, we will be required to translate and print the Voter Guide in the top seven limited-English proficiency languages, which would potentially add up to five new language editions of the print Guide.

This new requirement raises a number of issues to consider.

Additional translations will require a significant investment of resources, as some languages are more expensive to translate, format, and print. New language editions will require additional costs for printing and distribution.

Our current practice, with the permission of the Department of Justice, is to target mailings of the Voter Guide in Chinese, Korean and Bengali to voters by conducting surname analysis, and determining areas where the relevant populations are concentrated. CFB should have the authority to deliver these new resources to the populations that need them. Targeting distribution will mitigate the additional translation, printing, and postage costs, and ensure voters receive the information that is most relevant to them.

Int. No. 504 would require the CFB to print and mail Voter Guides for federal and state elections as well as city elections. We support expanding the voter information resources available to New Yorkers, and we know from the feedback we receive that many New Yorkers depend on the print Voter Guide.

Candidate participation rates in the Guide have been high, in part because we have a direct relationship with candidates running for city office—95 percent of candidates on the ballot in the primary provided information for the Guide’s print edition, and 74 percent of candidates for the general. To ensure voters receive information focused on the candidates they will see on their ballot, we produced 14 print editions for the 2013 primary election, and 20 editions in the general election. Overall, we printed and mailed nearly 7.5 million Guides in 2013.

Producing, printing, and mailing the Guide for the primary and general elections in citywide election years is a significant undertaking, requiring staff to collect and track candidate submissions, review content, communicate with translators, and oversee production at the print and mailing house.

In 2013, our budget included nearly \$10 million to print and distribute the Voter Guide. Printing and mailing multiple Voter Guides every year, including information for federal, state, and county offices, would require a considerable new investment.

After Int. No. 504 was introduced in October 2014, we estimated that creating Guides for the state and federal primaries and the general elections in 2016 could cost between \$16 and \$28.5 million. Publishing Voter Guides in 2017 under the expanded mandate to cover additional offices could cost between \$19.5 and \$35 million.

These estimates do not include the necessary cost of additional staff dedicated to the annual production of multiple citywide print Voter Guides. For example, we anticipate that it would require more staff time just to follow up with candidates to submit their information because we don't have an established relationships. Without this follow up, we expect lower response rates from candidates for non-city offices, which would make the Guides less useful for voters.

We are proud of the work we do to inform voters, and we are happy to explore ways we can expand our reach. However, as you consider Int. No. 504—and as we consider our budget request for the coming fiscal year—it is important that the Council is fully aware of the significant investment it requires.

Our immediate recommendation would be to amend Int. No. 504 to eliminate the requirement for the Voter Guide to cover party positions. There are multiple party position contests per assembly district, and there are easily more than 1,000 candidates across the city for delegate, state committee, county committee, and district leader positions.

It is true that there is often little information available to voters about the candidates for these party positions. Still, removing them would simplify the production of the Guide, lessen the expense, and ensure the information we provide is the most helpful and meaningful to voters. Omitting party positions would enable us to print fewer editions and dedicate more space to candidates for other offices.

Int. No. 504 does allow us to reduce some costs by allowing us to create an opt-out procedure for voters who prefer to receive the guide electronically. This was among the recommendations in our 2013 post-election report, and we think it is an important tool to providing voters the information that they need in the format they prefer. The most efficient way to create this system would be for the Board of Elections to collect opt-out information at the time a voter registers. At the same time, voters could also indicate in what language

they prefer to receive the guide. That way, we can ensure voters receive the Guide in the correct language, removing some guesswork.

We would also like to note that the BOE has been continually improving their online poll site locator with lists of candidates and sample ballots, and it is a valuable resource. We would love to work with the BOE to integrate this into our online Guide so that we could give voters additional tools prior to Election Day.

Of course, there are other ways we could reduce costs for the voter guide. One obvious change would be to consolidate the primaries. Voters will go to the polls at least four times in 2016, which guarantees voter fatigue. Primary consolidation makes imminent sense for everyone involved—especially voters. Fewer elections would relieve the administrative burden on the BOE—and would mean fewer editions of the Voter Guide. We support Res. No. 232-A to consolidate the primaries, and would urge members of City Council to be even more active in asking the state legislature to act.

As you know, we have been working with partners on the Vote Better NY effort to push for voting reform at the state level. We want to ensure that every New Yorker can register to vote, has an opportunity to get to the polls, and can cast a ballot that counts.

We strongly support Res. No. 553, which calls on the state legislature to pass legislation to allow early voting. Governor Cuomo called for early voting in his State of the State address in January and the bills now in the legislature mirror his strong proposal, which would

require counties provide 12 days of early voting and one polling location per 50,000 registered voters. With the Governor's support, there's now real hope that this will pass during the 2016 session.

We also urge the Council to consider a resolution in support of the Voter Empowerment Act (A5972/S2538B), which would bring our outdated voter registration system into the 21st century by leveraging technology to get more people registered and keep their registrations up to date.

We also urge the Council to consider a resolution supporting the Voter Friendly Ballot Act (A3389), which would provide voters with clearer, simpler ballots and has unanimously passed the Assembly for three sessions in a row.

Finally, we support Res. No. 870, asking legislators to change state law so that people with felony convictions be able to register to vote once they are released from prison. Under current law, probationers can complete a voter registration form, but people released to community supervision must wait until they have completed parole to submit a voter registration application.

When we register voters, we find a lot of confusion around this policy. We have also heard public testimony on this matter at our meetings of the Voter Assistance Advisory Committee. This past Saturday, our Voter Assistance Unit worked with a number of volunteers to register voters at two NYCHA buildings in Brownsville. One of the requests

from the community was that we discuss voting rights specifically for people that were formerly incarcerated.

Many would-be voters do not understand the distinction between parole and probation, or are unclear about their status. New Yorkers should not feel that they need to disclose their conviction status in order to get clarity on whether or not they can register. Language on the voter registration form explains that it is a crime to furnish false information to the BOE; some people fear they could be returned to prison if they complete the form incorrectly.

Changing the state law to allow people to register once they have been released from prison would simplify existing policy and make it clear and less frightening to those who have been incarcerated. It would encourage people released to community supervision to take part in civic life as part of their re-entry to society.

We support Res. 281-A which calls on the Mayor to create an annual Student Voter Registration Day. This year the CFB, Council Member Rosenthal, the New York Immigration Coalition, community groups and other members of the Council are partnering to bring SVRD to 56 schools throughout the city. We will bring our message to nearly 20,000 students citywide on March 18. Last year, on our inaugural SVRD, we registered over 2,000 students in 25 schools.

We generally support much of the remaining legislation under consideration today. Though we defer to the Board of Elections to assess the administrative burden they represent, we support the remaining items under consideration.

We support Int. No. 62 to require notice on closed poll sites, as well as Res. No. 390 to require Russian interpreters at certain polling locations.

We agree with the sponsors of Int. No. 463-A that it would be an important step forward if BOE were to communicate with voters through text and e-mail. We would note, however, that information that voters provide, such as e-mail addresses, are part of the public record and would have to be disclosed whenever someone obtains the voter file, unless state law is changed.

Int. No. 848 would require the BOE to send voters a summary of their voting history the past four years, which may help to spur turnout by providing individualized reminders to voters about their participation.

We also support Res. No. 384, calling on the Board of Elections to allow half-day shifts for poll workers. This could be a useful way to recruit potential poll workers who are deterred by a long 15-hour shift. This would not supplant the need for full-day workers, but would allow the BOE an additional recruitment tool to fill needed positions. A limited, but successful pilot project in Brooklyn suggests that the idea has promise. We would

generally encourage an expanded pilot, such as one poll site in each borough, to further determine viability.

The BOE is already crafting a pilot program to recruit 17-year-olds from select high schools in each borough to work as poll workers in a half-day shift. We think this is a positive step forward to further test split shifts and involve more young people in the civic process.

Thank you for your time today, and I am happy to take questions.