



CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Testimony to the Voter Assistance and Advisory Committee
On the 2011-2012 Voter Assistance Annual Report
June 11, 2012

Good evening Chair Chang and members of the Voter Assistance and Advisory Committee (VAAC). My name is Rachael Fauss, and I am the Policy and Research Manager for Citizens Union of the City of New York. Citizens Union is a nonpartisan good government group dedicated to making democracy work for all New Yorkers. We thank you for the opportunity to present our thoughts on your 2011-2012 Annual Report and ways to improve voter participation and election administration in New York City.

The VAAC 2011-2012 Annual Report outlines an ambitious but important agenda for the city in terms of voter participation. It also outlines the many significant initiatives that VAAC has undertaken, many of which began under its former structure as the Voter Assistance Commission. We support the VAAC's emphasis on technology and leveraging partnerships, as smart and cost-effective means of engaging more New Yorkers regarding the voting process.

Regarding the report's mention of leveraging of data, Citizens Union would like to note that it has often utilized NYU Capstone Teams in the past, and found them to be very effective and useful in expanding our resources. We look forward to reviewing VAAC's Capstone Report findings regarding ways to better target its education and outreach programs. We also look forward to seeing new initiatives in action such as the Taxi TV election reminders, and increased promotion of the NYC Votes! brand.

Citizens Union would like to focus the majority of our remarks on the recommendations and legislative proposals contained in your annual report. We fully support efforts to make voter registration easier, improve the voting experience, and provide voters with better information. I would first like to provide our thoughts on the recommendations outlined in the report, and then note additional legislative proposals for VAAC to consider.

I. Current VAAC Recommendations and Legislative Proposals

Regarding the VAAC's recommendations regarding online registration, automatic registration and pre-registration of youth voters, Citizens Union has been working with Assemblymember Kavanagh and our civic partners on legislation to implement many of these goals (S.1974-C). While Citizens Union has not yet formally supported the legislation, we are currently analyzing the legislation with an eye toward ensuring that any administrative hurdles can be overcome and to ensure that its effectiveness is maximized. We do, however, support the worthy goal of the legislation to simplify the voter registration process and encourage more New Yorkers to register to vote. Regarding same-day registration or "Election Day Registration," Citizens Union fully supports this proposal.

Regarding improving the voting experience, Citizens Union fully supports implementation of no-excuse absentee voting and early voting. We have also examined the issue of the primary dates, and in general believe that consolidation of primary dates should be examined as a means to both cut down on costs and ensure that turnout is maximized.

Providing voters with better information is also an important goal, and Citizens Union is pleased that the VAAC included among its recommendations in this area legislation that we support and is sponsored by Councilmember Inez Dickens to provide email notifications to voters. Regarding the other proposals in this area, Citizens Union supports improving the design of the ballot, and is working with Assemblymember Kavanagh regarding state legislation, the Voter Friendly Ballot Act (A.7492-C) to ensure that the ballot is easy to read and understand. We would also like to note that the VAAC's recommendation regarding allowing voters to select their language of choice may have other important benefits. For example, the Board of Elections in the City of New York has been considering a proposal supported by Citizens Union to implement bilingual ballots, which would allow for ballots to be produced in English and one other language, as opposed to including all of the required five languages. If the board had more information regarding voters' preferred languages, we believe they would be better able to target provision of bilingual ballots at poll sites.

II. Additional Legislative Proposals to be Considered by the VAAC

In addition to the legislation sponsored by Inez Dickens (Intro 613), which was formally supported by the VAAC in December by resolution of this body, we would like to bring to your attention other important legislation in the City Council which Citizens Union, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), the Brennan Center for Justice, Demos, the League of Women Voters NYC, the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG), and a growing list of other civic organizations support. We urge the VAAC to support this package of legislation, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss ways to improve the legislation. We are currently seeking a hearing on these bills in the Council, at which we can discuss their provisions in greater detail and highlight their value. The legislation in the package is listed below.

- **Intro 613** (Councilmember Inez Dickens) – would require email notifications of election dates, registration deadlines and sample ballots to registered voters who voluntarily sign up for such updates. We would like to thank you for your support on this bill. A majority of the council has already signed on to cosponsor it.
- **Intro 721** (Councilmember Jessica Lappin) – would establish a poll worker program that will give incentives to municipal employees to work on Election Day in order to enhance the pool of competent and able poll workers. In your report you mentioned that “staffing polling sites with qualified, well-trained poll workers is a significant challenge.” This bill provides a simple and effective solution to the poll worker problem which will improve the voting experience, a goal we share.
- **Intro 728** (Councilmember David Greenfield) – would require voter registration forms to be provided to parents enrolling children in school. In your report, you proposed ideas such as enabling online registration and implementing automated voter registration to make voter registration easier. This bill proposes yet another way to make voter registration easier and more accessible.

- **Intro 760** (Councilmember Jumaane Williams) – would require the City Board of Elections to report for particular city agencies the number of New Yorkers who completed voter registration forms while seeking city services. This bill would allow the city to better target their voter registration efforts to agencies that are producing the most registration forms, while also allowing them to address any possible issues at agencies where fewer forms are completed. Given the VAAC’s efforts to partner with city agencies, we believe that this legislation would provide the VAAC with important information regarding where efforts should be targeted.
- **Intro 769** (Councilmember Mathieu Eugene) – would expand the City’s Voter Guide to include more city races and state and federal elections so voters are more informed about all contests on the ballot. In your report you mentioned that due to the special elections this year, the CFB’s Online Voter Guide covered the City Council race, and the state and congressional special elections in Queens, Manhattan, and Brooklyn for the first time. This was done to raise awareness and hopefully increase participation. Councilmember Eugene’s bill would formalize expansion of the Voter Guide to other races being held in the city and provide voters with more information, one of your main goals.
- **Intro 778** (Councilmember Brad Lander) – would require the City Board of Elections (the Board) to report data required by the Mayor's Management Report to the City Council. This will better measure the Board's performance against key metrics for evaluating its administration of elections. Many of your proposals are related to improving the voter experience. Councilmember Lander’s bill would allow the City Council and public to better measure the Board’s performance and thus make necessary changes to improve the voter experience. Without this needed accountability, it is far more difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the Board’s current efforts.

Given the alignment between the VAAC’s goals outlined in its 2011-2012 Annual Report, and the goals of the package of legislation supported by Citizens Union and our civic colleagues, we urge the VAAC to formally support these bills by passing a resolution as it did for the Dickens bill and indicating its support to the Council for the entire package of legislation in concept if not for every provision in each bill. We welcome the opportunity to work with you to further strengthen the bills to maximize their effectiveness.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to present Citizens Union’s testimony, and am happy to answer any questions you might have.