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Implementation of Early Voting

Testimony of the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC)
New York City Governmental Operations Committee Hearing

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Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am Wennie Chin, Senior Manager of Civic Engagement at The New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC). NYIC is an umbrella policy and advocacy organization representing over 200 immigrant and refugee rights groups throughout New York State.

To start, we would like to extend a thank you to the staff at the New York City Board of Elections as well as the poll workers who aided in the launch of our first Early Voting cycle in New York City.

Following the November 5th election, NYIC surveyed voters on their experiences with early voting.

Early voting has a tremendous impact on everyone, but especially working families, persons with disabilities, and those with a non-traditional schedule. However, the benefits of early voting can only be fully enjoyed by voters if the program is well-implemented. 54% of our respondents who voted in 2019 reported having voted early. One third of those who voted on Election Day, did so because their early voting location was inconvenient. An additional 9% did not vote early because their early voting poll site was less convenient than their Election Day poll site. 87% reported having a poll site for early voting different than the one assigned to them for Election Day.



Overall, 74% of our members rated their experience with early voting as positive; 22% neutral; and only 4% negative. There was an overwhelming response of about 84% of respondents indicating their intentions to vote early in the next election. Many of our respondents cited this expansion of ballot access as “convenient” and “fun”.

As we prepare for the 2020 election cycle, NYIC offers the following recommendations:

Expand the Number of Polling Locations

Early voting only works if there are enough sites, in convenient locations. Many board of elections looked at the off-year 2019 election as a pilot for early voting and started off with fewer sites than we should have had. This was particularly the case in New York City.

We hope, and expect, the New York City Board of Elections will significantly expand the number of polling locations for each of the 2020 elections. Both for the convenience of the voters, and also to accommodate the expected higher turnout.

Site Placement & Equity

The purpose of early voting is rooted in making the ballot box accessible and convenient for voters. We hope the Board of Elections’ plans in 2020 will be more inclusive of immigrant communities. We call for an equitable distribution of locations across the boroughs and neighborhoods to reflect voter density and proximity to accessible public transportation.

There are 1,282,887 voters in Queens, but, with 14 sites designated for the county, that is distribution of 91,635 voters per pollsite. In Staten Island, the ratio is 35,497 voters per pollsite. These site allocations are neither adequate nor equitable in distribution. Well placed sites will be hugely impactful for voter participation in the early voting program. Immigrant-rich neighborhoods like College Point, Downtown Flushing, Jackson Heights, and Elmhurst did not see a localized early voting site this past election. In Brooklyn, Gravesend and Brighton Beach similarly did not see a local site. The New York Immigration Coalition calls on the New York City Board of Elections to work with community-based organizations to identify sites that are accessible to their communities. Early voting sites needs to be located near public transit, be in densely populated neighborhoods, and be accessible to persons with disabilities.



County	Current Voters Registered	Number of EV Sites	Voters per Pollsite
Queens	1,282,887	14	91,635
Richmond	319,473	9	35,497
New York	1,197,797	9	133,089
Bronx	833,172	11	75,743
Kings	1,637,055	18	90,948

* Data collected from New York State Board of Elections, Voter Enrollment by County, 11/09/2019

We would like the NYC Board of Elections to follow the lead of Erie County and allow any voter to cast a ballot at any early voting location. Some of our most positive feedback in our survey was related to this feature in Erie County. The technology to allow countywide -or, in the case of New York City, citywide- early voting has now been successfully tested and the practice should be standard.

New Yorkers travel far and beyond the immediate vicinity of their homes in their daily lives. It is important that voters are not restricted to one early voting poll site. Countywide voting is especially important in areas where residents rely on public transportation. We recommend integrating mobile early voting stations that can be placed near mass transit hubs to meet the needs of the commuting electorate.

Uniformed Operations and Improved Promotion of Early Voting

Owing partly to the first ever opportunity for early voting in New York and a lack of competitive races, we found that even among regular voters, early voting was not well known. There was also some additional confusion over polling locations that differed from early voting to Election Day, and the hours at early voting poll sites.

Among those who responded to our survey who were aware of early voting, 30% learned about early voting through social media; 13% from subway or print ads; 13% because they received mail about it; 13% from friends or family; 9% from television; and the remaining 30% through



some other means. While we anticipate an increase in voter interest in 2020's elections will improve awareness of early voting, we recommend New York City engage in a more robust outreach and education campaign, coordinating with community partners.

Language Access

The electronic pollbooks used this past election was hugely successful. However, when we surveyed voters, many responded that they did not ask for a translated ballot because the option was not visible or readily available for them on the electronic poll book nor were they offered by a poll worker in person. We recommend a more visible language prompt on the electronic poll books to ensure the technology does not overshadow language access at the polls.

The New York Immigration Coalition will continue to conduct community education, outreach, and awareness efforts on early voting and ensuring successful participation in forthcoming elections. We will look forward to working with city, state, and local partners to ensure that early voting can be more accessible to voters in 2020 and beyond.