

DEMOCRACY DOESN'T PAUSE: SECURING OUR NOVEMBER ELECTIONS

TESTIMONY OF SARAH GOFF, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, COMMON CAUSE NEW YORK

before the New York City Council Governmental Operations Committee

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Good morning. I am Sarah Goff, Deputy Director of Common Cause New York. I would like to thank the Committee Chair and its members for convening this important hearing on how we can replicate what worked and improve upon what didn't during the June primaries.

Common Cause New York is a nonpartisan citizens' lobby and a leading force in the battle for honest and accountable government. Common Cause fights to strengthen public participation and faith in our institutions of self-government and to ensure that government and political processes serve the general interest, and not simply the special interests. For 50 years, we have worked at both the state and municipal level to bring about honest, open and accountable government that serves the interests of all residents equally. Consonant with our overall mission we have consistently worked to improve accessibility, accuracy, transparency, and verifiability in our democratic process at the city, state and national level.

In March 2020, four days after Governor Cuomo issued the stay-at-home order, Common Cause released a plan on how to safely hold our elections during a pandemic. We are pleased the Governor adopted many of our recommendations including the consolidation of the presidential and state primaries and a measured expansion of absentee voting in lieu of a whole transition to vote by mail.

It is our position that while there were undoubtedly unforced errors along the way, that overall, the Boards of Elections did a credible job of navigating unprecedented circumstances and did their best to rapidly scale up a previously sleepy absentee voting program. We are pleased to note the State Legislature, the Governor, and the New York State and local Boards of Elections took heed of the numerous problems in June and have responded to our recommendations through legislation, executive orders, and process improvements. While there is more work to be done, it is encouraging to see:

AN INVESTMENT IN OUR ELECTIONS INFRASTRUCTURE TO IMPROVE VOTER CONFIDENCE IN ABSENTEE VOTING

Now that expanded absentee voting has been codified into state law for the duration of the pandemic, the NYC Board of Elections can plan accordingly. The June primary saw record numbers of voters voting absentee across the state and in New York City. New York's historically sleepy absentee voting

program, serving roughly 3-5% of voters each election cycle, rapidly scaled up over six weeks to serve anywhere from an estimated 30-60% in local elections.

The problems we saw during the primary are, unfortunately, not new to our absentee voting program but still have the potential to undermine voter confidence in the safety and security of our elections. Recent national polling of traditionally disenfranchised populations underscores the urgency to restore faith in New York's absentee voting program:

- 75% of voters indicated they would not want to vote in-person during the November election if there is no cure/vaccine for coronavirus.
 - 66% of voters prefer to vote by mail because it would be the safer option.
- Yet 47% are concerned voting by mail would result in lost or uncounted ballots.

New York has disproportionately high rejection rates of absentee ballots. The State Legislature has done its part by eliminating the unduly punitive reasons absentee votes are invalidated including a missing date on the absentee ballot envelope, stray marks on the ballot, and “improperly sealed” ballot envelopes. The NYCBOE has responded to pain points by:

- Investing in the appropriate equipment to count absentee ballots faster
- Increasing public confidence and transparency by adding a new ballot tracking function so voters can track their absentee ballot in real time.
- Prominently displaying absentee ballot drop boxes at early voting and election day poll sites. This will be of particular importance as the Governor and State Legislature declined to mandate prepaid return postage for absentee ballots for the general election through executive order or legislation.

INCREASED PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND VOTER OUTREACH

One of our ongoing and June-specific recommendations was to expand the city government's voter outreach program. We are pleased to note that city agencies have:

- Created and launched a unified public outreach and social media voter education campaign
- Advertised early voting more prominently as it remains an underutilized in-person voting option.
 - We must do more to educate New Yorkers about the nine additional days they now have to vote and where their early voting poll site is located. All too frequently, we heard from voters who did not realize early voting was an option much less where to



vote early.

- Dispersing in-person voters across 10 days, instead of the bulk showing up on Election Day, will allow our elections to run smoothly and safely while minimizing any attendant health risks for voters and poll workers.
 - Given the projected turnout for the November election, it is vital New York City aggressively promotes early voting to avoid long lines on Election Day.
- Address pandemic-induced poll worker shortages by specifically recruiting younger poll workers.

PRELIMINARY PLANS FOR RANKED CHOICE VOTING IN 2021

Common Cause New York has been working diligently behind the scenes to ensure candidates, campaigns, community-based organizations and elected officials are up to speed on the upcoming changes to our local elections. We will begin our general public education campaign after the November election to avoid confusing voters. We are working with the New York State and New York City Boards of Elections as well as the New York City Campaign Finance Board on election administration changes and a robust voter education and outreach program.

Thank you for your time, and Common Cause New York stands ready to assist in any way to secure our elections in November.

