



New York City Campaign Finance Board
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**Testimony of Allie Swatek
Director of Policy and Research
New York City Campaign Finance Board**

**New York City Council Governmental Operations Committee
June 7, 2023**

Thank you, Chair Ung and members of the Governmental Operations Committee, for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Allie Swatek, and I am the Director of Policy and Research at the New York City Campaign Finance Board (CFB). Joining me today is Frederick Schaffer, CFB Board Chair, and Amanda Melillo, Deputy Director of Public Affairs.

The Campaign Finance Board is a nonpartisan and independent City agency that administers the City's matching funds program. Our agency strives to make our local democracy more equitable and inclusive by matching small contributions from average New Yorkers with public funds. NYC Votes - an initiative of the CFB - works alongside community organizations, volunteers, elected officials, and other City agencies to register, educate, and engage voters across the City.

In accordance with the New York City Charter, the CFB produces an annual report with information on voter registration and assistance activities, analyses of the electorate, recommendations to improve voter participation, and more. We call this report the Voter Analysis Report (VAR). The Policy and Research team spearheaded the content, analysis, and research for the 2022 Voter Analysis Report. That said, the VAR publication process involves vital contributions from staff across the agency. We appreciate the opportunity to present the staff's hard work to the Committee today.

A key component of our agency's mission is to make sure that the City's voters are well-informed and prepared to cast their ballots on Election Day. We conduct voter outreach and education year-round, focusing on underrepresented New York City voters. Through a

comprehensive voter education and outreach campaign, designed to meet voters where they are with accurate and digestible information, as well as strong partnerships with community-based organizations and elected officials, we directly reached thousands of New York voters in 2022. We held 103 virtual and in-person events with over 2,000 attendees. Our social media accounts and NYC Votes website continued to be invaluable resources for New Yorkers seeking election information.

The NYC Votes Voter Guide is a fundamental part of our outreach and engagement efforts. The Guide, available in print and online, is a comprehensive resource with information on candidates, voting methods, key dates, and more. For select elections, including the June primary, we mail print Voter Guides to every household with a registered voter. In previous years, we offered Voter Guides in the five federal Voting Rights Act languages. Due to recent City Council legislation, all features on the website, the online and print Voter Guides, and all other NYC Votes materials will be available in all 13 designated citywide languages.

Distributing the Voter Guide and conducting direct voter engagement are not the only ways the CFB approaches voter education. The Voter Analysis Report allows us to make exceptional voting data accessible to all New Yorkers, so they can learn more about election information in their City, boroughs, city council districts, and even community districts. The “On the Ballot” section of our Voter Analysis Report includes high-level statistics and detailed examinations of 2022 voter registration and participation data that are of interest to many New Yorkers.

New York City’s voter registration rate has historically been higher than the turnout rate. This was also the case in 2022. By the end of the year, New York City had nearly five million active registered voters, representing a voter registration rate of 85.2%. Roughly 1.8 million New York City voters participated in the November general election: 38.3% of registered voters. As a result of redistricting challenges for state offices, New York City voters participated in split primaries in 2022, with one in June and another in August. Despite concerns about turnout disparities between the elections, overall turnout for eligible voters in the June and August primaries was similar: 14.5% and 14.7%, respectively.

This Voter Analysis Report also contains the agency’s first in-depth analysis of New York’s special elections. The lack of literature on this subject and minimal amounts of special election data limited our analysis. That said, we concluded that turnout in special elections was higher among older voters and in boroughs that have historically high turnout. As New Yorkers continue to participate in special elections, we hope to develop our analysis.

In this year’s report, we also studied a once in a decade phenomenon: redistricting. The City underwent an extensive redistricting process in 2022. New Yorkers submitted over 5,000 pieces of testimony to the New York City Districting Commission about their districts and communities. Rather than limiting our study of the redistricting process to the new lines themselves, we focused on the impact that New Yorkers had on the City redistricting process by conducting an in-depth analysis of the impact of public testimony.

Our analysis found that Council districts with higher proportions of people of color were mentioned in fewer testimonies. This issue could be addressed by disseminating mailers to City households, notifying New Yorkers of the redistricting process and the opportunity to submit testimony. Our overarching conclusion was that the Commission incorporated much of the constructive criticism offered in New Yorkers’ testimonies into the final maps. These groundbreaking findings show that community members have a real impact on decision-making when given the opportunity to voice their opinions and highlight the importance of ensuring that all communities are represented in these testimonies.

In addition to analyses of the electorate, the 2022 Voter Analysis Report includes two recommendations to increase turnout and make our elections more accessible. One of these recommendations concerns ballot proposals. Of the 1.8 million New York City voters who cast ballots in the general election, each ballot proposal received roughly 1.5 million votes. This gap could be reduced by making ballot proposals more accessible and easier to understand.

Ballot proposals can be confusing for New Yorkers of all backgrounds. To improve proposal accessibility, the CFB recommends that legislators require all State and local proposals to be written in plain language: a way to present communications clearly and concisely using everyday terms that are easy to understand. This change would make ballot questions more accessible for

voters with disabilities, including those with low vision and cognitive and intellectual disabilities. It would also reduce the risk of disenfranchisement, especially for voters with limited-English proficiency.

For this to work, proposal drafters cannot exclusively rely on online tools to assess readability. Instead, experts who understand strategies for writing in plain language for any given language must be involved in the drafting process. Furthermore, New Yorkers of different cultures, socioeconomic statuses, language proficiencies, political affiliations, and jurisdictions should provide feedback on the readability of the proposals before they are placed on the ballot.

Our other recommendation is to move elections to even years. As our report shows, there are significant disparities in New York City turnout for various elections. From 2001 to the present, the average turnout for mayoral elections is 29.5%. The average turnout for gubernatorial and presidential elections is 35.6% and 60.8%, respectively. Other cities have addressed their own turnout gaps by shifting their local elections to even years in the past decade. For example, after Baltimore aligned local elections with presidential elections, voter turnout increased from 13% in 2013 to 62% in 2016 and 61% in 2020. Los Angeles began voting for local races in even years in 2020. In its 2022 mayoral election, turnout nearly doubled the average of the previous four elections held in odd-numbered years.

Several legal changes are necessary to smoothly transition to even-numbered election years in New York City. Our Voter Analysis Report includes a flowchart of even-year election implementation options. Regardless of the route taken, all of which require voters to approve a State Constitutional amendment, the move to even year elections will take several years. We are happy to answer questions about the process and work with the City Council and other elected officials to better understand the ramifications of all options.

We are pleased that Committee Chair Ung introduced Resolution 646-2023, calling for the State to pass and voters to approve a Constitutional amendment that would move New York City elections to even-numbered years. Moving local elections to even years has many clear and tangible benefits, and we appreciate the Chair's commitment to increasing local election turnout.

The Governmental Operations Committee is also hearing Introduction 348-2022 today. This bill, sponsored by Council Member Keith Powers, would amend the New York City Administrative Code by exempting bank and credit card processing fees from campaigns' spending limits. While we do not have a position on this bill, the CFB greatly appreciates the Council's continued commitment to modernizing our City's campaign finance system.

The CFB reviewed bank and credit card processing fees for all matching funds program participants in 2017 and 2021. In 2017, these 200 candidates spent almost \$500,000 on bank and credit card fees, which represented just under 1.3% of all spending. About 0.87% of spending for City Council matching funds program participants went towards bank and credit card processing fees that year. In 2021, all program participants spent a total of \$2.3 million on bank and credit card fees, representing just over 1.3% of all spending. Roughly 1.1% of City Council candidate spending went towards bank and credit card processing fees. This aligns with the growth in online and credit card contributions in the same time frame.

Our CFB team also evaluated the practical considerations related to implementation. Currently, this bill would go into effect 120 days after passage. As a result, these changes could impact candidates' ongoing activity in both the 2023 and 2025 election cycles. To add clarity, the legislation should specify an election cycle for which fees in that cycle and future cycles would be exempted.

There are also a few changes the CFB would have to make internally to implement this legislation. For example, the CFB would need to amend its Rules to clarify whether a bank fee is a type of expenditure that is subject to the expenditure limit. The CFB would also need to update C-SMART (our campaign finance disclosure application) so these fees are exempted from the expenditure limit in a way that does not burden the campaigns themselves.

Introduction 348-2022 would have a tangible impact on CFB operations and campaigns. Our staff is available to provide additional information about the ramifications of this change.

Our Voter Analysis Reports serve as annual opportunities to shed light on the incredible work of the CFB staff, including the impactful voter outreach efforts, exceptional data analysis, and legislative recommendations. New Yorkers can use this information to continue the invaluable mission of supporting and improving New York City's electoral process.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about our Voter Analysis Report, Resolution 646, and Introduction 348 today. We are happy to answer any questions the Council may have.



Testimony Supporting Moving NYC Elections to Even-Numbered Years
NYC Council Committee on Governmental Operations

June 7, 2023

Reinvent Albany supports [Resolution 646 \(Ung\)](#), which calls on the State Legislature to pass a constitutional amendment moving municipal elections to even-numbered years.

We believe moving city elections to even years, to coincide with presidential and other federal elections, will significantly increase voter turnout and help build a more representative democracy. We concur with the December 2022 report by Citizens Union, [“Moving Municipal Elections to Even-Numbered Years,”](#) which estimates the switch to even years will double participation in NYC elections. We note that voter turnout for NYC general elections averages 29.5% versus 60.8% in presidential elections.

We ask the Committee on Governmental Operations to note Citizens Union’s estimate that moving municipal elections to presidential election years could increase turnout in majority-minority districts by 232%.

Elections in odd-numbered years are a relic of the days of Boss Tweed and Tammany Hall. As Citizens Union notes, election years switched between odd- and even-numbered years *four times* between 1850 and 1894 as rival political factions pushed for the year that they thought would help them win.

It’s time to move NYC’s elections into the 21st century. We thank Councilmember Ung for sponsoring this resolution and urge this Committee and Council to pass it immediately.



CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Testimony before the City Council Committee on Governmental Operations
Oversight Hearing on Improving Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections
Resolution 0646-2023

City Hall - June 7, 2023

Good morning members of the New York City Council Committee on Governmental Operations. My name is Ben Weinberg, and I am the Director of Public Policy at Citizens Union. Citizens Union is a nonpartisan good government group dedicated to making democracy work for all New Yorkers.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments today and commend Chair Sandra Ung for holding this public hearing specifically on the issue of voter turnout in our municipal elections. This topic deserves a separate discussion and different solutions than the common conversations about voter turnout.

New York has made significant efforts in recent years to improve our elections. Reforms like early voting, online voter registration, improved absentee voting, ranked choice voting, and public financing of campaigns have all been necessary to create a more open and fair electoral system. Voting and running for office have become easier, and our city has achieved a relatively high voter registration rate.

However, these reforms have not resulted in a substantial increase in voter turnout for our City elections. In fact, turnout in general elections has consistently declined with each local election cycle, regardless of the competitiveness of the mayoral race, whether it's an open seat, or how many candidates are running. The most recent mayoral election saw a record-low turnout of only 23% in the general election.

Such low participation rates pose a real challenge to the democratic legitimacy of our local government in the long term. This problem is worsened by the uneven nature of turnout. Simply put, our low-turnout electorate is wealthier, older, and whiter than the overall voting age population of New York City.

Citizens Union believes that New York needs to take transformative action to engage more people in the election of our elected officials. We support the proposal presented in Resolution 646-2023, which calls for moving New York City's elections from even-numbered years to odd-numbered years.

Our research, based on historical turnout data, comparative academic studies, and experiences from other cities, shows that aligning our local elections with presidential or gubernatorial elections would

significantly increase overall voter turnout in city elections, both for the top-of-the-ticket and down-ballot races. This change would particularly benefit younger voters and voters of color, who are better represented in high-turnout, even-year electorates. Additionally, this policy change would improve administrative efficiency, save costs for the city, and reduce fatigue for officials and voters.

Elections held in even-numbered years yield higher voter turnouts

In New York City, voter turnout is highest during presidential elections, at around 60%, followed by gubernatorial elections (which fluctuates depending on the race), and lowest during mayoral elections. In fact, for every one person who votes for mayor, two people vote for president. This trend is consistent in other cities in New York and other cities in the U.S. that hold local elections in odd-numbered years.

Even-year elections in New York City also yield higher turnouts for down-ballot races. Even though City Council elections are often competitive because they are held every four years, incumbents are term-limited, and candidates' campaigns are publicly funded, they still have lower turnout rates compared to State Assembly races, which are often uncompetitive. We analyzed overlapping Council and Assembly districts in every borough and found that Assembly races during presidential election years see 2.3 times higher turnout than corresponding City Council races in odd-numbered years. The average turnout for a gubernatorial-year assembly race was 1.7 times higher.

Cities that hold their local elections in conjunction with higher office elections do not suffer the same voter turnout problem. The six largest U.S. cities that hold local elections in even-numbered years see average mayoral turnouts ranging from 50% to 75%. The six largest odd-numbered years cities have mayoral turnouts ranging from 10% to 38%.

It is not surprising, then, that many cities, both large and small, have decided to change their municipal election year in the last decade. In all cases, voter turnout dramatically increased immediately after the change and remained high in subsequent elections. For instance, mayoral election turnout nearly doubled in Los Angeles, Phoenix experienced a turnout increase from 20% to 77%, and Baltimore saw a jump from under 13% to 60% in its first even-year mayoral election.

Electorates in even-numbered years are more representative of the population

This data clearly indicates that more New Yorkers would participate in local elections if they were held concurrently with larger elections. However, it is a separate question whether consolidating elections would impact who is voting. In a diverse city like New York City, solutions to address voter turnout must focus on communities with the lowest participation rates and help narrow the participation gaps.

New York City has substantial participation gaps, with age, race, and education being strong predictors of voter turnout. Research from the Campaign Finance Board has found that the five community districts with the highest participation rates are in wealthier areas of Manhattan and Brooklyn, while the five districts with the lowest rates are all located in the Bronx. The city has also identified specific groups, such as young voters under 30, for targeted voter outreach programs.

We believe that moving local elections to even-numbered years will benefit the City's efforts in reducing participation gaps across the five boroughs.

Perhaps the most dramatic impact would be on the age of the electorate because young voters in New York City are far better represented in even-year elections than in odd-year local elections. In the last two open mayoral elections, turnout among 18-29 year-olds was only around 11%. In contrast, the average turnout for this age group during presidential and gubernatorial elections was 57% and 33%, respectively. Simply moving our election year could increase youth turnout by three to five times.

Another major impact of this change would be on the demographic composition of the electorate in city elections. When comparing turnout between odd-year and even-year elections, we found the sharpest increase in turnout occurred in minority-majority districts. For instance, white-majority districts saw a 120% increase in turnout during presidential years compared to mayoral years, whereas top Latino-majority districts experienced a 256% increase. This suggests that shifting New York City's local elections from odd-numbered years to even-numbered years would result in the highest turnout gains for communities of color and help reduce participation gaps.

Additional benefits

Consolidating local elections in even-numbered years brings additional benefits, including reduced fiscal costs and improved efficiency in election spending. It allows election administrators to focus on internal organizational work and adequately prepare for the next election.

Furthermore, this policy is popular among people from various political backgrounds as it gives voters a break from frequent elections and the associated campaign advertisements and mailers. It has been approved by voters across the nation every time and place it was on the ballot.

Comments on Resolution 646-2023

Citizens Union strongly supports Resolution 646, which calls on the State Legislature to pass an amendment to the State Constitution to move New York City elections to even-numbered years. However, we offer one suggestion.

The Resolution calls for City elections to coincide with gubernatorial elections. The data shows that the benefits associated with raising turnout and diversifying the electorate are strongest in presidential years, and most cities that have changed their local election year aligned it with presidential elections. However, we acknowledge that there are other considerations related to the types of election on the ballot. We recommend replacing the constitutional requirement for “odd-numbered” year elections with the words “even-numbered” year elections to allow for more flexibility. Alternatively, the provision requiring a specific year could be removed from the constitution altogether, thus leaving the legislature to set the dates of municipal elections or giving that power to local governments. County elections are, for the most part, governed by state law, rather than the constitution.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to address you today.

For more information and data on this topic, please see December 2022 Citizens Union [policy report](#): *Moving Municipal Elections to Even-Numbered Years: How consolidating New York City's local elections with presidential or gubernatorial elections will boost turnout, diversify the electorate, and save money.*

For further information, please contact Ben Weinberg, Director of Public Policy, at 347-291-4199.

**Written Testimony on behalf of Common Cause New York before
The New York City Governmental Operations Committee
on Improving Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections
June 7, 2023**

Simply put, if improving voter turnout in an election cycle was simple, straightforward or the product of one or two reforms there would be no need for this hearing. However, improving voter turnout in any election cycle is elusive at best. This is, in part, due to the dynamic circumstances and factors typically at play in a given election cycle.

Sometimes these factors are well beyond the control of policy solutions like competitiveness of races or the weather on election day. Other times there are common sense reforms that improve the ease and accessibility of voting like giving voters more time and more ways to vote. Common Cause New York has the longstanding position that voting reforms should be enacted regardless of whether or not they boost turnout as turnout should not be the sole metric of efficacy or success.

However, what is clear is the consistently low voter turnout in municipal elections. A quick comparison of turnout rates in general elections shows municipal elections are consistently some of the lowest.

General Election Turnout in New York City

Election Type	Year	Turnout
Mayor	2021	23%
Presidential	2020	62%
Judicial	2019	17%
Governor	2018	47%
Mayor	2017	26%
Presidential	2016	62%
Judicial	2015	6%

Governor	2014	25%
Mayor	2013	26%
Presidential	2012	58%

As mentioned, there is no single solution to improve anemic voter turnout, but we believe that a combination of policy solutions would start to move the needle.

MOVE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS TO EVEN-NUMBERED YEARS

We fully support Resolution 646 (Ung) which calls on the New York State Legislature to pass a constitutional amendment that would allow municipal elections to move to even-numbered years. While this would be a multi-year process and subject to voter approval, it is a relatively simple fix that would produce outsize results.

‘On-cycle elections’, elections that are held in the even-numbered years, have higher profile races that consistently bring voters to the polls like presidential, gubernatorial and congressional races. This would dramatically increase the likelihood of down ballot effects in the form of increased voter engagement in local races. Our colleagues at Citizens Union have produced [excellent research](#) that demonstrates that municipalities that have made this change have seen dramatic increases in voter turnout and the composition of the electorate becomes more representative of actual demographics.¹

MAKE VOTING EASIER

New York has improved the voting landscape but there is still more work to be done. This year, New Yorkers will now have the opportunity to register to vote and vote in-person on the first day of early voting due to changes in state election law. The June 2023 primary election cycle will be the first opportunity for New Yorkers to take advantage of this same day registration option. Other states have seen demonstrable and sustained increases in voter turnout, especially with younger voters² and voters of

¹ Citizens Union, [Moving Municipal Elections to Even-Numbered Years](#), January 2023.

² Jacob Grumbach and Charlotte Hill, [Rock the Registration: Same Day Registration Increases Turnout of Young Voters](#), The Journal of Politics, Volume 84, Number 1.

color³, upon implementation of same day registration. We hope to see the expansion of this program to encompass all nine days of early voting and on election day.

New York must also follow the path of Massachusetts and Pennsylvania and adopt vote by mail to continue to give voters more options. Both states, like New York, have restrictive absentee voting laws but have developed separate and distinct vote-by-mail programs to give voters more flexibility.

LOOKING AHEAD

New York City is unfortunately almost entirely reliant on state election law in terms of changing how New Yorkers are able to vote and rules around voting in primary elections. However, New York City can continue to make strategic investments in voter education and outreach and civic engagement programs. The City Council has an important oversight role for the New York City Board of Elections and should continue to hold oversight hearings as necessary.

³ Laura Williamson (Demos) & Jesse Rhodes (UMass Amherst), [Same Day Registration: How Registration Reform Can Boost Turnout Among Black and Latinx Voters](#), June 2021.

TESTIMONY

presented by

**Kathleen Daniel, Chief Democracy Officer, DemocracyNYC New York City Civic
Engagement Commission**

before the

New York City Council Committee on Governmental Operations
on the subject of

Oversight – Improving Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections
on

Wednesday, June 7th, 2023, at 1:00 PM

Thank you Chair Ung and members of the Committee on Governmental Operations for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to submit testimony on the important topic of voter turnout in New York City's Municipal Elections.

My name is Kathleen Daniel, and I am the Chief Democracy Officer at DemocracyNYC (DNYC). As my predecessor outlined in testimony before this committee in April of 2022, DemocracyNYC was created in 2018 as a mayoral initiative, and pursuant to Mayoral Executive Order 88, is now a program of the New York City Civic Engagement Commission (CEC). This merger has further streamlined engagement efforts to ensure that we have maximum impact through closer coordination.

The Mayor recently established the city's first-ever Office of Engagement, led by Chief Engagement Officer Betsy MacLean, who is present at this hearing. This office oversees the CEC and works to ensure that the city coordinates community engagement efforts across agencies, systematically learns from communities to inform policy and programs, builds the capacity of all city agency outreach and engagement teams, and advances community-driven solutions.

Among these community-driven solutions is the CEC's charter mandated citywide participatory budgeting process, "The People's Money," a program that works to provide pathways into civic engagement for New Yorkers typically left out of the democratic process. We have the pleasure of working with many Council offices through this process, with the goal of moving community voice into action, a goal that is shared by DemocracyNYC.

DemocracyNYC's mission is to foster civic engagement, increase voter access, and promote voter turnout for all New York City residents. From voter registration to the act of voting itself, we believe that participation in our democracy must be as accessible as possible. Our work is focused on utilizing grassroots organizing strategies for direct voter contact and developing

communications strategies and educational materials to encourage New York City residents to exercise their right to vote and to do so in their own language.

This week, we announced a \$2 million Get Out the Vote campaign to educate New Yorkers on Ranked Choice Voting, the rights of Limited English Proficient (LEP) voters, and to activate voters to turn out to the polls ahead of the June Primary Election.

This comprehensive campaign will include a grassroots direct-to-New Yorker outreach and canvassing operation, a \$1.1 million targeted, multilingual, ethnic, and community media advertising campaign, a CUNY Corps of 100 participating students, and partnerships with community and faith-based organizations:

\$1.1 Million Multilingual Media Campaign

- Ethnic and Community Media TV, radio and print advertising.
- An out of home campaign which includes subway, bus shelters and newsstand ads, digital screens in bars, restaurants, barbershops and nail salons, the NYC Ferry, LinkNYC, and more.
- Digital media on social media and streaming services.
- Promotion of multilingual digital games which help New Yorkers practice and understand how Ranked Choice Voting works.

Direct Outreach

- Investments in Community and Faith-Based Organizations, to conduct in-person outreach, voter education and activation, including in the 33 neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19.
- Hosting and facilitating multilingual voter education teach-ins.
- Conducting Citywide Days of Action including Phone Banking, Peer-to-Peer Texting, and Community Canvassing to Get Out the Vote for the June Primary.
- Developing a CUNY student corps to conduct voter outreach, voter education, and volunteer recruitment.
- Collaborating with NYC Service and the Spread Love NYC campaign to build a volunteer base of New Yorkers committed to stopping the drop between voter registration and voter activation.

Language Access and Accessibility Resources

- As part of its core programming, the CEC provides language interpreters at poll sites.
- Investing in translation of key voter education resources in multiple languages including printed materials and public service announcements.
- Sharing culturally competent video content advising New Yorkers of their right to vote in their language.

Language access is an integral part of civic inclusion in New York City where 49% of New Yorkers speak a language other than English at home and 23% are limited English proficient. One of the CEC's mandates under the City Charter is to expand access to language interpreters at poll sites throughout the city for LEP voters, which is part of CEC's larger commitment and mission to increasing support available to LEP New Yorkers in the CEC's programs and services.

To further meaningful access to the electoral process, the CEC has expanded poll site language assistance for LEP New Yorkers and worked to increase awareness of poll site interpretation rights. To accomplish this work, the CEC established a Language Assistance Advisory Committee (LAAC) to provide recommendations for the development and implementation of the program. The CEC will provide these services at select Early Voting and Election Day poll sites in the following languages: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin), French, Haitian Creole, Italian, Korean, Polish, Russian, Urdu, and Yiddish.

It is also important for us to provide highlights, examples and context of the inter-agency collaboration that has supported voter engagement work in recent years:

- DemocracyNYC has partnered with NYC Public Schools (NYCPS) and PEU on Civics Week and the annual Student Voter Registration Drive. We partnered with the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA) to provide language assistance at poll sites and ensure that materials about voting – including voter registration forms – are translated and accessible to Limited English Proficient (LEP) New Yorkers. We worked with the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities and the New York City Campaign Finance Board (CFB) to make voter guides available in American Sign Language. These are just a few examples of the collaborative, pro-voter, inter-agency work that DNYC has prioritized in the past few years.
- Since 2019, PEU has been a key partner to DNYC, supporting voter registration and direct voter engagement work. DNYC and PEU have partnered with the NYCPS on an annual Student Voter Registration Drive as part of NYCPS Civics Week/Civics for All initiative.
- In addition to collaborative voter registration work, DNYC and agency partners have prioritized increasing voter turnout and engagement, an extremely important task, given the City's persistently low voter turnout numbers. The NYC Elections Consortium, founded by DNYC, brings together good government groups, community-based organizations, and elected officials' offices regularly to discuss and address issues related to NYC elections as they arise.
- The CEC and DNYC work in close coordination with the NYC Campaign Finance Board (CFB), amplifying shared messages, cobranding outreach materials, and triaging civic engagement outreach efforts.

DemocracyNYC is committed to building a movement to create a culture of voting in NYC. The vote is one of our sacred rights and one of the keys to building community power. We look forward to further discussion on improving voter turnout and other ways we can work together with the Council, City agencies, and other stakeholders.

Although we are experiencing a dramatic decrease in voter participation, DNYC is committed to continuing its work with inter-agency coordination and collaboration with external groups, such as community-based organizations, in our campaign to Stop the Drop between voter registration and participation.

Thank you again to Chair Ung and the Committee members for your time today.



FOUNDER EMERITUS

Hon. Edward R. Roybal †

†deceased

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Testimony

By

Orlando R. Ovalles, Northeast Director of Civic Engagement

**National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed
Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund**

before the

**New York City Council
Committee on Governmental Operations**

On

Improving Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections

New York, New York

June 9, 2023

Chair Ung and members of the committee: Thank you for the opportunity to provide the testimony of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund regarding ways to improve voter turnout in municipal elections. We believe that the resolution currently being considered by the committee ([Res 0646-2023](#)), which calls on the New York State Legislature to pass, and the voters to approve, an amendment to the New York State Constitution to move New York City elections to even-numbered years to coincide with Gubernatorial elections, if properly implemented, holds great promise for increasing the voter turnout of Latinos and other underrepresented groups.

NALEO Educational Fund is the leading non-profit, non-partisan organization that facilitates full Latino participation in the American political process, from citizenship to public service. Our constituency encompasses the more than 7,000 Latino elected and appointed officials nationwide, among which more than 90 are from New York City, and it includes Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. For several decades, NALEO Educational Fund has been at the forefront of efforts to increase Latino civic engagement and to empower the Latino community to participate in the American democratic process. NALEO Educational Fund's New York City office, which was established nearly 30 years ago, has been a leader in conducting robust non-partisan efforts to mobilize Latinos to register to vote and cast ballots; to assist eligible lawful permanent residents (LPRs) with the U.S. citizenship process; and to encourage Latinos to participate in the decennial Census.

For many decades now, New York City has been suffering from low voter turnout in municipal elections. Despite the critical voting reforms enacted by the New York State Legislature in recent years, including implementing early voting, automatic and online voter registration, shortening voter registration deadlines, and improving absentee voting, these measures have yet to translate into higher turnout rates in municipal elections, especially for Latinos and other underrepresented groups. This situation has serious implications for our city's governance and policy making, since low voter turnout indicates that many New Yorkers have not been able to make their voice heard in the state's democracy or elect candidates that are accountable to their concerns. Given the available data on voter turnout rates in New York State, academic research, as well as anecdotal evidence from U.S. jurisdictions who have changed their local election dates, we believe that moving New York City's elections to even-numbered years to coincide with Gubernatorial elections can be an effective strategy to help ensure higher turnout for Latinos and other underrepresented groups. Ultimately, this would result in a more vibrant democracy and a more responsive government for all New Yorkers.

Academic research, as well as the real-world experience of several U.S. jurisdictions, suggest that a major factor contributing to low voter turnout rates in municipal elections is the fact that for local offices, elections are held in odd-numbered "off-cycle" years rather than being aligned with Gubernatorial or presidential elections. According to a 2022 [Citizens Union's policy report](#) on the potential benefits of moving New York City's municipal elections "on-cycle" to even-numbered years, in the last 22 years, mayoral elections have averaged 29.5% turnout, Gubernatorial elections averaged 35.6%, and presidential elections averaged 60.8%. This dynamic is not unique to New York City. In most U.S. jurisdictions, local elections are held separately from federal elections, and they tend to see lower turnout rates compared to presidential or Gubernatorial contests. As highlighted in

the aforementioned report, in the last two decades the six largest U.S. cities that hold local elections in odd-numbered years have seen average mayoral turnouts of 10% to 38%. In contrast, during the same period, the six largest cities that have their elections in even numbered years experienced average mayoral turnouts that range between 50% and 75%.

To address the problem of persistent low turnout rates in municipal elections, a growing number of U.S. jurisdictions are taking action to align their local elections to coincide with federal elections held in November of even-numbered years. According to the findings of the Citizens Union's report, this approach appears successful in boosting voter turnout rates. In all cities that transitioned from odd- to even-numbered year mayoral elections, turnout immediately increased dramatically, and remained high in the following election cycles. Examples of cities that consolidated their local elections with statewide or federal elections include Phoenix, AZ; Austin, TX; El Paso, TX; and Baltimore, MD. Notably, turnout rates in these cities increased by 240% to 460% between 2012 and 2022.

We believe the findings of the Citizens Union's report show that consolidating municipal elections to coincide with the presidential and Gubernatorial elections is an approach that holds great promise for increasing voter turnout rates, and we support this change. We also believe it is important to take this opportunity to share our perspectives on actions which must be taken to implement this change properly, to ensure that New York City fully realizes the benefits of increased voter turnout in municipal elections by Latinos and other under-represented groups. Our recommendations would require collaboration between relevant policymakers and stakeholders, including the New York State Board of Elections, the New York City Board of Elections, the New York City Council, and organizations which conduct non-partisan voter engagement activities within New York City's under-represented communities.

First, any change in local election dates must be accompanied by significant enhancements in voter outreach and education, particularly with respect to New York City's diverse racial and ethnic population groups; and the continuous improvement in the accessibility of polling locations and early voting to provide citizens with a wider variety of options to vote at a place and a time that is convenient for them. These efforts would help ameliorate the concerns raised about the consolidation of New York City's municipal elections, particularly about voter confusion, which could be exacerbated by the City's relatively recent change to ranked choice voting. Robust voter education and outreach would also help ensure that the change results in a significant increase in participation and engagement.

Additionally, should there be a consolidation of New York City's municipal elections with even-numbered year Gubernatorial elections, policymakers and stakeholders must seriously examine how implementing this change should affect the design of ballots used in the elections. Because ballots in consolidated elections are usually longer than those in off-cycle municipal elections, it is possible that more voters will not complete the entire ballot (a phenomenon known as ballot drop-off), and fail to cast votes for candidates and measures that are at the end of the ballot. Election officials and other policymakers should fully consider best practices, including an optimal ballot design, for minimizing the

likelihood of ballot drop-off. In addition, policymakers and stakeholders should consider approaches to ensure that municipal candidates and issues receive the attention they deserve during consolidated elections, given that they will have to compete with the public debate and dialogue about federal and state matters.

If properly implemented, changing the timing of local elections is an approach that can strengthen New York City's democracy by increasing the voter turnout rate of Latino voters and other underrepresented groups, while ensuring that public officials are accountable to a more representative electorate. For these reasons, on behalf of the NALEO Educational Fund, I urge the New York City Council to support Resolution 0646-2023.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.



THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 348 Res. No. 696

in favor in opposition N/A. 28

Date: June 7, 2023

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Allie Swatek, Rick Schnaff, Amanda Melillo

Address: 100 Church St. Fl. 12, 1007

I represent: NYC Campaign Finance Board

Address:

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Date: _____

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Name: BEN WEINBERG

Address: _____

I represent: NY CITIZENS UNION

Address:

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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in favor in opposition

Date: 6/7/23

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Name: FREDERICK SCAPPELLO

Address: _____

I represent: NY CAMPAIGN FINANCE

Address: 100 CHURCH ST.

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THE COUNCIL THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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in favor in opposition

Date: _____

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Name: Kathleen Daniel

Address: Chief [redacted]

I represent: Democracy officer CEC

Address: [redacted]

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THE COUNCIL THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Appearance Card

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in favor in opposition

Date: _____

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Name: Betsy Maclean

Address: Chief Engagement [redacted]

I represent: officer (Mayor's office)

Address: _____

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