



New York City Campaign Finance Board
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Testimony of Amy Loprest
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New York City Council
Committee on Government Operations
March 3, 2015

Good morning Chair Kallos and members of the Government Operations Committee. My name is Amy Loprest, Executive Director of the New York City Campaign Finance Board (CFB). I am joined today by Eric Friedman, our Assistant Executive Director for Public Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the bills under consideration today.

While it seems like the 2014 elections are not that far behind us, it is already time to start preparing for the 2016 elections. A presidential election year brings greater interest and higher participation, and we should focus now on ensuring that New Yorkers will have the smoothest possible voting experience. It's simple: if we want to encourage more New Yorkers to think of voting as a habit, it should be our mission to make the act of voting as simple and meaningful as possible.

In any election, some voters will be unable to make it to their poll site, and will have to request an absentee ballot to cast their vote. In the last presidential election, 340,169 New Yorkers cast absentee ballots around the state, according to the Election Assistance Commission's 2012 Election Administration and Voting Survey. Of those, 16,534 were rejected for reasons that were not reported. While this data is for the entire state and not specific to New York City, we imagine that a sizable number of those ballots were cast by city voters. This means at least some city voters were effectively disenfranchised due to problems with their absentee ballot.

Current law requires that voter registration forms be submitted no later than 25 days before an election. Applications for an absentee ballot may be submitted no later than 7 days before an election. This window should provide enough time to verify a voter's registration and allow that voter the time to make an absentee ballot request. However, it creates a two-step process that can act as an unnecessary barrier to participation.

Our experience in direct voter engagement has provided further evidence on this point. In November 2014, CFB staff and volunteers conducted a GOTV phone bank under the

auspices of our NYC Votes campaign, reminding voters we registered on National Voter Registration Day to cast their ballot. We reached a number of newly registered voters who planned to be out of town on Election Day, and had failed to request an absentee ballot.

Compressing these two steps in one transaction would simplify the process, especially for new voters who are unfamiliar with New York State's voting requirements. We support making it easier to register to vote and apply for an absentee ballot to the extent that current state law allows.

We support Intro 659, which would provide the ability for voters to track the status of their absentee ballot application online. Widely available technology can improve every step in the voting experience, and provide voters with the same level of convenience and transparency we expect in our everyday lives. We can all track our packages online, and we should be able to track our votes the same way. Online tracking would give absentee voters the confidence that when they drop their ballot in the mail, they are casting a ballot that counts. For those voters who mail in ballots that are later rejected, the system can provide an explanation why, whether the reason was a missing signature or a missed deadline.

A handful of states have online absentee ballot tracking systems modeled after the 2009 Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act, which allows overseas voters to track the receipt of their absentee ballots. Florida, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Virginia all allow domestic absentee voters various tracking capabilities. This legislation provides an opportunity for New York City to be a local leader in the use of technology to boost confidence in our elections.

We support making the absentee voting process simpler and more transparent. No voter who needs an absentee ballot should forfeit their vote due to a missed deadline. Voters who cast an absentee ballot through the mail should have the same certainty their vote counts as if they ran it through a scanner at their polling place.

As always, we look forward to communicating with the Council on these and other issues. I thank you once again for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

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