



**TESTIMONY FOR ANNUAL PUBLIC HEARING  
NEW YORK CITY CAMPAIGN FINANCE BOARD  
VOTER ASSISTANCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE  
Tuesday, December 15, 2015**

**Edward Cuesta  
Dominicanos USA  
369 E 149<sup>th</sup> street, 11<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Bronx, NY 10455**

**SUBJECT: 2015 Election Day and Voter advocacy experiences. Preparing for the 2016 elections.**

I'd like to begin by thanking the Campaign Finance Committee and VAAC for taking an interest in these important issues by holding this hearing today. I would also like to acknowledge the work being done by NYC Votes. The purpose of our testimony today is to share our experiences and demonstrate the need for making voting easier.

My name is Eddie Cuesta and I am the New York State Director for Dominicanos USA (DUSA). Dominicanos USA is a non-partisan organization dedicated to empowering the Dominican-American community through voter registration and mobilization, as well as encouraging civic engagement at all levels.

We are an organization whose work is focused on voter mobilization and education. Therefore, Dominicanos USA fully supports NYC Votes and its partners in their goal of making voting easier for all New Yorkers. As a result of our work, we have come to the conclusion that voting reform is essential to greater civic engagement in future elections.

In the two years since our inception, Dominicanos USA has registered over 100,000 new voters, including over 75,000 in New York City, and 25,000 in Rhode Island. In 2015 DUSA has registered over 47,000 New Yorkers. Last year, in 2014, we also organized an expansive “Get Out The Vote” program for the New York federal and state primaries, and general elections. DUSA canvassers knocked on over 60,000 doors, made almost 160,000 phone calls, and sent out over 64,000 mail notifications over the course of the year.

The response from our community has been overwhelmingly positive. Voters have thanked us for registering them to vote and informing them whenever elections took place, because the biggest barrier they faced in getting involved in the voting process was a lack of information. We need to make it easier for these voters to register and cast their vote.

We know that there is a strong desire within our community to participate in the electoral process, however, they have not been engaged politically. In our post-election turnout analysis, we found that successfully contacting a voter and informing them of an upcoming election made them substantially more likely to vote.

Voters that Dominicanos USA was able to reach with a phone call or face to face conversation, went on to vote at a significantly higher rate than the overall population of registered voters in the very same neighborhoods. In the geographic areas where we did our work, Caucasian voters had a voter turnout of 18%, African-Americans 18% as well, and Hispanics 14%. However, voters that we contacted turned out at a rate of 23%. The turnout for

our voters would have been even higher if they had access to early voting, especially for voters who travel around election time or work long hours and don't have the time to vote on weekdays.

Although we are encouraged by the results of our efforts, we cannot afford to be complacent with these results. Our experiences, and our interactions with members of our community, have given us reason to pause and truly evaluate some of the obstacles we have faced on Election Day.

As we did during the previous election cycle, Dominicanos USA conducted voter mobilization and voter protection programs leading up to the November 2015 general elections. In the week prior to this election, we knocked on over 12,000 doors, made over 23,000 phone calls and sent out over 32,000 mail pieces, reminding our voters to go out and vote, and informing them of their poll location.

The emphasis of our voter protection program was to contact voters leaving the poll site, and asking if they had any issues casting their vote. If there was an issue, DUSA poll monitors would document the experience, and attempt to help that person. We had our most experienced canvassers, who knew the local communities very well, doing this poll monitoring on Election Day.

With our presence at poll sites and outreach efforts we were able to help hundreds of voters cast their vote. However, our observations of the 2015 general elections showed us that our electoral system has a long way to go in order to become more inclusive for all voters.

Many first time voters had no idea where they were supposed to vote, and some long-time voters were surprised to find that their poll site, or voting table (AD/ED) had been changed since the last time they went out to vote. When we encountered these voters, our poll monitors

used the poll site locator smartphone application or called the Dominicanos USA office in order to help these voters find out their registration status and poll location.

In one instance, a voter could not find their name on the voter file and we could not find any election workers with access to the poll site locator or voter lookup tool. The poll monitor instead called our offices and found out that voter was supposed to vote at a different location. We believe the accessibility of these tools, and similar technology, at poll sites would facilitate more voter participation.

We also encountered many voters who arrived to their poll site with the Dominicanos USA mailer in hand and mentioned that it was the only notification they received about the November 3 Elections. Finally, the complexity of the ballot and voting machines was discouraging for many voters, especially for those with a first language other than English. We are hopeful that the testimony provided here today can help address some of these issues for future elections.

With all that said, we still believe that the Dominican-American community is coming of age politically. Dominicanos USA unveiled this past summer the findings of a groundbreaking political research project on Dominican-American political perceptions and attitudes. The portrait of the Dominican-American community that this research painted, is one of a community eager to participate in the electoral process and interested in political information. However, Dominican-Americans have not historically received the same rates of engagement, outreach and information by political campaigns. Therefore, an information deficit exists.

For example, when we asked non-registered, but eligible, citizens why they have not registered to vote, 38% simply said “I don’t know”, followed closely by 25% who said they don’t know enough about the candidates running for office, and 20% who said they don’t know

how to or that the registration process is confusing. When offered choices such as “politicians don’t really care about me”, or “voting doesn’t make any difference”, only 9% and 8%, respectively, chose these answers. In other words, an overwhelming percentage of non-registered Dominican-Americans are not registered to vote due to a civic information gap.

Although this survey specifically targeted the Dominican-American community, we know from our work across New York City that these perceptions and barriers are wide spread amongst voters and non-voters alike.

In the coming year, as we gear up for the presidential election when voting will be on everyone’s mind, Dominicanos USA intends to strengthen its civic engagement efforts. We will continue to do what has worked for us so far, and partner with stakeholders to address the issues which we have encountered in the past two years.

Dominicanos USA will be registering new voters throughout the five boroughs and other areas outside of New York City. As well as phone-banking, door to door canvassing, and sending out thousands of mail notifications, in order to mobilize voters for multiple primary elections and the November Presidential elections.

In the 2016 election cycle we want to make sure that those in our community eager to vote and learn more about our political process can do so. We look forward to engaging thousands of new voters to the political process and are hopeful that voting reform will make it easier for those citizens to exercise their right to vote. Once again, we thank the committee for taking an interest in the incredibly important goal of making the voting process more efficient and accessible for all New Yorkers, and offering us a platform to share our experiences.