



Testimony of Cathy Gray, LWVNYC Vice-President Before The Voter Assistance Advisory Committee Public Hearing regarding Election Day Experiences.

December 16, 2013

Good evening. My name is Cathy Gray and I served as the Vice-President of the League of Women Voters of the City of New York. As a multi-issue, non-partisan political organization we encourage informed and active participation in government, work to increase understanding of major policy issues, and influence public policy through advocacy and education.

For over 92 years, voter education, voter service, and election administration have been priorities for the League of Women Voters in New York. Accordingly we appreciate this opportunity to give testimony before the Voter Assistance Advisory Committee and we thank you for inviting us to participate. After the low voter turnout in the 2009 City-wide election we were confident that the turnout would improve for the 2013 election. When we learned that the number of voters for this year's election was lower than it was before the passage of the 19th amendment, we were shocked. Getting people out to vote is no easy task, but the statistics of this year give a clear indication that voters need more to become engaged in the election process.

Despite the low voter turnout, 2013 was a great year for our League. We reached several new milestones and were successful trying new ways to engage New York City voters. In early 2013 the NYC League partnered with the CUNY Graduate Center to make our Elected Official directory, *They Represent You* available online and on all web devices. In the spring, we held an education session as part of our *Lunch with the League* meeting series (open to LWVNYC members and the public) featuring the NYC Board of Elections Commissioners. In the fall we partnered with city government and various voting advocacy organizations representing a range of age and ethnic populations for our National Voter Registration Day event in Bryant Park. We were pleased to be joined by the national League president Elisabeth MacNamara and our state League president, Sally Robinson, as well as many other supporters including actress America Ferrera; Senior Vice Chancellor for University Relations at CUNY, Jay Hershenson (City University of New York); Voto Latino; Jewish Association Serving the Aging; the New York Organ Donors Network; and Rock the Vote. 2013 also marked the first time we presented debates for the General Election giving voters new perspectives from third party candidates. And, our VOTE411.org interactive voter guide saw the most traffic for our Primary and General Election voter guides since we began using the software in 2010.

During the 2013 election year the NYC League served New Yorkers by providing our usual election education programs. We held voter registration drives in three Boroughs; sponsored prime-time debates on WABC, (cosponsored by Univision and NY Daily News) for the positions of mayor, and comptroller; moderated and cosponsored eight debates with the Manhattan Neighborhood Network (a public access broadcasting station) for the Primary Election and six debates for the General Election for Manhattan Borough President and Council Districts; cosponsored debates in various public venues with NAACP, NOW, CUNY and other prominent NYC organizations; produced a ballot issue guide in English and Spanish that was distributed widely throughout the city; our website was kept up-to-date with links to our VOTE411.org interactive online voter guide, Primary and General Election debates; the Board of Elections link to locate polling sites and confirm voter registration status; and the Campaign Finance Board; and throughout the year we continued to hold education sessions through our Lunch with the League meetings.

On Election Day we took trouble calls from voters and alerted the NYCBOE to any discrepancies that required immediate attention. This year we received fewer complaints than in previous years, but had a few calls and emails complaining that poll workers were instructing voters they had to vote on a "straight party line." Some poll workers were clearly confused about NYS rules on open and closed elections. Improving poll worker training is one way we can strengthen voting in New York City.

The NYC League believes there are many ways to strengthen NYC elections. Focusing on four priorities would make significant improvements to the system currently in place. The first suggestion is to improve polling place management, poll worker training and recruitment. There was no additional training between the 2013 Primary and General Election to stress the importance of understanding how votes are cast in open and closed elections and as a result many voters were given inaccurate information. In addition we should add a split shift for poll workers as New York State Legislation permits. Perhaps VAAC will add their voice now that Doug Kellner, co-chairman of the New York State Board of Elections, has included these suggestions for the City BoE to adopt as soon as possible. As the split shift legislation is being made in other counties in NYS we should be able to add the new regulation in NYC.

A third recommendation to strengthen NYC voting is to create a better ballot design. We are pleased the NYCBOE is taking a look at this and we are hopeful that the font size will be enlarged enough to be readable without a magnifying glass. In addition to the font size, the NYC League believes it is vital that longer ballots are permitted when there are lengthy ballot proposals that need to be included. The bottom of each page should say **TURN OVER** to remind the voter there is more to vote for than just the candidates. The fourth way to improve NYC Elections is better management of how many scanners are provided at poll sites. There seem to be too many scanners at some sites while other sites do not have enough. In addition, there should be more effort put forth to improve the election processes to extend, encourage and protect voting, including paperless and Election Day registration and early voting. All of the above recommendations should be accomplished before the June 2014 Primary.

All in all, 2013 was an exciting and productive year for the New York City League. We had a chance to think outside of the box and try to engage voters in new ways. In order for our success to resonate into future election years it is vital that progress be made on the recommendations described above before the June Primary. The LWVNYC will continue to monitor the Board of Elections, along with other good government groups, and we will make recommendations along with our civic partners. In addition perhaps the VAAC (even though it is a City agency under the CFB) could also advocate for our recommendations as stated above. We all need to work together to improve the election processes to extend; encourage and protect voting, including paperless and Election Day registration, early voting, better ballot design, and improved polling place management/poll worker training. Finally, we recommend a single June primary, and measures to ensure the integrity of all ballots. Thank you for inviting the LWV to speak to the issues of voter assistance and we look forward to working with the VAAC and our voter coalition to continue to encourage a stronger and more engaged voting community in New York City.