



BROOKLYN VOTERS ALLIANCE
SUBMITTED TESTIMONY TO THE NYS SENATE ELECTION COMMITTEE
JULY 28, 2021
FOUNDERS AUDITORIUM, MEDGAR EVERS COLLEGE
1650 BEDFORD AVENUE, BROOKLYN, NY 11225

Voters deserve better

Brooklyn Voters Alliance (BVA) is an all-volunteer, non-partisan organization that works to protect and expand voting rights in New York State. We believe democracy is strongest when everyone has a voice. We promote voter participation, education, and civic engagement to ensure fairness and equal access to our fundamental right to vote. What we consistently see and hear from voters across the borough is that registering (and/or updating their registration) is difficult, voting itself is unnecessarily complicated, and their trust that their votes are actually being counted is eroding. We as voters deserve better election administration in this city.

BVA believes an election system that conforms to fundamental principles that are rooted in fairness and accuracy will result in election administration that is

1. **Voter-Centric:** The mission of the Board of Elections (BOE) must center voter service by improving the experience of every voter. The systems, processes, and practices of the BOE should facilitate ease of voting in order to support high voter participation.
2. **Professional:** Election administrators should be supported and provided with the tools and resources needed to perform effectively. BOE commissioners and election staff should be expected to meet defined standards of knowledge, skills and experience to execute functional requirements of election administration.
3. **Transparent:** Information should be easily available, clear and usable to the public in regard to the election process, decisions, and officials involved. There should be a clear process for public input and participation.
4. **Accountable:** Voting access, security and accuracy should be ensured to promote fairness in election administration. The BOE, including its leadership, staff, practices, and processes, must be answerable to the interests of the voters.

After every election, our members and other Brooklyn voters share stories that demonstrate just how far we are from these core principles. In the June 2021 primary, many voters only found out

their Early Voting poll site changed when they went to vote and were notified they were in the wrong location. The mailing they received from the BOE with their fast-pass (a great innovation!) and Election Day poll site location and hours is mandated to be sent out prior to the deadline. BVA and others have long advocated that the NYCBOE explain how poll site locations are determined and that community input be solicited, but that is yet to occur. Furthermore, during the pandemic, the NYCBOE stopped allowing for the public to even ask questions during Commissioner's meetings, which indicated that they do NOT want community input.

While we are grateful for the expansion of absentee voting during this year, there are still numerous issues with voting by mail in NY. Because we do not have postage-paid return for absentee voting, in this most recent primary, many NYC voters took advantage of the opportunity to drop off their ballots at poll sites during Early Voting. This was good for most voters, but not for all. BVA members who were poll workers shared stories of poll site coordinators who actively prevented poll workers from asking voters dropping off their ballots if they signed their oath envelopes, which seems both anti-voter and not professional. We heard from a member who dropped off her Manhattan mother-in-law's absentee ballot at an Early Voting poll site in Brooklyn. She tried to track that ballot through the online system (another system that's great to have!) to no avail. She made repeated phone calls to the BOE to find out if the ballot was received. It appears the ballot never showed up in the Manhattan BOE office and there is no way to trace it or to know if her vote was counted. A Brooklyn Borough BOE worker told the voter she shouldn't have dropped it off in Brooklyn, even though we have a single Board of Election in this city and the BOE has repeatedly informed voters they may drop off ballots at any poll site in the city. This voter was disenfranchised by incompetence and a lack of transparency and accountability. This is unacceptable.

All is not lost - we want to end on a high note. In NYC, we used ranked choice voting for the first time in 2021, and though it was a major change in how we vote and once again resulted in a 2-page ballot for many voters, voters overwhelmingly understood how RCV worked and most chose more than 1 candidate in the RCV races. The education efforts from the BOE, NYC Votes, Democracy NYC, Rank the Vote NYC, and many grassroots groups like BVA made a difference.

BVA is advocating for a more inclusive democracy and a more voter-oriented election administration system. The foundational principles of an election system that is Voter-Centric, Professional, Transparent, and Accountable will boost trust in our elections and support the leadership and the staff of the BOE itself. It is better for voters if the people who are responsible for elections have clear and consistent standards to follow, are seen as professionals, and can build and receive trust.

Thank you.

Amanda Ritchie
Co-Founder, Brooklyn Voters Alliance