

I commend the state Senate Election Committee for holding these hearings throughout the State of New York. Election issues are too important to every resident of New York for any section or segment of the population to be overlooked.

My name is Judith Hunter, and I am Chair of the Democratic Rural Conference of New York State. Fully 47 of New York's 62 counties are rural (having populations of fewer than 250,000), and our experiences with elections are not the same as in the larger counties. Any changes that affect county Boards of Election are going to happen most often in the rural counties, simply because there are so many of us.

One thing I have noticed in leading an organization covering 47 counties is how much variation there is in the structure of county Boards of Election. There are some counties with part-time Commissioners and full-time Deputy Commissioners. Some have Clerks and no Deputies. My own county (Livingston) has two full-time Commissioners and two full-time Deputy Commissioners. I believe this variation, which leads to different levels of available services, is due to the fact that county governments fund the Boards' operations, and different counties have made different decisions over the years.

Consistent levels of staffing combined with sufficient funding levels could go a long way towards bringing all of the rural counties to the same level in providing election services across the rural counties. Perhaps these could be standardized according to population. There should also be training and continuing education provided on a regular basis by the State Board of Election.

Much has been said about the "partisan" nature of the Boards of Election. I would like to emphasize that the Boards are bipartisan rather than partisan. The requirement that Boards have staffing from both major parties and that the staffing of one party be mirrored by the other's is actually a positive. It creates a structure of checks and balances; double-checking is inherent in the very make-up of county Boards. Each party makes sure the work of the other is accurate and fair, leading to better results.

Some have argued that the role of political parties in appointing Election Commissioners is problematic. But the Chairs of political county committees, as well as committee members themselves, are in fact elected officials. We collect petition signatures to serve on committees, and these seats are subject to primaries. We are every bit as accountable as other elected officials. County committee Chairs and members also have to have their recommendations for

County Commissioners approved by each county's governing body. Such approval is not automatic. Boards of Supervisors and County Legislatures do not hesitate to exercise their authority in this process.

I would like to conclude with my most important point: the only way in many of New York's rural counties to avoid having Boards of Elections becoming partisan actors is to mandate that their makeup be explicitly bipartisan. County governments are all too frequently completely dominated by one party, and it is the informal practice and expectation in those counties that county employees belong to the dominant party. I can't speak to how this works in the larger counties, but it is a fact of life in many small counties. The bipartisan structure of county Boards of Elections insures that one-party domination in a county does not carry over into the administration of voting procedures, where fairness demands parties check each other.

There is much that can be done to make sure county Boards of Elections function in a way that is more consistent and professional. But it is important that any reforms preserve the bipartisan structure of these offices.