



**CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK**  
**Testimony to the Voter Assistance and Advisory Committee**  
**Post-Election Hearing**  
**December 16, 2014**

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Good evening Chairman Chang and members of the Voter Assistance and Advisory Committee (VAAC). My name is Peggy Farber, and I am legislative counsel for Citizens Union of the City of New York. Citizens Union is a nonpartisan good government group dedicated to making democracy work for all New Yorkers. We serve as a civic watchdog, combating corruption and fighting for political reform.

Voter engagement is vital to the mission of the Citizens Union and we thank you for this opportunity to present our thoughts on the 2014 election cycle. We know voter engagement and participation is central to you, too, and applaud the work you have undertaken to encourage and increase voter engagement. There is still much work to be done.

**2014 Voter Turnout**

Voter turnout in 2014 was staggeringly low. Citywide, roughly 1 in 5 *registered* New York City voters – 21% – went to the polls in the General Election, according to an analysis of State Board of Elections data performed by the editors of Gotham Gazette, which is published by Citizens Union.

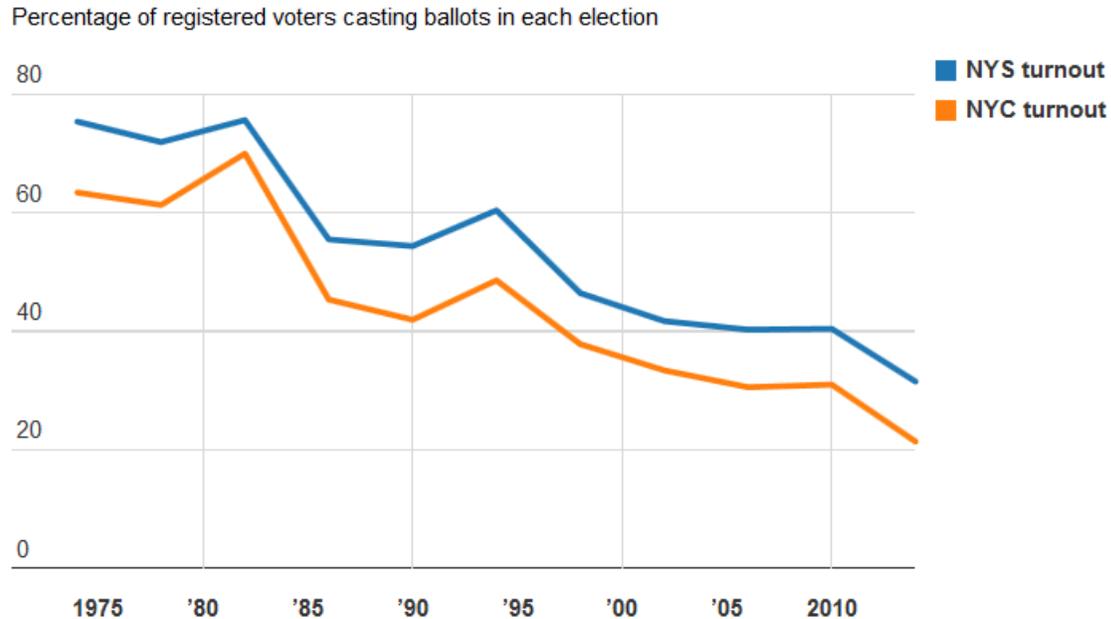
The voting habit is in freefall, as shown by the graph from Gotham Gazette on the next page. In 1974, 75.4 percent of registered voters state-wide, and 63.4 percent of city registered voters, went to the polls to vote for governor. Since then, “voter registration has vastly outstripped turnout, with the number of voters rising from 7.4 million in 1974 to 11.8 million today, which the number of voters who show up on Election Day has declined from 5.5 million in 1974 to an anemic 3.7 million this year.”<sup>1</sup>

Looking at the graph on the next page, you will see that New York City turnout is consistently lower than state turnout. In 2014, the last point on the graph, state turnout was 31.49 percent of state registered voters, and 21.37 percent of city registered voters. For an interactive version of this graph, visit the Gotham Gazette website.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Jahr, Forty Years of Freefall in New York Voter Turnout, Gotham Gazette (Nov. 13, 2014) available at <http://www.gothamgazette.com/index.php/government/5432-forty-years-of-freefall-in-new-york-voter-turnout>

## VOTER TURNOUT IN NEW YORK STATE AND NEW YORK CITY: 1974-2014



Your 2013-14 Annual Report sets forth a state legislative agenda to update the state's archaic laws and regulations that we endorse strongly. We join you in supporting early voting to allow New Yorkers to vote during the two weeks that precede Election Day. We also support Assemblyman Brian Kavanagh's bill to improve the design of the ballot. There is no reason to be using a ballot designed for 20<sup>th</sup> century machines. Citizens Union also supports Assemblyman Kavanagh's bill to modernize voter registration – establishing universal online voter registration, increasing the number of state agencies providing voter registration opportunities, and creating better voter rolls. And we, like you, support instant runoff voting.

Citizen Union also maintains a city legislative reform agenda that we urge you to consider and adopt. As you know, there has been recent progress in New York City in holding agencies to the standards of the Pro-Voter Law, enacted in 2000 to create opportunities for New Yorkers to register to vote at city agencies. The agencies, unfortunately, have failed to implement the law, as we and our partners – the Center for Popular Democracy, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law School, and the New York Public Interest Group – found when we sent testers into city agencies this past summer. Two bills, signed into law last Friday by Mayor de Blasio, are going to change this. The laws increase to 26 the number of municipal agencies offering voter registration; they require the agencies to provide New Yorkers with assistance in completing the registration applications; and they establish a protocol for measuring the performance of the agencies.

We know that you are working closely with the agencies to provide training in voter registration so the agencies can meet the performance requirements of the new laws, and we commend you for playing your vital role.

There are additional measures that that remain important and that we urge you to support. We have presented some of these at earlier hearings. They remain important.

**Other Election Reform Legislation for Consideration**

- **Intro 769** (Councilmember Mathieu Eugene) – would expand the City’s Voter Guide to include more city races and state and federal elections so voters are more informed about all contests on the ballot. The CFB has, in practice, utilized its online voter guide to inform voters of state and federal races, and this bill would formalize this expansion.
- **Intro 302** (Councilmember Brad Lander) – would require the City Board of Elections (the Board) to report data required by the Mayor’s Management Report to the City Council. the City Board provided increased data in its annual report this year, which enabled the Mayor’s office to input this data in the MRR, there is no guarantee that this data will continue to be provided.
- **Intro 508** (Councilmember Benjamin Kallos) – would allow eligible New York City residents to register online. Twenty-four states offer online voter registration in some form, many with a fully paperless process. States that allow online voter registration have saved nearly all of their processing fees. In Arizona, the per voter cost of registration has gone from 83 cents to 3 cents. This bill would require the Board of Elections to provide a secure website allowing all eligible voters to confidentially submit a voter registration application.

We urge your continued consideration of these bills as you looking ahead to future election cycles.

**What VAAC Can Do Administratively**

Citizens Union appreciates the work you do to promote voter participation, and urge you to continue to explore new ways to engage voters and to be active participants in ensuring that policies are in place to support this goal. To that end, we recommend as we have in the past that Voter Assistance and Advisory Committee advocate the pre-registration of 17 year olds.

1. **Pre-register 17-Year Olds and Register Young Adults.** The City Charter specifically states that Voter Assistance and Advisory Committee shall, “educate youth about the importance of voting and to encourage eligible youth to register to vote.” Seventeen year olds in New York are able to pre-register to vote as long as they will turn 18 by the end of the calendar year. Yet only five 17-year olds in all of New York City were pre-registered according to the City Board’s 2012 annual report, down from only eleven in 2011. The Voter Assistance and Advisory Committee could work to increase this stunningly low number by creating programs to register and track the registration of 17-year olds. the committee should work to ensure implementation of the Young Adult Voter

Registration Act (YARVA).<sup>2</sup> The committee should work with principals at the hundreds of high schools in the city to ensure YARVA is implemented, and track the number of completed registration forms that are submitted to the City Board.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to present Citizens Union's testimony, and am happy to answer any questions you might have.

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<sup>2</sup> Young Adult Voter Registration Act. Available at:  
<http://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=441698&GUID=C38890D4-E9A0-460A-86A1-ED38D8D08178&Options=ID|Text|&Search=young+adult+voter+registration+act>