



Written Testimony of
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Executive Director and Founder
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Submitted to the New York State Senate Standing Committee on Elections at the Hearing Regarding the
Administration of Elections and Youth Voting Rights

September 21, 2021

Good Afternoon,

I would like to thank the Chair, Senator Zellnor Myrie and all the members of the Elections Committee for offering us the opportunity to testify today. I'm Brianna Cea, Executive Director and Founder of Generation Vote (GenVote). This year, GenVote will spark a new intersectional youth-led movement that fights for our right to vote and a just democracy for all. As the co-chairs of the Let NY Vote Youth working group, we appreciate this opportunity to share how New York can improve its election administration process to increase youth voter turnout and empower the next generation of New Yorkers.

1. The Importance of Young Voters

18-29-year-olds make up 21% of the voting eligible population nationwide.¹ The new generation of voters is the most diverse in our nation's history, and will continue to grow in the coming years. Last year, we saw record-breaking turnout rates among young voters. In 2020, nearly half of America's eligible 18-29-year-olds voted in the presidential election.²

2. New York's Youth Turnout is Still Exceedingly Low

We applaud the Committee's efforts to address the Covid-19 crisis and pass legislation that improves how we administer elections during a global pandemic. These improvements, such as allowing voters to apply for absentee ballots online and no-excuse absentee voting, made voting in New York more accessible for

¹ Center for American Progress, *America's Electoral Future*, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/politics-and-elections/reports/2020/10/19/491870/americas-electoral-future-3/>

² Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, *Half of Youth Voted in 2020, An 11-Point Increase from 2016*, Tufts University, April 29, 2021, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/half-youth-voted-2020-11-point-increase-2016>



students and working-class voters. In New York City, youth voter turnout increased by 3.4% from the 2016 presidential election, resulting in 59.3% of young people voting in 2020.³ A recent estimate by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University found that New York's statewide youth voter turnout rate increased from 37% in 2016 to 45% in 2020.⁴

While improving, New York's youth voter turnout is significantly lower than other states. **In 2020, New York had the second lowest youth turnout rate in the Northeast.** Our neighbor, New Jersey, had the highest youth turnout rate in the country (67%). In the 2018 midterm elections, New York also had the second lowest youth turnout rate in the country at 16.4% (followed by Arkansas at 15.5%).⁵

As this committee prepares for the 2022 midterm elections, this leads us to an important question: Why does New York consistently have one of the lowest youth voter turnout rates in the country?

3. Lessons from the GenVote 2020 Youth Voting Rights Listening Tour

At Generation Vote, we've spoken to hundreds of young voters to understand the most pressing voting rights issues facing our generation. We are also founders and co-chairs of the Let NY Vote Youth Working Group, the largest youth-focused voting rights coalition of youth organizations, students and educators in the state. This year, we embarked on a national Youth Voting Rights Listening Tour to hear from young voters about their experiences voting in the 2020 election and fighting against youth voter suppression. The tour consists of virtual listening sessions in New Hampshire, New York, Texas, Michigan and Florida.

We held our New York Youth Voting Rights Listening Tour session in July 2021. Our session brought together student organizers from SUNY Binghamton, Bard College, CUNY, Fordham University, NYU, and Cornell. We were also honored to have Assemblywoman Nily Rozic speak about A454, which would mandate polling locations on campuses with more than 300 registered voters. As part of our listening tour, I've attached written testimonies that we received from young New Yorkers in the Appendix of this testimony.

³ NYC Votes, *Voter Analysis Report 2020- 2021*, New York Campaign Finance Board, April 30, 2021.

⁴ Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, *State-by-State 2020 Youth Voter Turnout: The Northeast*, Tufts University, April 13, 2021, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-state-2020-youth-voter-turnout-northeast>

⁵ Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, *Final Analysis of State by State Youth Voter Turnout Shows Increases Across the Country*, Tufts University, May 20th, 2019.



Across the state, the students shared their experiences with several barriers to getting out the youth vote in the 2020 election:

Inaccessible polling locations for early voting and general elections: Students in Broome County and Dutchess County experienced severe challenges with polling locations during the early voting and general election period.

According to several Binghamton student leaders, none of the Broome County early voting polling locations were convenient for Binghamton students without cars. And this was not for a lack of trying...

Since 2019, Broome County has had three early voting locations.⁶ Students at GenVote @ Binghamton and the Andrew Goodman Foundation attempted to bring an early voting location to Binghamton University. Our students were informed by the local Board of Elections (BOE) that there were not enough resources to add a fourth early voting site in Broome County for the 2020 election. However, just weeks before Election Day, a new early voting site was added off-campus to the Taste NY Building.

Without an accessible early voting location at Binghamton University, thousands of students were forced to use the single campus polling location on Election Day. This resulted in long lines with 1-2 hour waiting periods.⁷ The long lines discouraged students from casting their ballots due to time constraints from classes and midterm exams. One student shared her frustration with the election administration process: “It feels as if the BOE just really doesn’t want to accommodate students and the universities don’t care as well.”

Similarly, students at Bard College had to sue the local BOE to get an accessible polling site on their campus for the 2020 general election. Despite Bard students making up 65% of the district’s electorate, the nearest polling location could not be reached by public transportation and was not ADA compliant.⁸ In 2020, a group of Bard students and administrators filed a lawsuit to bring a polling site to Bard’s campus. The court first denied the request because the Dutchess County Board of Elections claimed that it was too

⁶ Ashley Biviano, “Early Voting in New York: Here Are the Broome County Locations, Dates and Times,” *Press Connects*, May 2, 2019,

<https://www.pressconnects.com/story/news/local/2019/05/02/new-york-early-voting-broome-county-locations-date-s-times/3644737002/>

⁷ Rick Jervis, “Despite Obstacles, Young Voters are ‘Raising Hell’ With Historic Early Voting Turnout,” *USA Today*, October 31, 2020,

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/10/31/young-voters-suppression-tactics-early-voting-election-record-numbers/6071293002/>

⁸ Najwa Jamal, “Even Blue States Suppress Student Voters,” *The Nation*, March 2, 2021,

<https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/voter-suppression-new-york/>



close to Election Day. However, the next day, an additional polling place was opened in the same town. Once the plaintiffs appealed the lawsuit, the court granted their request and a polling location was opened at Bard's campus.⁹

After a decade of voter intimidation and youth voter suppression in Dutchess County, Bard College filed another lawsuit after the Dutchess County Board of Elections failed to designate Bard College as a primary polling location in 2021.

Serious administrative challenges at Board of Elections confused new voters and young poll-workers: Students across the state experienced confusion at local board of elections over student poll-worker recruitment efforts, and in some instances, were disenfranchised due to serious administrative challenges at local BOEs.

As an official partner of Power to the Polls, the first national campaign to recruit young poll workers for the 2020 election, Generation Vote worked with partner organizations across the state to educate and recruit students to become poll workers. Due to the decentralized nature of our board of elections, this was particularly challenging since each local BOE has different instructions for youth poll workers.

In New York City, high-school and college-aged students shared that many of their peers were motivated to sign up as poll workers but found the process unclear and discouraging. For high-school students, this confusion was caused in-part by the current requirement to receive paper sign-offs from "school officials" to apply to be a poll worker. During a pandemic, when schools are shut down or function remotely, and educators are under tremendous pressure, this cumbersome paper process was almost an impossible task.

Although we commend the Board of Elections's investment in digital and print campaigns to recruit new poll workers -especially among young people - we were concerned that the lack of information regarding eligibility requirements for 17-year-olds and rigid shift requirements would prevent students from being able to serve as poll workers. As a result, we drafted a letter of recommendations for the NYC BOE to improve their student poll worker program. Shortly after, the NYC BOE published their first web page for high school student poll workers.

In Oneida and Broome County, students were discouraged from participating in the political process through other serious administrative challenges at local BOEs. In 2020, the Oneida County Board of Elections failed to register 2,418 voters who applied on time through the DMV online portal - the motor

⁹ Victor Feldman, "Bard, Alleging Voter Suppression, Sues Again To Locate Polling Site On-Campus," *Red Hook Daily Catch*, July 22, 2021, <https://www.thedailycatch.org/articles/bard-sues-again-to-locate-polling-site-on-campus-for-good-this-time/>



voter portal which was supposed to make voter registration more accessible for transient voters, especially young people.¹⁰ In addition to failing to register several student voters, the student-heavy election districts in Binghamton had some of the highest affidavit ballot rejection rates in NY-22. According to recent litigation, poll-workers mistakenly told students to report their home addresses instead of their college addresses. When the ballots were contested, at least 20 ballots cast by students were not counted in one of the most contentious congressional races in the country.¹¹

Lack of outreach and education re: new election procedures in high schools and colleges: The timing, pace, and scope of the current public health crisis disrupted schools across New York, bringing civic engagement initiatives and school voter registration drives to a standstill. In 2020, 90,730 young people turned 18 in New York City and over a half million more eligible 18-29-year-olds faced limited opportunities to register to vote and obtain a ballot.¹²

To make it easier for people to register and vote, Governor Cuomo announced a series of executive orders throughout the 2020 spring semester. From SUNY Cortland, to NYU and CUNY, our students commonly reported confusion over the new election procedures when registering young people and applying for absentee applications. For instance, if students wanted to apply for an absentee ballot they may not be aware that they have to change their address. If students were registered at their college addresses and were suddenly displaced as a result of school closures, they were more at risk to not receive their absentee applications.

Since many high schools, colleges and universities do not have robust civic engagement programs -or if they do, they are often understaffed- it was difficult for student advocates and administrators to keep up with the recent changes in election administration. This led to inadequate educational and outreach efforts to newly registered voters across the state. To support our advocates, we circulated a letter urging college and high school administrators to take swift action to notify their students of the recent election changes.

¹⁰ Patrick Lohmann, "Oneida County Botched 2,400 Voter Signups, Preventing their Votes in Brindisi-Tenney Race," *Syracuse.com*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.syracuse.com/politics/cny/2021/01/oneida-county-botched-2400-voter-signups-preventing-their-votes-in-brindisi-tenney-race.html>

¹¹ Claudia Tenney v Oswego County Board of Elections et al., https://www.democracydocket.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2021.01.29_Order-on-Ballot-Challenges-1.pdf

¹² New York City Campaign Finance Board, *NYC Votes Finds New Voter Registrations Plummeted Due to Coronavirus; Releases 2020 Registration Data During Public Hearing*, July 2, 2020, <https://nyccfb.info/media/press-releases/nyc-votes-finds-new-voter-registrations-plummeted-due-to-coronavirus-releases-2020-registration-data-during-public-hearing/>



Unfortunately, 2020 was also the first year that the pre-registration law kicked into effect. Between mass school closures and the lack of explicit processes from local BOEs to implement pre-registration in high schools, many of our highschool students and partner organizations did not have the opportunity to pre-register our state's newest voters. In 2021, a study by the Civics Center found that "only 61,567 of the state's estimated 484, 317 16- and 17-year-olds were pre-registered to vote. That's just 13% statewide - a failing grade by any high school's standards."¹³

In New York City, the pre-registration rate is just 8%. One of our working group members expressed concern over the lack of structure and accountability in implementing the new pre-registration law: "We work with hundreds of young people in high schools across New York City, yet none are familiar with pre-registration. In effect, it doesn't exist and feels like a facade."

4. Recommendations for Improving Youth Voter Turnout

The issues raised by young people across the state from the 2020 election are not new to Generation Vote and our allies in the Let NY Vote Youth Working Group. From inaccessible polling locations, to under-sourced civic engagement offices on college campuses, to voter registration and recruitment challenges at local board of elections, it is clear that we have a long way to go to create a robust civic culture for all young people in New York. That is why in November 2019, Generation Vote and Let NY Vote held the first statewide convening centered on voting rights and civic engagement for young people in New York.¹⁴ The following recommendations are a part of the first New York Youth Voting Rights and Engagement Platform and address the relevant challenges faced by young voters in the 2020 general election (full platform attached in Appendix):

Mandate on campus poll sites: The State Legislature should mandate on-campus polling locations at colleges or universities, on Election Day and during early voting.

Expand registration and civic engagement practices at CUNY/SUNY schools: The State Legislature should expand civic engagement practices at SUNY/CUNY schools with a new Student Voter Empowerment Act, which would mandate public institutions of higher education to develop voter

¹³ Dylan Morrissey, *Youth voters in New York City high schools could shift the Mayoral race, if they're registered*, Civic Center, May 13, 2021, <https://thecivicscenter.org/blog/2021/5/13/youth-voters-in-new-york-city-high-schools-could-shift-the-mayoral-race-if-theyre-registered>

¹⁴Generation Vote, *First New York Youth Voting Rights and Engagement Platform*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.genvote.org/ny-youth-voting-rights.html>



engagement plans, provide students with regular election information and appoint on-campus coordinators to lead such plans.

Invest in robust recruitment and training programs for young poll workers. Historically, 55% of all New York’s poll workers are over the age of 60, making them especially vulnerable to public health crises. We recommend that the State Board of Elections provide standard recommendations for youth election worker recruitment programs to local boards of elections and that local boards advertise their partnerships with high schools and colleges. There are several notable youth election worker recruitment programs in jurisdictions across the country, such as Chicago, Illinois, Minneapolis, Minnesota and Montgomery County, Maryland.¹⁵ Considering student poll workers are also more likely to develop a civic culture of lifelong voting and recurring poll work, recruiting young poll workers this year and beyond will lay the ground for new cohorts of poll workers in future elections.

Create a Robust Pre-registration Program for 16 and 17-Year-Olds. Passing a pre-registration law is just the first step to engaging potential young voters, but does not guarantee a robust statewide pre-registration program. In order to maximize the number of 16- and 17-year-old registrants, this new law should include explicit directives for how local boards of education can promote student voter registration (such as creating high school voter registration days and designating high school voter coordinators), require county boards of elections to report the number of students registered through their pre-registration program to the State Board of Elections, and advertise online pre-registration.

Lower the Voting Age to 16 for State and Local Elections. Under the current election administration, 16- and 17-year-olds do not have a voice in our political process since they cannot vote in any primary or general elections. New York has the potential to create transformative change by implementing automatic pre-registration and lowering the voting age. The State Legislature should lower the voting age to 16 for local and state elections and provide new voters with robust civics education. This requires a constitutional amendment. Until such an amendment passes, the State Legislature should allow 17-year olds to vote in a primary election if they will turn 18 by the general election.

With the 2022 midterms around the corner, the stakes have never been higher for New York to make it simpler, not harder, for young voters to make their voices heard. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

¹⁵ For more recommendations, see William Roberts, Danielle Root, Michael Sozan, *Recruiting and Retaining Poll Workers During the Coronavirus Pandemic*, Center for American Progress, September 21, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2020/09/21/490586/recruiting-retaining-poll-workers-coronavirus-pandemic/>

Written Testimony of
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Submitted to the New York State Senate Standing Committee on Elections for the Public
Hearing To Solicit Testimony on Voting Experiences and Issues from Voters in New York City

July 27, 2021

Firstly, I would like to thank all the members of the New York State Standing Committee on Elections for offering the opportunity to testify today as well as Senator Myrie for his commitment to election reform in New York State. For the past four years I have worked with Election@Bard, a nonpartisan student organization who collaborates with the Andrew Goodman Foundation, to register, educate, and engage young voters. Sharing the experiences myself and my peers have gained, I believe, is crucial to creating an election system that is robust and protects the voices of all voters. I appreciate the opportunity to share my experience as a young New York Voter and to voice my support for Senate Bill 4658.

Every November as election results begin trickling in we often hear the same political punditry: that young people do not vote, that turnouts are modest at best, and perhaps even that young people do not put in enough effort to cast their ballot. These statements, of course, don't paint the full picture of what it means to be a young voter in New York. As you all know, a series of impediments might prevent a young person from voting. Perhaps they were not raised in a family that couldn't or didn't vote or maybe they live in a rural community and don't have access to transportation. I am sure that as members of this committee you are all incredibly aware of roadblocks such as these. Today, however, I would like to speak to another challenge that is particularly important to my experience as a young voter, and one so important to many young voters across the state; access to polling locations on college campuses.

This May, I graduated from Bard College, located in Northern Dutchess County. It is safe to say that Bard is an institution that values civic engagement both out in the community and at the polling booth evidenced by the current student voter registration of approximately 85.2%. The ability to practice this right, however, has been challenged for decades despite the efforts of student organizers. The polling place assigned to Red Hook's 5th Election District, the district in which Bard is located, is a small church building located on a winding unlit road without a sidewalk and inaccessible by public transportation. The allocated location's size allows only for the necessary voting equipment, poll workers, and a few voters. During the 2018 Midterms, turnout was so large and the space was so small that lines of voters waited out in the rain. All of

these characteristics point to the space's insufficiency to serve as the polling place for local voters, 60% of whom are on-campus Bard voters.

The most obvious solution is to use a space on Bard's campus as the polling location. A large and accessible location, such as the Multi-Purpose Room, provides both local community members and Bard students the opportunity to vote comfortably. After a 2020 Lawsuit by Administrators and Students of Bard, along with the Andrew Goodman Foundation, Bard was finally able to secure an on-campus polling place that served the local election district in combination with the previous site. Voters were lined up as early as 6 AM as the polling station opened and continuously voted throughout the day.

This major success came after decades of student organizing that was repeatedly undone by lack of cooperation from the Dutchess County Board of Elections. Unfortunately, despite the success of the polling location, the site's future is left in the lurch once again after a continued lack of transparency from the Board of Elections. Situations similar to those at Bard point to a necessity for state legislative action. It is for this reason that I would like to thank those members of the committee who continue to support Senate Bill 4658 and would urge them to encourage the same support of their Assembly counterparts for Assembly Bill 454.

In many cases, college campus polling places not only provide the opportunity for students to exercise their civic duty, but a convenient location for local voters to do the same. Bard College's example of litigation, although successful in the 2020 Election, is inaccessible for so many others making it even clearer that the state must help play a role in ensuring safe and accessible polling locations.

Dear NY State Senate Elections Committee:

My name is Shelli Cohen and I've witnessed a variety of mishaps during the 2020 election. I reside here in Brooklyn, but I went to school at SUNY Binghamton, where I served as a Vote Everywhere Ambassador for the Andrew Goodman Foundation. Starting August 18th and continuing through September, my team and I helped many students register to vote. A week before the voter registration deadline, students were stopping by the Center for Civic Engagement, texting and calling me because their voter registration still wasn't showing up online. This demonstrated that the BOE was too overwhelmed. They were understaffed and were struggling to process the forms at same time as prepping all of the absentee ballots.

Students face many barriers to voting, most prominently, we frequently move. Therefore, many students tend to have to vote via affidavit ballot. For example, students tend to register to vote as freshmen, who live on campus, and forget to update their registration when they move off-campus as upperclassmen. So, we educated students to go to their polling place associated with their current address and vote via affidavit. Students followed our instructions and poll workers sent them to campus to vote. We sent them back, but some were so frustrated, they just gave up.

Even the students that managed to vote affidavit at an off-campus polling site faced problems. Poll workers instructed students to put their parents' address on the form, instead of their address in Broome County. This is obviously problematic because they were trying to vote in NY-22, not back home. These ballots were contested in the NY-22 congressional race and the judge threw out the ballots because students had signed a legal document that they lived outside the district in which they were voting. So, 20 students who simply followed directions did not have a voice in choosing their representation in 2020. These two experiences show poor training of poll workers.

The next issue I encountered was very poor communication from the State BOE, especially regarding absentee ballot drop-off. Many students decide to remain voters back home and vote via absentee ballot. We anticipated students bringing their absentee ballots from outside of Broome County to the campus polling site to drop them off because of the USPS slowdown. We were in close communication with the Broome County BOE to find out whether these ballots would be accepted. Our BOE was trying to find out from the protocol from the State BOE, but there was no protocol. Broome County decided to accept them, timestamped them as received on Election Day and mailed them out the following day, but what did other counties do? Some accepted the ballots, but arrived back at the BOE after midnight, so the timestamp listed the day after Election day. Because they weren't timestamped **by** Election day, the ballots were discarded.

In addition, due to the USPS delays, voters were receiving two different deadlines for absentee ballots (by when to apply/return the ballot): the legal deadline and the "real" deadline. Even so, people didn't get their absentee ballots in time and many ballots arrived too late, even though they postmarked them in time.

Lastly, there was and still is blatant student voter suppression. I worked on trying to bring an early on-campus polling site to SUNY Binghamton because there are over 20,000 students, staff and faculty that walk through the campus daily. When I contacted the BOE, I was informed that there was not enough funding nor resources to add a new early polling site in 2020. I had sympathy for the overworked BOE staff, but weeks before Election Day, the Broome County BOE opened a fourth early polling site, which was not on SUNY Binghamton's campus.

There is much to say about the NY-22 congressional race, sticky notes on contested ballots, voter registration forms not filed and the discovery of ballots a month after Election Day, but I want to focus on ways we can make our election system better, especially for students. The youth are the future leaders of this country and I believe it is your responsibility to make it easier for them to be active participants in our democracy.

I am very pleased that same day voter registration and vote-by-mail will be on the ballot in November, but we need more. Specifically, I urge you to mandate both Election Day and early on-campus polling sites. There are many advantages. One, the staff can work with the university to be more prepared to answer common questions from student voters. For example, at SUNY Binghamton's polling site, there is one person designated to helping voters fill out affidavit ballots properly. Two, it's been proven that student voter participation rates increase. Three, students tend to work the polling place. The existence of the polling place encourages civic engagement!

Next, students should have time off to vote just like everyone else. Friends of mine had many hours of class and tests on Election Day. Why are students expected to have the time to travel to vote? In general, the BOE needs more funding to be able to properly manage elections. They need better trainings for poll workers and we need to USPS to get back up to speed.

Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony and hear about the experiences of student voters. My testimony is only a small fraction of the obstacles students face to vote. I hope this letter encourages you to take steps to expand voter access, especially for students.

Sincerely,

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Written Testimony of
Sadia Saba
Previous Co-Director of Election@Bard
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Submitted to the New York State Senate Standing Committee on Elections for the Public
Hearing To Solicit Testimony on Voting Experiences and Issues from Voters in New York City

July 27, 2021

I would like to thank all the members of the New York State Standing Committee on Elections for offering the opportunity to testify today. At Election@Bard, our mission focuses on voter registration, engagement, and education of our student body and the wider community of young voters. As an organization dedicated to amplifying young voices and making the political process more accessible, we appreciate the opportunity to discuss the importance of youth civic engagement and voting rights across our state.

My name is Sadia Saba and I am a recent graduate of Bard College, which is located in Annandale on the Hudson. For the past 4 years as a registered voter in Dutchess County, I have been directly impacted by flawed voter administration and suppression especially in college. For years, colleges in Dutchess County, including Bard College, have been subject to various rulings that intentionally work to discourage and suppress political involvement of college students. Bard College has been trying to get a polling place on campus for over 5 years, despite the persistent activism from student leaders. We have been told time and time again that changing the polling place would not be possible because of the proximity to the census or because residency status of students is questionable, as though residency for 4 or more years in one location was illegitimate. Frankly, this is the language of voter disenfranchisement disguised through legal arguments. There is a need for not only the individual litigation on the part of the college but legal change on the part of the state. State Senate Bill S4658 can make this necessary change happen.

Bard's current polling place is located at the Church of St. John the Evangelist in Barrytown, NY. Despite its years of service as the local polling place, it is clear that the current location is not appropriate to accommodate for the large concentration of voters within the district, 70% of which are Bard students. The space is not ADA compliant and is inaccessible especially for those with motor disabilities. In addition to not being able to accommodate large crowds of voters due to the small space, the polling place is also located on a small, unlit road with no sidewalks and is inaccessible by public transportation despite New York State Law § 4-104 [6] [a] which rules against this.

As a first generation American who is the child of immigrants, crucial democratic practices such as voting has not been commonplace in my household because of lack of accessibility and engagement of the political process. As a first year student at Bard, I joined the leadership of Election@Bard, the largest nonpartisan voting rights initiative on campus and part of the Andrew Goodman Foundation's Vote Everywhere network. I worked alongside dedicated, determined student activists to make the polling place as accessible to voters as possible. In 2020, months before the pivotal presidential election, I was one of the plaintiffs to sue the Dutchess County Board of Elections to get a polling place on campus- one that would be accessible, safe, and convenient especially with the growing threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. The effort was successful and a polling place was granted for the presidential election. Bard students and community members alike were able to vote comfortably and safely.

However, the County's efforts to curb voter accessibility and suppress young people's votes has not ended. The Board of Elections has taken the extraordinary measure to refuse to certify a District 5 polling location for the November 2, 2021 General Election. Another lawsuit has been filed in response to the BOE's attempt to completely disregard its statutory obligations to designate a polling location by the state deadline, and to erroneously presume that the status quo may apply as a substitute. The American Constitution's 26th amendment protects the right to vote for young people, and what can be seen in places such as Dutchess County is a symptom of a much larger effort of voter suppression across the nation. Restrictive laws like the ones my communities have been subject to put marginalized communities at a significant disadvantage. New York State must be the beacon of voter accessibility, and model for democracy, for the rest of the country and State Senate Bill S4658 can help us achieve just that.

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Submitted to the New York State Senate Committee on Elections "To Review Elections Administration and Voting Rights in New York State."

July 28th, 2021

I would like to thank Brendan Cushing, the Director of Programming for Generation Vote (GenVote), the National Youth Rights Association for helping me testify today, and this committee for letting me testify. Generation Vote sparks an intersectional youth-led movement that fights for our right to vote and a just democracy for all. At NYRA, we are working on creating a movement and spreading awareness on the importance of youth rights, including the lowering of the voting age to 16. As a 17 year-old, I have found it to be difficult to express myself because voting for what I believe in is simply not possible. I am in support of lowering the voting age to 16 because I think that it is a crucial step in maintaining a fair democracy.

Voting is one of the most important aspects of democracy, yet a large population of able teens are left out of this because they can't vote. According to Vote16USA¹, young people who are 16 to 17 years old have the necessary civic knowledge to vote, and there is not much of a difference in these skills from voters of the age of 18. Lowering the voting age will also increase the civic discipline and education among people who are 16 and 17 because they will need to learn what they are voting for and who they think best represents their ideas.

Starting to vote at the age of 16 would also start a good habit for youth to know how to vote and continue this habit for the rest of their lives. Voter turnout among the age group of 18-29 in New York City increased by 3.4% from the 2016 to the 2020 elections, despite the profound difficulties that COVID-19 presented, according to *Amny Newsletter*². However, only 48% of eligible voters of this age group voted in the 2016 elections, according to the *New York Times*³. That poor turnout could be the result, at least in part, of not knowing how to vote and not understanding basic procedures. If teens were empowered with this basic knowledge about voting procedures, once they were away in college, voting would not be as difficult for them and therefore turnout for college-age students would likely be much higher. In Takoma Park, a suburb of Washington D.C., the voting age was lowered to 16 and the turnout rate exceeded every other demographic in the city's 2013 and 2015 elections, and quadrupled the overall average of voter turnout, according to vox⁴. This bodes very well for long term commitment for long term responsibility.

Teens of the age of 16 and 17 are also impacted by political issues just like eligible voters are. They can work untimed hours and pay taxes, a clear case of taxation without representation. In New York teens can also start driving when they turn 16, and can be tried in court as an adult. 16 and 17 year olds are required to be in school, yet they cannot vote on school policies.

In school elections for student-held positions, I have seen everyone voting excitedly to vote for the people they believe in and interested in finding out who stands for what. Since 16 and 17 year olds cannot vote, this has been the only time I have experienced voting, but I think the enthusiasm that teens have when casting their school ballots will carry over to official elections and voting. Also, during my Syracuse University Project Advance American history class, my teacher asked us students why we should not be able to vote. None of us were able to come up with any reasons, and the entire class got excited because we felt like we should have say in legislation that actually affects us.

I want to thank the committee for giving me this opportunity to testify. In conclusion, I think that 16 year olds are fully capable of voting, and given the chance would strengthen our democracy in terms of voting. 16 year olds would be able to start the habit of voting at an easier time in their life, and could have an actual decision on policies and who they believe should be in power. I urge the committee to vote in favor of the NY Senate Bill A611 / S478

1: <https://vote16usa.org/reasons-for-lowing-voting-age-16/>

2 :

<https://www.amny.com/news/young-new-york-city-voters-went-to-the-polls-in-2020-election-analysis-finds/>

3 : <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/08/upshot/youth-voting-2020-election.html>

4 : <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/11/7/13347080/voting-age-election-16>

Written Testimony of
Amanda McBain
Leadership Team Member
Generation Vote @ NYU

Submitted to the New York State Senate Standing Committee on Elections at the Hearing
Regarding Voting Experiences and Issues in New York City

July 28, 2021

Committee Chair Myrie and all members of the Senate Elections Committee, thank you for granting us the opportunity to testify. My name is Amanda McBain, and I am a member of Generation Vote @ NYU's leadership team. Generation Vote sparks an intersectional youth-led movement that fights for our right to vote and a just democracy for all. At GenVote @ NYU specifically, we have worked to alleviate the barriers to voting for youth voters in New York City through various efforts, including educating voters on ranked-choice voting and successfully advocating for an on-campus early voting site in 2020. As a youth-led organization aiming to improve voting accessibility and the overall voting experience, we appreciate this opportunity to discuss voting experiences and issues in New York City. It is essential that we continue to advance youth voting, and addressing the barriers to voting accessibility will allow us to do so.

I. Youth Voter Turnout

Historically, youth voters, aged 18 to 29, have been depicted as a disengaged electorate and a challenging group to mobilize. However, in 2020, youth voters utilized the polls to change that narrative. During the 2020 general election, the youth voter turnout rate in New York City was 59.3 percent, undergoing an increase of 3.4 percent from the 2016 general election.¹ This increase also placed New York City significantly above New York state's youth voter turnout rate of 45 percent.² The improvement in New York City's youth voter turnout rate not only evinces the impact of 2020's unprecedented political climate but also appears to demonstrate the effectiveness of voter engagement and accessibility efforts in New York City. Such efforts including, increasing the number of early voting locations and expanding early voting hours, have made more voting opportunities available for voters, and voters are taking advantage of them, as evident in the 36.3 percent of general election voters who voted early in 2020 compared to 7.6 percent in 2019.³

However, while there was demonstrated improvement among youth voters in New York City in 2020, the youth voter turnout rate viewed relative to additional states indicates there is significant room for improvement, and that more impactful efforts need to be undertaken to address this difference. In 2020, Minnesota and New Jersey experienced youth voter turnout rates of 65 and 67 percent, respectively.⁴ The advancement of youth voter turnout in Minnesota and New Jersey should indicate to us that it is possible to further youth voting and that there

¹ NYC Votes, *Voter Analysis Report 2020-2021*, New York City Campaign Finance Board, April 30, 2021.

² Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, *State-by-State 2020 Youth Voter Turnout: The Northeast*, Tufts University, April 13, 2021.

³ NYC Votes, *Voter Analysis Report 2020-2021*, New York City Campaign Finance Board, April 30, 2021.

⁴ Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, *Half of Youth Voted in 2020, An 11-Point Increase from 2016*, Tufts University, April 29, 2021.

remain many aspects of New York City's election system that are not working in complete favor of voters.

II. Polling Place Accessibility

Throughout the 2020 voting period, New York City voters flooded social media with posts highlighting long lines and long wait times across polling sites. Many voters, including myself, had to wait between three to five hours to cast their vote, a time at least two and half hours longer than the Board of Elections' regulated standard wait time.^{5,6} Subjecting voters to such unreasonable wait times and long lines is an unjust barrier to voting that can serve to deter many voters from casting their ballot. According to an estimate by the Bipartisan Policy Center, over 560,000 eligible voters failed to vote in 2016 due to polling place management problems, such as long lines.⁷ The burden of long lines compounded with the obligations of voters, such as jobs and school, can make choosing not to vote a much easier choice than doing so.

Further, in 2020, we also witnessed the inequity that exists in how the Board of Elections allocates voters to polling stations, which would go on to contribute to the aforementioned barriers to voting. During the early voting period of the general election, the Robert Wagner Middle School located in the Upper East Side had 118,753 assigned voters, prompting hours-long waits to vote for most voters. However, the NYU Skirball Center for the Performing Arts located in Greenwich Village had only 8,317 assigned voters.⁸ This significant disparity present among these two voting sites demonstrates the managerial issues and unfairness of the New York City election system. For youth voters, who have long been taught that members of their generation are not active participants in the political process, burdensome and unjust voting circumstances such as this can further dissuade them from casting their ballot.

III. Improving Turnout Through Voting Accessibility

It is imperative that we address these barriers to voting, for it will allow us to ensure that every single eligible voter has an equal opportunity to cast their ballot. As previously mentioned, long lines and wait times have notoriously lowered voter turnout, and we thank you for already taking action on this issue with the passage of S4658, which mandates on-campus polling sites. To further solve this problem, we must ensure that the city works to extend the early voting dates and hours and increase the number of available early voting polling sites in areas with overcrowded polling stations. Doing so will ensure that a larger number of voters are presented with the opportunity to cast their ballot and will be able to do so with greater ease.

While implementing these changes are necessary courses of action, they are only a few acts of many needed to be had in order to see the immediate change that New York City elections require. We must also recognize that a failure to act against these barriers to voting will

⁵ Shayna Jacobs, "Long lines, other issues plague early voting in New York City, prompting calls of voter suppression," *The Washington Post*, October 31, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/early-voting-lines-new-york/2020/10/30/0e3a212c-1ad1-11eb-82db-60b15c874105_story.

⁶ NYC Votes, *Voter Analysis Report 2020-2021*, New York City Campaign Finance Board, April 30, 2021.

⁷ Weil et al., *The 2018 Voting Experience: Polling Place Lines*, Bipartisan Policy Center, November 2019.

⁸ Brigid Bergin, "About That Long Early Voting Line: Find Out How Many People Were Assigned To Your Poll Site," *Gothamist*, October 27, 2020, <https://gothamist.com/news/about-long-early-voting-line-find-out-how-many-people-were-assigned-your-poll-site>.

serve to further discourage a generation of voters and future voters from becoming active participants in the political process. Ensuring a strong youth voter turnout is essential to maintaining a well-functioning democracy, and improving voting accessibility by way of extending early voting hours and expanding early voting sites can help us meet that goal.