ADVANCING OUR COMMUNITY

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New York City Council
Committee on Governmental Operations:
NYC's Early Voting Rollout
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Good afternoon, my name is Amy Torres, Director of Policy & Advocacy at The Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC). CPC thanks the honorable chair Fernando Cabrera and members of the Committee on Governmental Operations for the opportunity to testify on New York City's inaugural Early Voting period. Our testimony includes recommendations to address the needs of low-income, immigrant, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities that we serve in 2020.

CPC is the nation's largest social services organization for Asian Americans, bridging social services to social change for 60,000 low-income, immigrant, and AAPI New Yorkers each year. CPC's community members come from more than 40 countries, speaking 25 distinct languages and dialects. We provide over 50 contracted programs in 35 sites in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens, ranging from family support, education, and economic and community empowerment. Often, CPC sites and programs fill gaps in language access, cultural competency, and community trust for seniors, parents, children, and new arrivals. In addition to our direct services, CPC conducts non-partisan civic engagement and voter registration and education with eligible voters across our sites each year. For these reasons, CPC is well-poised to comment on Early Voting in its inaugural year and appreciates the opportunity to share our recommendations.

CPC believes that Early Voting should make it easier for working, caregiving, and busy New Yorkers to cast their vote at a time that is convenient and accessible to them. Additional hours and sites should mean less time in line, more individualized support if needed, fewer strain on machines and poll staff, and a better experience for everyone at the polls. Indeed, much of the feedback our organization has received from community members is that Early Voting afforded more time in their personal schedules, less overall time in line, more time to read and make decisions within the booth, and more attention from poll workers. However, with party primaries for 2020 just a few short months away, we urge our City BOE and the City Council to consider our findings below and our recommendations to adapt increased funding, additional sites, and county-wide voting centers, allowing New York State to achieve record voter turnout next year.

AAPI Communities, Language Access, and Political Participation

CPC engages in non-partisan civic engagement and voting rights advocacy as part of our "Advancing Our CommUNITY" strategy to bridge our social services to social change. The neighborhoods that CPC serves are home to communities that have historically been marginalized and alienated from the political process, and their growth rate within the electorate demand the attention of the Board of Elections and policy makers. AAPIs are the fastest growing racial group in New York State[1] and are eligible to naturalize and register to vote at some of the highest rates compared to other immigrant groups.[2] Existing AAPI voters make up one of every three immigrant voters nationally and in New York State, one in four voters is a naturalized immigrant.[3] Over 70% of the state's AAPI population resides here in New York City.[4] Despite the growth of this electorate, several societal and systemic barriers prevent AAPI voters from fully exercising their influence at the polls. Reforms like Early Voting transform the ways busy New Yorkers are able to make and weigh

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[1] Office of the State Comptroller, "Asian Community in New York State, 2016"
[2] Department of Homeland Security, "Legal Immigration and Adjustment of Status: Persons Naturalized Table 3, 2018"
[3] American Immigration Council, "New Americans in the Voting Booth: The Growing Electoral Power of Immigrant Communities, 2014"
[4] Office of the State Comptroller: Asian Community in New York State

decisions about family care, work, language support, and exercising their vote.

AAPIs and newly naturalized citizens are beginning to buck trends in voter turnout and are increasingly engaged in the electoral process[5], but a lack of tailored language access services, as well as diminished attention from candidates serve as deterrents to full civic participation. From registration through to voting at the polls, a lack of tailored language access services continues to present barriers for AAPIs, where rates of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) run as high as 70 percent for Asian immigrants in NYC living in poverty.[6] The language used on voter registration forms nears high school level - out of reach for new Americans with Limited English Proficiency or with little familiarity with the civic system. Even once barriers to registration are overcome, election literature is often highly technical, decreasing the likelihood that AAPI voters turnout in smaller, local elections, and thus, continue to be marked as low-propensity by campaigns (see section below). For comparison, the level of English required to pass the naturalization exam is third- and fourth-grade level[7] but a 2011 report on "voter roll-off," or the likelihood that voters skip key ballot questions because of complex language, found that in New York State, voters would need a mean of 19 years of formal education (equivalent to Ph.D.) in order to read, understand, and make decisions about ballot measures.[8]

Further, once registered and at the polls, many AAPI voters are hesitant to insist that a translator of their choice accompany them into the voting booth if a BOE translator is unavailable, a hesitation that is especially pronounced as AAPI voters increasingly report facing scrutiny at the polls over identification, naturalization status, and other perpetual foreigner myths.[9] As a racial group, AAPIs are at times perceived as being monolithic and apolitical and thus, receive lower priority for tailored election services, despite originating from over 30 recognized nations and comprising over 100 languages and dialects.[10] This group also receives a low share of direct campaign messaging. In the 2016 Post-Election National Asian American Survey, 74% of Native Hawaiians & Pacific Islanders and 71% of Asian Americans across the country received no contact about the election, either from political campaigns or non-partisan groups[11].

Early Voting should go a long way toward alleviating the disparities that prevent voters from casting their ballot on Election Day. Additional dates and hours expand the choices for working New Yorkers, and allow greater flexibility for friends, loved ones, and families to visit polls together -- a critical feature for newly naturalized and LEP voters who face real or perceived discrimination at the polls or who wish to bring a translator of their choice. However, the current NYC BOE Early Voting scheme will be insufficient to meet the expected turnout and demand in 2020's multiple election opportunities. An increase in staff, outreach and awareness, as well as additional sites and county-wide voting centers will alleviate many of the community-specific barriers outlined here, and the geographic hurdles outlined below.

Access to Early Voting Sites in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens

CPC's neighborhoods and the community members who commute to our programs are predominantly AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander), immigrant, and/or low-income and present complex and intersecting barriers to political participation. In NYC BOE's initial announcement, CPC raised concerns that the proposed

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[5] Pew Research Center, "Historic highs in 2018 voter turnout extended across racial and ethnic groups, 2019"
[6] Asian American Federation, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Asian American Poverty in NYC, 2018"
[7] USCIS Study Guide: Writing Vocabulary for the Naturalization Test
[8] Reilly, Shauna & Richey, Sean, "Ballot Question Readability and Roll-Off: The Impact of Language Complexity, 2011" Descriptive Statistics of Grade Level by State (page 63)
[9] Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF): "2018 Asian American Voters Exit Poll"
[10] United Nations Member Nations Archive
[11] Karthick Ramakrishnan, Janelle Wong, Jennifer Lee, and Taeku Lee, "Post-Election National Asian American Survey, 2016"

sites did not fully support communities in Brooklyn, Lower Manhattan, and Queens. While some additional sites identified and funded by the Mayoral Administration made their way into the final local NYC BOE plan, much more should be done in 2020 given the increase in election opportunities, the expected turnout, and the demographic makeup and composition of these neighborhoods. These neighborhoods face unique challenges for naturalized immigrant voters. The table below highlights borough-wide stats and neighborhood specific information about CPC's communities.

Manhattan[12]	Brooklyn[13]	Queens[14]
28.9% foreign born 12.8% AAPI 16.3% living in poverty	36.9% foreign born 12.8% AAPI 19.8% living in poverty	47.5% foreign born 27% AAPI 12.2% living in poverty
Lower East Side / Chinatown[15][16]	Sunset Park[17]	Flushing / Whitestone[18]
36.04% foreign born* 36.1% AAPI 27.3% poverty rate	44.5% foreign born 32.7% AAPI 22.1% poverty rate	58.73% foreign born 54.5% AAPI 16.2% poverty rate*

CPC is concerned that the 2019 scheme will be insufficient to meet the needs of voters in 2020's cycle. Aside from the citywide Public Advocate race, Queens was the only NYC county with a borough-wide office on the ballot. In Queens, 56% of households report speaking a language other than English at home[19] and in Eastern Queens, where a significant part of the borough's AAPI community lives, rail transportation is limited to East-West directional lines and local bus routes serving riders between or across rail lines. CPC expressed concern that many of NYC BOE's sites were on these North-South bus routes, some of which were the slowest in the borough (1 mph or less than the borough average).[20] While we were grateful that some additional sites were added in early fall, Queens remains the second most populous borough in the City and is slated to become a majority-minority borough by 2020, making the push for additional sites to serve this, and our city's other growing communities, more urgent than ever.

Citywide, CPC heard from staff and community members that several subways operated with service changes or disruptions on the two Early Voting weekends. The MTA alert archive shows that major East-West directional lines in Brooklyn and Queens and North-South lines in Manhattan had service changes, signal problems, and outages[21]. While the NYC has little jurisdiction at this time over MTA management, CPC urges an increase in funding to support additional and better placement of sites. We were thrilled that the Mayoral Administration included additional funding for sites, and hope that these and others are included and full in 2020. CPC also firmly believes that county-wide voting would greatly expand voter access, even if minimal new sites are added. NYC BOE's inaugural plan restricted choice between a single Early Voting site or an

[12] US Census Bureau, "Quick Facts, American Community Survey 2018" New York County
[13] US Census Bureau, "Quick Facts, American Community Survey 2017" Kings County
[14] US Census Bureau, "Quick Facts, American Community Survey 2017" Queens County
[15] NYU Furman Center, "NYC Neighborhood Data Profiles, 2017" Lower East Side / Chinatown
[16] NYU Furman Center, "CoreData.nyc Map" Lower East Side / Chinatown
[17] NYU Furman Center, "NYC Neighborhood Data Profiles, 2017" Sunset Park
[18] NYU Furman Center, "NYC Neighborhood Data Profiles, 2017" Flushing / Whitestone
[19] US Census Bureau, "Quick Facts, American Community Survey 2017" Queens County
[20] Regional Plan Association, "Overlooked Boroughs Technical Report, 2015": Connectivity
[21] MTA Alerts Archive

Election Day site, a scheme we hope will be left behind in 2020.

Recommendations for 2020

For these above reasons, CPC applauded the passage of Early Voting in January 2019, making New York the 38th state in the nation to offer this expansive practice. In other states, Early Voting has been particularly important to increasing political participation among marginalized racial and ethnic groups, as well as low-income voters and working families who may not have the flexibility to vote in-person on election day. CPC believes Early Voting would have a significant positive effect on political participation in New York City where low-income, immigrant, AAPI, and voters of Color are disproportionately left out of public and civic systems. We believe Early Voting could help improve political participation by increasing opportunities for working, commuting, and Limited English Proficient (LEP) voters to visit language accessible Early Voting sites that are within a short commuting distance of places where our communities are most likely to live, work, go to school, or visit for business, recreation, or services. CPC is pleased that in Early Voting's inaugural year, many of our community members have reported positive experiences, less waiting and standing time, and more patience and attention from poll workers and interpreters.

2019's Early Voting scheme was a positive and promising pilot. However, with increased turnout anticipated in 2020 and even more election opportunities in the year ahead, CPC presents three recommendations:

- Continued support for public awareness campaigns and interpreters
- Provide sufficient and convenient voting locations for voters in the Lower East Side, Chinatown, Sunset Park, and Flushing
- Permit registered voters to cast a ballot at any Early Voting site in their borough of residence

Public Awareness & Public Education

CPC is a proud member of several voting rights and civic engagement workgroups including Let NY Vote and APA VOICE (Asian Pacific Americans Voting and Organizing to Increase Civic Engagement). We commend our partners VoteEarlyNY and Common Cause for playing an active role in creating, designing, and distributing Early Voting awareness literature as well as updating maps and tools to direct voters to their assigned sites. These materials were incredibly helpful in guiding CPC's multi-lingual voter outreach and canvassing work and the process for creating them involved careful, collaborative input from stakeholders and translation from trusted, native speakers. Materials were large-print, easy to read and understand, and attractive (some materials included Halloween candies). CPC also applauds the Administration and the City for stepping in and filling the void in State-funded outreach. Early Voting reminders could be seen on charging kiosks, subway platforms, and busses all around our city, raising the general awareness of the public.

However, despite these incredible materials, CPC still faced voter questions about the new initiative, especially related to changes in locations, hours, and procedures. We would like to see a continued effort to create and distribute user-friendly outreach and awareness materials and coordinated multi-lingual media buys to raise public awareness, especially in advance of the Presidential primaries. This will allow organizations and coalitions like ours to increase our capacity to do the deep voter education and

engagement, rather than spread ourselves across both those and the public awareness efforts.

Site Selection

After the initial announcement over the summer, CPC compared BOE poll sites closest to our community center and service locations, alongside the BOE sites and Mayor's proposed locations, some of which were adopted by the BOE at a later date. We chose this comparison based on the number of constituents served annually at these sites and based them on Assembly District. We chose this calculation because CPC, like many other publicly-funded AAPI-led organizations[22], is often one of the lone service providers with culturally competent and linguistically capable staff and programming throughout the city for AAPIs. As such, AAPI New Yorkers often commute to and from human services providers, like CPC, even if they live elsewhere or in another borough.

In addition to the public transportation findings outlined earlier in this testimony, we found that many of the sites proposed, and especially the ones adapted, were long walking distances from the businesses, services, and programs our community members frequent. For example, many of the proposed sites and the 3 chosen sites below 34th Street are at least 10-15 minutes away from CPC's Manhattan senior center locations (Open Door, Chinatown Senior Citizen Center, CPC Home Attendant Program). A 30+ minutes round trip walk is a significant distance to commute for our low-income seniors, seniors with disabilities, and seniors who are caretakers for grandchildren. Many of the seniors we serve also do not live on site due to ongoing gentrification and displacement, and commute long distances to get access to culturally competent and language accessible services that CPC offers. Asking these voters to take another 20-30 minutes to walk away, especially when commutes are against the grain of the subway, may not be feasible in their comfort or schedules, many seniors may not take the time to vote early. As outlined above, all of these barriers in addition to being historically marginalized from the political process present even more difficulty and access for low-income AAPI voters.

CPC urges the NYC BOE to reconsider the offers from the City and Administration to identify and fund additional sites. We are happy to again provide the NYC BOE with lists of appropriate sites as they consider 2020 plans. While we understand the challenges of selecting sites that prioritize accessibility internally, we also believe the distance to and from major cultural hubs is also an accessibility and mobility rights issue. Expanding the number of sites alleviates these commuting pains, ensuring that Early Voting maximizes convenience and accessibility for all voters.

County-Wide Voting Centers

Regardless of whether funding is included for additional sites or public awareness campaigns, the single most transformative way to relieve voter confusion and maximize convenience and participation is to allow county-wide or city-wide voting centers in NYC. NYC is in the minority of regions in the State that assigned voters to a single Early Voting site. Low-income, immigrant, and New Yorkers of Color disproportionately have longer commutes, live in transit deserts, and live in communities prone to displacement. New York City's AAPI communities also live in areas that are prone to gentrification and displacement and often commute back to Asian American communities for employment, business, healthcare, and other services and programs. The US Census Bureau found that between 1990 and 2020,

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[22] Coalition for Asian Children and Families, "Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Analysis"

Chinatown's population decreased by 7% overall but racial demographics show that the white population increased. During the same period, Chinatown and the Lower East Side, neighborhoods that have traditionally been home to immigrant communities, have become predominantly dependent on food and restaurant businesses.[23] These establishments, largely small businesses, often hire from and serve the community -- providing both gainful employment as well as important links to culture and heritage from home for consumers.[24] As a result, CPC finds that many of our members engage in daily "cultural commutes" wherein residents who can no longer afford to live in Chinatown or other ethnic hubs are displaced, but still commute daily for employment, business, recreation, culturally competent services, and language accessible programs. Indeed, in a recent audit, we found that though CPC sites are rooted in the three boroughs, we serve commuting constituents from all NYC State Assembly, Senate, and City Council districts.

Because commuting is a regular and significant part of working New Yorkers' daily lives, county- or city-wide voting would minimize the amount of time and scheduling spent commuting to a single Early Voting site. Early Voting should expand opportunities, but limiting voters to a single site is restrictive does not also take into account the ways that New Yorkers move around and work in our City, leading many to still choose their regular Election Day site or not participate at all. NYC's BOE structure is uniquely poised to be able to do this since the borough-based BOE's already work in close cooperation with each other.

Further, because Election Law § 8-600 provides certain criteria for selecting Early Voting sites, including sites that must be publicly available for the duration of the Early Voting period, we understand that the NYC BOE may be limited by the number of sites to choose from. For this reason, it is imperative that the Board of Elections fulfill its obligation to provide voters with an opportunity to cast a ballot at any poll site in their county of residence. A plan that only assigns voters to one Early Voting site based on proximity to their residential addresses cannot effectively account for where, when, and how New Yorkers move around the city.

CPC is thrilled to witness the continuing changes and reforms that expand democracy in our state. We believe all New Yorkers have a right to convenient and equitable voting access and look forward to working with the Board of Elections' on continuing to advise and support a scheme where all New Yorkers have equal opportunity to exercise their fundamental right to vote -- by being aware and informed, having more locations to cast their vote, and by being able to vote early at any location within their city or county of residence. With this opportunity to make historic changes to turnout and access in 2020, we urge the Board of Elections and our city leadership to continue to be thoughtful and timely. We appreciate the opportunity to testify at this historic moment, and look forward to continuing to partner with you on issues that advance and transform low-income, immigrant, and AAPI communities.

Further question or comment on CPC's testimony can be submitted to Amy Torres, Director of Policy and Advocacy at atorres@cpc-nyc.org and Frances Huang, Policy Associate at fhuang2@cpc-nyc.org.

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[23] Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF): "Chinatown, Then and Now"
[24] Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF): "Chinatown, Then and Now"