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Testimony by DeNora Getachew, New York Executive Director
Generation Citizen
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Elections in a Pandemic: A Review of the 2020 Primaries

Good Afternoon Senators and Assembly Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today at this public hearing on the 2020 Primary Elections.

I am the New York Executive Director at Generation Citizen. Generation Citizen (GC) is a ten-year old, national, nonpartisan civics education nonprofit whose mission is to ensure that every student receives an Action Civics education. Generation Citizen New York has educated and empowered 29,000 students in all five boroughs of New York City and in Suffolk and Westchester Counties since launching the site in 2011 -- equipping these youth with the civic knowledge, skills, and disposition needed for lifelong civic engagement in our 21st century democracy.

GC demystifies democracy for youth by bringing civics education back into the classroom. Action Civics is a project-based approach to civics education where young people learn about the political process by taking action on specific issues they identify in their communities. The program operates during the school day, but in a real-world lab where students have the opportunity to become agents of positive change. Students learn about democratic structures and processes by directly engaging with them, as well as with each other to address one or more issues they care about, which are impacting their community. Students are working with their local policymakers and school administrators on diverse issues, including police brutality, curricular improvements, environmental improvements and relevantly, voting rights. GC focuses on educating youth in communities that have historically been marginalized in our democracy to ensure that our democracy is more inclusive and reflective of all voices.

During the last few election cycles, our nation has been powerfully reminded of the potential of youth political participation. According to the Center for

Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, numerous statewide races have ultimately been decided by voters under the age of 29.¹ While this trend is encouraging, it also underlines the necessity of reinvigorating civics education in schools to prepare youth to participate fully in all facets of civic life.

In order to develop youth as civic actors, and ensure that their voices are heard and reflected by their representatives, we also need to eliminate structural barriers to democracy that break down barriers to political participation, and facilitate political participation for youth and all citizens. That is especially true as we continue to navigate the aftermath of COVID-19 when many of our norms have been and continue to be disrupted. Indeed, voting provides critical civics lessons to our youth, and enables them to manifest their civic dispositions, encouraging long-term engagement.

As the state faces major disruptions in our elections due to COVID-19, GC encourages the State Legislature to learn from the experience earlier this year to ensure that the November election is as accessible and seamless as possible. ***The resonating theme must be that Democracy Doesn't Pause... it adapts!***

Young people are the present and the future of our democracy. And if we can actually give them the knowledge and skills they need to participate, they will make their voices heard — even in this moment, when young people are feeling so disrupted and uncertain, they want to make their voices heard.

According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, more than 15 million youth have turned 18 since the 2016 presidential election.² COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated inequities in historically marginalized communities from the lack of education and police brutality to inconsistent access to healthcare and structural barriers to democracy. Young New Yorkers have marched and protested to highlight these inequities. It is important that state elected leaders act now to ensure that new voters — especially youth and new citizens — can register to vote and cast their ballot safely during this critical election.

GC applauds the New York State Legislature for its leadership in recently adopting a host of pro-voter reforms, including automatic voter registration,

¹ See <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/growing-voters-profile-youngest-eligible-voters-2020> (last accessed on August 9, 2020).

² *Id.*

early voting, pre-registration for 16 and 17 year olds, and a host of reforms to make the absentee voting processes more accessible and clear. We encourage Governor Cuomo to sign the bills pending on his desk to further modernize New York's elections.

GC recommends that the Legislature adopt the following reforms to further modernize New York's election processes:

- 1. Authorize the New York City Campaign Finance Board's online voter registration system.** It is important that state elected leaders act now to ensure that new voters — especially youth and new citizens — can register to vote in this critical election. The challenge is that when the pandemic hit and the city went into quarantine, civic activity slowed and in-person voter registration events ceased. As I recently wrote in a Daily News op-ed coauthored by myself and GC program alumna, “[d]o we really expect new voters, who are used to conducting their personal, educational, and professional lives online, to find and print the voter registration form, then stamp and mail it to their local board of elections office?”³ If new voters do not form the civic habit of voting as soon as they turn 18, they are much less likely to register to vote in later years. With youth at the forefront of this civic and racial reckoning to end police brutality and systemic racism, now is the time to capitalize on their civic activation by removing unnecessary barriers to voting. We should enable them to continue their advocacy for systemic change at the polls. And the good news is that the City's Campaign Finance Board has already built an online voter registration system in June of 2019 through a local ordinance. The City just needs state authorization to launch the system.
- 2. Allow 17 year olds to vote in primary elections in years that they will turn 18 in advance of the general election.** Currently, there is a notable portion of citizens who are eligible to vote in the general election, but not able to have a say in determining who will be on the ballot because they are not able vote in the preceding primary election. Approximately twenty states allow youth who will turn eighteen before the general election to vote in the primary election.⁴ Granting voting rights to 17-year olds during primary elections if they'll turn 18 by the time of the general election ensures that they can truly participate in elections, especially given New York's closed primary election process. Furthermore, allowing 17 year olds to participate in advance of turning 18 years old can bolster lifelong

³ See, DeNora Getachew and Ayanna Henry, New York Daily News “New York Needs Online Registration Now,” available at: <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-nyc-needs-online-voter-registration-now-20200720-ockh5hg3ljg4tkacwlfckjr7qm-story.html>

⁴ See, NCSL, Voting Age for Primary Elections, available at: <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/primaries-voting-age.aspx>

voter participation among youth. Engaging young people at the polls early allows voting to become a habit and, depending on the time of the primary, can allow 17 year olds to vote while they are living at home and in high school, creating a supportive environment for them to engage. A vote in the primary can also increase their investment, and likeliness to turn out, in the general election. Nearly half of all US states allow 17 year olds to vote in primaries when they will be 18 by the time of the general election. New York should follow suit to make its elections more representative and to ensure to put young people on a more direct path to lifelong political participation.

3. ***Reduce the voter registration deadline to 10 days before the election.*** Research shows that many first-time voters learn key election information from social media, instead of from government sources.⁵ Many of these first-time voters may miss the 25 day voter registration deadline as election information intensifies in the days leading up to the election. Reducing the voter registration deadline to the constitutionally mandated 10 days in advance of the election would ensure that more youth are able to register to vote and participate in elections.
4. ***Promote split shift poll worker opportunities.*** The New York State Legislature wisely passed legislation allowing poll workers to work split shifts in 2017. Serving as a poll worker is the perfect way for younger voters to engage in the election process. The Legislature should encourage the Boards of Elections statewide, including especially in New York City, to actually recruit poll workers, including especially youth, using this split shift approach.
5. ***Increase funding for the Board of Elections' to ensure comprehensive voter education.*** Many first-time voters may be unfamiliar with how elections are conducted in New York. Given the uncertainties about voting in person or via mail during this pandemic, the Board of Elections will need additional funding to educate voters about all of the changes in election processes during this election year.
6. ***Provide resources for educators to receive professional development to teach experiential, project-based civics education.*** GC believes that all students need an effective Action Civics education in order to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to actively participate in 21st century

⁵ See *supra* note 1.

democracy. We cannot expect youth, especially those who live in communities that have historically been marginalized in our democracy, to participate if we don't teach them how the full contact sport of democracy works and how they can engage with democracy to claim their civic power. GC was a member of the State Civic Readiness Task Force, which provided recommendations to the New York State Education Department about how to ensure all students achieve civic ready before they graduate. One component of the proposed recommendations is that the state allow youth to achieve a diploma Seal of Civic Readiness. This will result in a fundamental shift in the state's approach to civic learning, which will only be successful if the state allocates sufficient resources for professional development for teachers to support this new facet of work. GC recently released "Ensuring Civic Readiness in a 21st Century Democracy: The Promise of Civic Diploma Seals,"⁶ which analyzes the rise of civic diploma seals in states across the country and proposes best practices that New York should consider to ensure that the civic seals achieve their full promise.

We respectfully encourage the New York State Legislature to take these recommendations into consideration as you work to improve our state's democracy and make sure that all voices are heard and reflected in our government.

Thank you and the Committees for your time and consideration of this testimony. I can be reached at dgetachew@generationcitizen.org or (917) 912-5471 with any questions.

⁶ Available at: <https://generationcitizen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Ensuring-Civic-Readiness-in-a-21st-Century-Democracy-White-Paper.pdf>