

Written Testimony of
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I would like to thank Senator Myrie and all the Senators on the Elections Committee for allowing me the opportunity to testify today. I would like to extend a special thank you to my Senator, Shelley Mayer, and all those at Cornell Votes who encouraged me to share not just my personal anecdote about college voting, but to share a reflection of how difficult college and youth voting truly is. My name is Patrick Mehler, and I am a rising junior in the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University. I am a lifelong New Yorker and have spent my entire civic engagement career across the rural, suburban, and urban spaces across our great state. I voted in my first election at 18 years old in Yonkers and am proud to have voted in every election there since. Unfortunately, I have watched thousands of similarly young New Yorkers go from being engaged citizens after high school to disinterested bystanders in our electoral process once becoming college students and graduates. I wish to share with you the story of my friend Leo and I when we tried to vote in the 2020 primaries as one example of why I believe the current voting process is creating these bystanders.

A. 4 Hours to Vote

Leo had registered to vote on April 22, nearly two months before the primary. I had already voted by mail while at college, but he wanted to have his first vote be in person, a habit that has been proven to increase voter participation over a citizen’s lifetime.² I offered to drive and the plan was to pick him up in Mount Vernon, go to Lincoln Middle School, take 15 minutes to vote, and head to lunch in New Rochelle. In double checking his polling site online, we realized that it listed an error as to where he should vote and that he should call the Board of Elections. He called the BOE who told him to come to White Plains and sort everything out. We complied and waited in a forty-five minutes’ line of voters before making it to the central office. Leo explained the situation to the woman at the front desk who, when looking up his name, said he

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² Gerber, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3186114>

was not registered to vote. He retorted that he had email confirmations that he was registered and should be able to vote. We were asked to sit down and wait for the Commissioner to come settle things. As someone who had read the entire 800-page New York State Election Law, I knew that he had the right to vote affidavit, a right which was duly ignored after I tried to argue on his behalf. A much more patient man than I am, Leo asked me to just sit and wait for what the Board wanted us to do. Eventually we completed one small task every 15 minutes for an hour and a half; re-registering to vote, signing papers, and eventually being asked to write a letter to a judge saying he believed he was entitled to vote. The Commissioner never spoke with us.

So, at over two hours of not yet voting, we were still sitting in the central office of the BOE. A woman sat across from us was clearly reaching her limit of patience sitting in a hot office with our masks and left after announcing to the room that her three hours of waiting for a judge was not worth it and left. Thirty minutes after that, Leo was finally handed a dozen papers in a manilla envelope and told he could vote affidavit. Hoping to vote and be done, the BOE then told us we needed to drive back to Mount Vernon and vote there. I personally watched other folks in the room with us from Yonkers and Rye vote on a machine at the BOE; why could Leo not for Mount Vernon? We caved without having the energy to argue and went back to Lincoln Grade School where Leo voted over four hours later than intended.

B. The Example Set

I implore you all to consider for a moment the precedent this set for Leo. In his now-lived experience, voting is an hours long excursion which is fraught with being told he was a liar, being told he should have known what to do, and outright attempts to prevent him from voting. I ask: would you go back and vote next election? Now thankfully, Leo does vote every election. Sometimes horrid experiences breed resistance to a poor system and a desire to prove that voting does matter. But what example does that set for others who are encouraged to give up?

Leo and I's journey taught me a couple of lessons which would lead me to help co-found and lead a voting rights organization just two weeks later:

1. *Even voting experts cannot solve poor management.* It had not mattered that I knew the Election Law front-to-back. It did not matter that I explicitly cited where in the Law Leo had a right to vote affidavit. The power of either uninformed or, worse, intentionally malicious practice of BOE employees supersedes the Law on Election Day.
2. *Poor experiences beget low civic engagement.* I think especially to the woman who stormed out after not being able to vote for three hours. Will she even consider voting again? I've personally turned my frustration into action, but I know for millions of Americans that is not even an option. There is not enough space within this testimony to share the hundreds, if not thousands, of stories I have personally been told about why other college students will not vote again or were discouraged from voting in the first place.
3. *The incentive to NOT vote is enormous.* Almost every excuse I hear as a voting organizer almost came true in Leo's experience. "It takes too long; I have class and work."

“They’re going to get rid of my vote in some way anyway, I bet a smidge disqualifies me.” “It’s a mental pain to plan everything else around this.” “My vote won’t matter.”

Although I have learned these lessons, it concerns me that those working for the Board and maybe even other voters do not understand this. I have voted by absentee in almost every election, but I have voted in person three times since being eighteen. The first two times I voted on Election Day at PS30 in Yonkers. It took 5 minutes for me to walk there, no line to wait and vote, and I was back home in less than thirty minutes both times. I would have had no idea how hard voting was for other people without this experience. Most recently, Leo, another friend of ours, and I all voted on the first day of early voting for the primaries this June. We voted in New Rochelle and when I submitted the ballot into the machine, I noticed an interesting number of how many ballots had been submitted: three. We voted in the middle of the day on the first day of early voting and the only three people to have voted in that area were three college boys from Mount Vernon, Bronxville, and Yonkers. It is incredibly worrying to me that youth voters and not even more traditional older voters are partaking in Westchester’s democratic process; you need look no further than the incredibly low turnout this past election.³

C. Advocacy for Youth Voters and Ease of Access

Beyond wanting to share this horror story of voting, I wish to call upon the Elections Committee of the Senate and the whole New York State Legislature on multiple items. In general, voting should be easy, quick, and painless and that reality has not materialized for millions of voters in New York, including in Westchester. In Westchester, I ask that you all seriously consider how effective our Board of Elections is. It truly only takes one Commissioner’s inability to properly follow the law for hundreds, if not thousands, of voters to be disenfranchised. My disappointment in the June 2020 primaries and my experiences with the Bronx, Tompkins, and other county BOEs do nothing but assure me that better options exist in managing Westchester elections.

In New York, larger reforms can be made to make voting access easier for young voters especially. I am particularly grateful for the legislation that has already passed, including S2076⁴ which will enable SUNYs to participate in automatic voter registration starting in 2025. I am also hopeful that the conversation around youth and college voting rights continues to persist throughout the Senate, such as in S2161,⁵ which calls to make SUNYs and Community Colleges designated early voting sites. However, there is far too much work to be done to say the State has already successfully secured voting rights for college students.

Moving beyond the fact that S2161 has not left the Elections Committee nor been introduced in the Assembly, both bills exclude hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers who attend college in New York but not in the SUNY system. Cornell, Fordham, Columbia, NYU, Syracuse, and more still struggle with on-campus polling sites and although this testimony is not for Tompkins County and the Southern Tier, I can promise you that if these laws were to include at least

³ Westchester BOE, <https://citizenparticipation.westchestergov.com/election-results>

⁴ NYS Senate, <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2021/s2076>

⁵ NYS Senate, <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2021/s2161>

Cornell students, whose University system includes both privately endowed and state contract-colleges such as my own ILR School, you would personally be helping 23,000 students trying to vote. In regards to automatic voter registration, is AVR more worthy for students at Binghamton rather than those at Pace or Bard? There are over 1.2 million students in New York colleges, and over half a million of those are unprotected by these bills.⁶

A separate issue I wish to briefly raise is those of poll workers. At least 37,000 young poll workers stepped up this past November to help others cast a vote even if they could not cast one themselves.⁷ There are already numerous calls to reform our poll working practices, but after watching the Syracuse Public Hearing, which included my second home of Ithaca and Tompkins County, I must add that *are* truly nonpartisan people who exist and work to better democracy. I like to think of myself as someone who, in my official capacity as Cornell Votes' President, is and acts nonpartisan. Both the Southern Tier and Westchester County have incredibly competitive elections and while I may personally hope for certain candidates to win, I have always worked to help every voter vote for whom they wish, whether that be Biden, Trump, or even Kanye this past year.

There are thousands, if not tens to hundreds of thousands, of people who want to work our polls but are forced to be bystanders. Can't work the full day in some counties? Sorry, you can't be a poll worker. Aren't registered with a major political party? Sorry, you can't be a poll worker. We can measure that second question and know that of the 13.4 million registered voters in New York, 3.7 million are not affiliated with the Democratic or Republican parties; that's over 25% of all voters being left out for potential poll workers.⁸ We can only imagine how many more poll workers would be available if we removed the all-day requirements and party requirements for potential poll workers.

D. Please Help Us Vote

Ultimately, I ask for a couple of reforms to generously be considered. Firstly, I ask that you please extend S2076 and S2161 to include our private institutions of higher education, ensuring that all New York college students are included in automatic voter registration and have ease of access to on-campus polling sites. I also ask that you consider broader reforms to our Boards of Elections and electoral process, including to make Election Day a full and legitimate holiday, as was attempted in 2019, to allow poll workers who do not wish to affiliate with a party to serve their communities, and simply keep conscious the needs of young voters in the electoral process.

Finally, I ask that you remember Leo's story when thinking of youth voting. Voting is one of the most fulfilling aspects of our democracy and every story such as Leo's is a stain upon our democracy. I thank you all immensely for giving me the opportunity to share my testimony with you all and appreciate you considering efforts to not just expand youth voting rights but guaranteeing the ones we are already owed.

⁶ New York State Dept. of Ed., <https://data.nysed.gov/highered-enrollment.php?year=2018&state=yes>

⁷ Poll Hero Project, <https://www.pollhero.org/about>

⁸ NYS Board of Elections, <https://www.elections.ny.gov/EnrollmentCD.html>