

Testimony before the National Commission on Voting Rights

Submitted by
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Good afternoon, members of the National Commission on Voting Rights. Thank you for convening this regional hearing and for the opportunity to offer testimony concerning the experiences of voters in the states of Connecticut and New York. I am Ingrid Alvarez-DiMarzo, the Connecticut State Director of the Hispanic Federation, a national nonprofit advocacy organization that promotes equal opportunities for Latino communities. The Hispanic Federation has worked for many years to advance and ensure the voting rights of Latinos and have long been concerned about the barriers that prevent minority voters from exercising their right to vote.

Consistent with the Commission's direction to identify challenges for language minority voters and make recommendations to promote the fair administration of elections to improve the experience of voters facing obstacles in casting their ballots, I'd like to share with the Commission some of the barriers experienced by the Latino and minority voter communities in Connecticut and New York.

The Federal Voting Rights Act mandates that a state or political subdivision must provide language assistance to voters if more than 5 percent of voting-age citizens are members of a single-language minority group and do not speak or understand English adequately enough to participate in the electoral process. In Connecticut under the federal Voting Rights Act, nine state municipalities meet that criteria and must provide Spanish-language ballots and voting materials: Bridgeport, East Hartford, Hartford, Meriden, New Britain, New Haven, New London, Waterbury and Windham. Danbury is noticeably absent from this list.

Yet during the 2010 elections, the City of Bridgeport had wide spread shortages of ballots at polling sites. In a city of 68,000 registered voters, Bridgeport Registrars only ordered 21,000 ballots. Voters were disenfranchised, standing on lines for hours awaiting a judge's order for extended hours at the polls and for photocopied ballots. Out of confusion and frustration, many individuals left the polling places without voting. Those who bore the chaotic process that day to cast their ballot then learned two days later of an undisclosed bag of 335 uncounted ballots.

In 2013, election officials in Danbury, CT proposed to move the Park Avenue School polling site to another location. This has not only raised concerns regarding the affect this could have on minority and working-class voters, but has brought allegations of voter suppression. The said proposal would move a polling location from an easily accessible school, where residents have voted for more than 40 years, to the Moose Lodge. The Moose Lodge is two miles away from the current polling site and lacks sidewalks, sufficient lighting and transportation. This proposal comes after Hispanic voters accused poll site workers of language discrimination by encouraging non-English speaking voters to get off voting lines and return once they had a translator during the 2010 elections. The motivation under all of

these circumstances could be none other than to make it more difficult for minorities and the working class to vote.

Hispanic Federation recommends the following reforms, based on best practices as well as knowledge of widespread barriers to language minority voters exercising the right to vote and deterring some of the most prevalent discriminatory practices:

In Connecticut, ensuring that each municipality and/or city with populations of more than 5% of voting-age citizens that are members of a single language minority group make available non-English voting materials.

Increased Bilingual Assistance at Polls

Hispanic Federation recommends that both Connecticut and New York's Board of Elections work to ensure that the rights of Latinos and Limited English Proficient (LEP) are upheld during the voting process by drastically increasing the number of bilingual poll workers and improving poll worker training to properly assist LEP voters.

Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act states that bilingual assistance for Spanish-speaking voters must be provided in New York, Bronx, Kings, Queens, Nassau, Suffolk, and Westchester counties. New York has the most foreign-born voters than any other big city. In 2012, 30 percent of all New York City voters were foreign-born. This was twice as many immigrant voters than Los Angeles, Chicago and Miami. Not only does New York and Connecticut have a legal obligation to provide these services, but a moral obligation as well. It is the responsibility of the Board of Elections to ensure that all US citizens have the opportunity to cast their vote and choose their legislative body.

Need for Early Voting

The implementation of early voting in New York would provide an important avenue to increase voter-turnout and work to eradicate common issues at poll sites.

About 53.6 percent of registered voters cast ballots during the 2012 presidential election, leaving New York 44th among the 50 states and the District of Columbia for voter participation. The implementation of early voting would allow for busy New Yorkers to cast their ballot during weekdays and weekends before Election Day, allowing for flexibility within individuals' schedule to vote.

To date, 33 states and the District of Columbia have implemented a form of early Voting. In fact, 30% of voters in the United States cast their ballots before Election Day. Research has shown that the implementation of early voting improves poll worker performance, reduces stress on the voting system on Election Day, increases access to voting, shortens lines on Election Day and leads to increased voter satisfaction.

As states across the country are passing voter suppression laws, New York has the opportunity to expand access to voting by implementing early voting.

Non-citizen Voting

Hispanic Federation recommends that the CT and NYC Board of Elections allow for legal permanent residents to take part in municipal elections.

Approximately 1.3 million New Yorkers and 150,000 CT residents are legal permanent residents. In New York, these individuals pay more than 18 billion dollars in New York State income taxes annually. Their children go to city schools; they own businesses and participate in every aspect of life in their communities.

Non-citizen voting would ensure that all legal permanent residents have proper representation. City legislative officials will no longer be able to ignore the needs of immigrants within their communities and pay proper attention to their true constituents. In addition, having the ability to vote would empower immigrants to civically engage. As a country built by immigrants, we should ensure that legal permanent residents have proper representation and are able to cast their ballots on Election Day.