

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

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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.