

Dear NY State Senate Elections Committee:

My name is Shelli Cohen and I've witnessed a variety of mishaps during the 2020 election. I reside here in Brooklyn, but I went to school at SUNY Binghamton, where I served as a Vote Everywhere Ambassador for the Andrew Goodman Foundation. Starting August 18<sup>th</sup> and continuing through September, my team and I helped many students register to vote. A week before the voter registration deadline, students were stopping by the Center for Civic Engagement, texting and calling me because their voter registration still wasn't showing up online. This demonstrated that the BOE was too overwhelmed. They were understaffed and were struggling to process the forms at same time as prepping all of the absentee ballots.

Students face many barriers to voting, most prominently, we frequently move. Therefore, many students tend to have to vote via affidavit ballot. For example, students tend to register to vote as freshmen, who live on campus, and forget to update their registration when they move off-campus as upperclassmen. So, we educated students to go to their polling place associated with their current address and vote via affidavit. Students followed our instructions and poll workers sent them to campus to vote. We sent them back, but some were so frustrated, they just gave up.

Even the students that managed to vote affidavit at an off-campus polling site faced problems. Poll workers instructed students to put their parents' address on the form, instead of their address in Broome County. This is obviously problematic because they were trying to vote in NY-22, not back home. These ballots were contested in the NY-22 congressional race and the judge threw out the ballots because students had signed a legal document that they lived outside the district in which they were voting. So, 20 students who simply followed directions did not have a voice in choosing their representation in 2020. These two experiences show poor training of poll workers.

The next issue I encountered was very poor communication from the State BOE, especially regarding absentee ballot drop-off. Many students decide to remain voters back home and vote via absentee ballot. We anticipated students bringing their absentee ballots from outside of Broome County to the campus polling site to drop them off because of the USPS slowdown. We were in close communication with the Broome County BOE to find out whether these ballots would be accepted. Our BOE was trying to find out from the protocol from the State BOE, but there was no protocol. Broome County decided to accept them, timestamped them as received on Election Day and mailed them out the following day, but what did other counties do? Some accepted the ballots, but arrived back at the BOE after midnight, so the timestamp listed the day after Election day. Because they weren't timestamped **by** Election day, the ballots were discarded.

In addition, due to the USPS delays, voters were receiving two different deadlines for absentee ballots (by when to apply/return the ballot): the legal deadline and the "real" deadline. Even so, people didn't get their absentee ballots in time and many ballots arrived too late, even though they postmarked them in time.

Lastly, there was and still is blatant student voter suppression. I worked on trying to bring an early on-campus polling site to SUNY Binghamton because there are over 20,000 students, staff and faculty that walk through the campus daily. When I contacted the BOE, I was informed that there was not enough funding nor resources to add a new early polling site in 2020. I had sympathy for the overworked BOE staff, but weeks before Election Day, the Broome County BOE opened a fourth early polling site, which was not on SUNY Binghamton's campus.

There is much to say about the NY-22 congressional race, sticky notes on contested ballots, voter registration forms not filed and the discovery of ballots a month after Election Day, but I want to focus on ways we can make our election system better, especially for students. The youth are the future leaders of this country and I believe it is your responsibility to make it easier for them to be active participants in our democracy.

I am very pleased that same day voter registration and vote-by-mail will be on the ballot in November, but we need more. Specifically, I urge you to mandate both Election Day and early on-campus polling sites. There are many advantages. One, the staff can work with the university to be more prepared to answer common questions from student voters. For example, at SUNY Binghamton's polling site, there is one person designated to helping voters fill out affidavit ballots properly. Two, it's been proven that student voter participation rates increase. Three, students tend to work the polling place. The existence of the polling place encourages civic engagement!

Next, students should have time off to vote just like everyone else. Friends of mine had many hours of class and tests on Election Day. Why are students expected to have the time to travel to vote? In general, the BOE needs more funding to be able to properly manage elections. They need better trainings for poll workers and we need to USPS to get back up to speed.

Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony and hear about the experiences of student voters. My testimony is only a small fraction of the obstacles students face to vote. I hope this letter encourages you to take steps to expand voter access, especially for students.

Sincerely,

Shelli Cohen  
392 Saint Marks Ave #4A  
Brooklyn, NY 11238