



2016-2017

# VOTER ASSISTANCE

## ANNUAL REPORT

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April 2017







# New York City Campaign Finance Board

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The VAAC advises the CFB on voter engagement and recommends legislative and administrative changes to improve NYC elections.

The Voter Assistance Advisory Committee is made up of nine members:

- ◆ two members appointed by the mayor
- ◆ two members appointed by the speaker of the City Council
- ◆ one member appointed by the comptroller
- ◆ one member appointed by the borough presidents
- ◆ the public advocate
- ◆ the executive director of the city Board of Elections; and
- ◆ one member appointed by the mayor in consultation with the speaker to serve as the chair.

You can learn more about VAAC and its members at [www.nycfb.info/nycvotes](http://www.nycfb.info/nycvotes).



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# WELCOME

**A**s we publish our annual report for 2016–17, we find an election system that is still hopelessly outdated and prohibitively difficult for voters to navigate. While the 126,000 city voters who were erroneously purged from the rolls last year were restored in time to participate in November’s general election for president, little else has been accomplished to make it easier for New Yorkers to cast a ballot that counts.

Interest in the presidential election spurred half a million new registrations in the city last year. That’s the good news. Still, more than 750,000 eligible citizens in the city remain unregistered, and only slightly more than half of those who are on the rolls cast a ballot in the 2016 general election. Our public hearings this year drew large number of voters and civic groups complaining about widespread disenfranchisement. Voters are furious that they cannot join a party in the year of the election, that poll sites open late and have defective equipment and poorly trained poll workers, and that even when they’ve followed the cumbersome rules and shown up to vote, their names may not appear in the poll books.

This needs to change. Over the past 12 months, the NYC Votes initiative has worked tirelessly to register new voters, educate and engage those already registered, and advocate for election reform. During the same time frame, elected officials from the City Council up to the governor have proposed improvements to state election law that we wholeheartedly support, yet time and again the legislature has failed to act. That must change. Next month, our largest Vote Better NY contingent to date will travel to Albany and demand an electoral system that invites participation, instead of throwing up barriers to voting. Read more about the legislation we support, beginning on page 28.

With the citywide elections on the horizon, including a ballot initiative for a statewide Constitutional Convention, it is imperative that every eligible New Yorker make their voice heard in 2017. Voting.nyc, the one-stop webpage for essential voter resources we launched last year, will make it easier than ever for millions of New Yorkers to register, learn about the local candidates and ballot issues, and find out where and when to vote. Our Debate Program and a newly redesigned Voter Guide will help city voters make informed choices at the polls. We urge you to get involved! Share this report, join the Vote Better NY coalition, volunteer to register your neighbors, and encourage your family members and friends to participate. When everyone votes, our city and state works for all of us!

*Voter Assistance Advisory Committee*





# 2016–2017 VOTER ASSISTANCE ANNUAL REPORT



**Onida Coward Mayers**  
NYC Voter Coordinator/  
Director of Voter Assistance

NYC Votes is the nonpartisan voter engagement initiative of the New York City Campaign Finance Board (CFB). Through NYC Votes, the CFB develops and implements programming to promote civic engagement and increase participation in local elections. NYC Votes helps New Yorkers connect voting and civic engagement to issues that affect their daily lives. New Yorkers take pride in their city and understand that their votes help create a better future for their communities. NYC Votes aims to draw on this sense of pride and empower New Yorkers with the resources they need to make informed choices at the polls.

The CFB’s Voter Assistance Unit (VAU) coordinates voter registration events and youth engagement initiatives, distributes voter education materials, and conducts GOTV outreach to encourage new registrants to vote each Election Day. Each year, VAU recruits new community, government, corporate, and youth organizations to partner with NYC Votes, to help these initiatives reach communities throughout the five boroughs.

The Voter Assistance Advisory Committee (VAAC) is mandated by the New York City Charter to advise the CFB on its voter engagement efforts and recommend legislative and administrative changes to improve NYC elections. The VAAC regularly hears public comment on ways to strengthen the electoral process and increase public participation through its public meetings and hearings, which are held throughout the year.

## VOTER REGISTRATION

The first step to participating in our democracy is registering to vote. Yet nearly 14% of eligible city residents cannot cast a ballot because they haven't taken this step. The NYC Votes initiative commits substantial resources to aiding and encouraging city residents to register, especially in areas with low levels of registration and among populations that are historically underrepresented at the polls, such as youth, the homeless, the incarcerated, and citizens with limited English proficiency.

### NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION DAY

On September 27, 2016, NYC Votes and the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) joined forces for the fifth annual National Voter Registration Day (NVRD). This nationwide event coordinates voter registration and engagement efforts across the country. Partnering with 80 community organizations, corporations, and city agencies, NYC Votes and NYPIRG registered over 8,000 new voters at 200+ locations across the city, netting first place among all NVRD participants nationwide for the second year in a row.

NYC Votes planned more than a week of programming on and around NVRD. First up was a pre-NVRD youth voter pep rally at Lehman High School in the Bronx on September 23<sup>rd</sup>. Special guest Shoboy of AMP 92.3 Radio's *Shoboy in the Morning* spoke to 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students about the importance of voting.

On September 27<sup>th</sup>, NYC Votes kicked off NVRD with voter registration drives hosted by the Department of Homeland Security at three naturalization ceremonies held at 26 Federal Plaza. Community voter drives were conducted throughout the day by the New York Public Library (at 93 branches), the Children's Aid Society (15 sites), and CUNY (on select campuses), just to name a few. NYPIRG held voter registration drives in the subway system — Union Square, Times Square, Grand Central, and Fulton Street in Manhattan; Atlantic Avenue/Barclays Center and Jay Street/Metrotech in Brooklyn; and Roosevelt Avenue/74<sup>th</sup> Street in Queens — and registered 2,160 New Yorkers on their way to and from work.

Focusing on the next generation of voters, NYC Votes conducted a special youth convention on "Developing a Student Voter Platform" at the New York Institute of Technology (NYIT). Students from NYIT, Fordham University, Juilliard, Long Island University, Marymount, NYU, and John Jay learned how to build platforms around issues of concern to them and their communities. The students then put these skills into action by constructing and presenting their own political platforms. VAU will continue to offer this program for youth audiences in 2017.



Naturalization ceremony at 26 Federal Plaza



NYC Votes capped off the day with its “Red, White, and Blue Bash: Party with a Purpose” at Lincoln Center, which was promoted as a signature event by the national organization behind NVRD. Hosted by Shoboy and his colleague DJ Majestik, the event celebrated NVRD volunteers, newly registered voters, and youth convention attendees. It featured performances by former Youth Poet Laureates Nkosi Nkululeko (2016) and Ish Islam (2012) and YPL ambassadors Sergio Jimenez and Keanna Hunter.

NVRD activities continued on September 29<sup>th</sup> with the “Educate and Elevate Youth Voter Jam” at Long Island University, sponsored by NYC Votes and *The Source*. A panel of hip-hop industry influencers spoke with high school and college students on how to promote change within their communities through the arts, education, and advocacy.

NYC Votes, in partnership with the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and volunteers from the Pan-Hellenic Council, NYU, and the Urban League, conducted additional registration drives at nine homeless shelters in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Brooklyn on October 1<sup>st</sup>.

In a final effort before the general election registration deadline, NYC Votes joined Mayor Bill de Blasio and the Mayor’s Community Affairs Unit at Brooklyn Metro Tech for a press conference on October 13, 2016. The Mayor advocated for electoral reforms to make registering and voting easier for New Yorkers, and joined other volunteers to register 132 new voters on-site.

## STUDENT VOTER REGISTRATION DAY

Student Voter Registration Day (SVRD) brings NYC Votes and its partners into city schools to encourage eligible students to register and vote. SVRD programs encourage students to make voting a lifelong habit by engaging them in conversation about how voting impacts their daily lives.

SVRD is a collaboration between NYC Votes, City Council Member Helen Rosenthal and the New York City Council, the Department of Education (DOE), New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC), and the NYC Board of Elections.



SVRD at Edward A. Reynolds West Side High School

Building on the success of SVRD in March 2016, NYC Votes helped coordinate a second day of SVRD programming on October 6<sup>th</sup>. Fifteen schools participated and 165 students were registered in time to cast a ballot in November’s general election.

## HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH

Hispanic Heritage Month (HHM) is a celebration of Latino cultural heritage held each year from September 15<sup>th</sup> to October 15<sup>th</sup>. In 2016, NYC Votes joined the HHM Action campaign to register and engage voters in the Latino community. NYC Votes and its partners (including Voto Latino, Dominicanos USA, the Mayor’s Community Affairs Unit, Assembly Member Jeffrion Aubry, and Council Member Julissa Ferreras-Copeland) held a press event at 103<sup>rd</sup> Street-Corona Plaza in Queens and canvassed Roosevelt Avenue from 103<sup>rd</sup> Street to 74<sup>th</sup> Street/Diversity Plaza, registering 38 new voters. VAU Manager Sabrina Castillo and Eddie Cuesta of Dominicanos New York also appeared on NY1 Noticias Pura Politica to discuss the importance of making nonpartisan voter registration efforts a part of the HHM celebration.

## AGENCY-BASED VOTER REGISTRATION

In 2000, Local Law 29 (LL29) was enacted to provide New York City residents with access to nonpartisan voter registration opportunities through local government agencies. While the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) already required public assistance agencies, like the Human Resources Administration, to offer registration to the public, LL29 expanded this mandate to include 18 city agencies and the city's 59 community boards. Local Law 63 (LL63) of 2014 added seven additional agencies to LL29.

As a result, the City Charter now requires 25 city agencies and the city's 59 community boards to help register voters and increase public awareness about elections. The Charter directs the CFB to issue guidelines for implementation of this mandate and establish training programs for employees of participating agencies. As amended by LL63, the Charter requires each agency to "provide the same degree of assistance with regard to the voter registration form as is provided with regard to the completion of its own form, if requested." In 2014, the Mayor's Directive 1 required agencies to prioritize fulfilling this mandate and report their voter registration activities to the Mayor's Office of Operations.

## Voter Registration Agencies

Administration for Children's Services

Business Integrity Commission

Civilian Complaint Review Board

City Commission on Human Rights

Community Boards

Department for the Aging

Department of Citywide  
Administrative Services

Department of City Planning

Department of Consumer Affairs

Department of Correction

Department of Cultural Affairs

Department of Environmental Protection

Department of Finance

Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

Department of Homeless Services

Department of Housing Preservation  
and Development

Department of Parks and Recreation

Department of Probation

Department of Records and  
Information Services

Department of Small Business Services

Department of Transportation

Department of Youth and Community  
Development

Fire Department

Human Resources Administration

Office of the City Clerk

Taxi and Limousine Commission

Led by Stewart Armstrong, VAU's Inter-agency Liaison, the CFB works closely with LL29 agencies throughout the year to help them meet their mandates. NYC Votes provides signage, multilingual posters explaining how to fill out the form, and coded registration forms so efforts can be tracked and reported. VAU helps agencies develop voter action plans that often go beyond their registration mandate and provides trainings to help them carry out these plans.

Many agencies post links to NYC Votes resources such as the Voter Guide and information about election dates on their websites and social media channels. Some host public meetings on local voting issues, and/or conduct voter registration drives.

Preliminary numbers from the New York City Board of Elections indicate it received 24,230 voter registration forms from Local Law 29 agencies in 2016, up from 9,798 in 2015.

## NOTABLE PROGRAMMING

As mentioned, several of the designated LL29 agencies go well beyond their obligations under the Charter.

For five years, the **Taxi and Limousine Commission** has hosted Election Day surveys (in English and Spanish) on Taxi TV. New Yorkers are asked to rate their experiences at the polls and indicate what improvement to NYC elections they would most like to see implemented. In 2016, nearly 12,000 voters took the survey and indicated that their highest priority for election reform is expansion of online voter registration. Same-day registration (being able to register to vote on Election Day) and keeping the polls open for more than one day were nearly tied as the second-highest priority.

In February 2016, the **Department of Homeless Services** (DHS), working with NYC Votes partner Nos Quedamos, hosted nine voter registration drives in homeless shelters in the Bronx. In October, DHS hosted a civics outreach program in eight additional shelters. DHS also maintains a voter registration link on its homepage year-round.

The **Department of Small Business Services** (SBS) facilitated voter registration at the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Citywide Procurement Fair in May 2016. SBS also participated in the #PromoteTheVote campaign detailed later in this report, sending #PromoteTheVote information to its clients and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to share with their staff and BID member businesses.

Several LL29 agencies hosted registration drives on NVRD, including the **Administration for Children's Services**, **Department of Corrections**, **Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**, **Office of the City Clerk**, and the **Department for the Aging** (at 29 provider sites). The vast majority of LL29 agencies provide a voter registration link on their websites.

## OTHER GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

The Local Law 29 framework provides NYC Votes with a roadmap for engaging partners at every level of government—even those who are not mandated to do so—to increase voting and civic engagement in New York City.

**NYC Health + Hospitals (HHC)**, the city’s public hospital system, has worked with NYC Votes since 2012. This past year, HHC sent out election date and deadline reminders to its facilities, collected Vote Better NY petition signatures at multiple sites, conducted over 60 voter registration drives (including on NVRD), and reported collecting 447 completed voter registration forms.

The **Department of Homeland Security** invited NYC Votes to conduct voter registration drives at 11 naturalization ceremonies this year. Naturalization ceremonies are the perfect time to encourage new citizens to take ownership of their civic rights and responsibilities by registering to vote. With the assistance of the NYC Board of Elections, Dominicanos USA, and the City Commission on Human Rights, NYC Votes registered nearly 2,200 naturalized citizens in 2016.

The **Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA)** translated voter registration forms into 11 additional languages (Albanian, Arabic, French, Greek, Haitian Creole, Italian, Polish, Russian, Tagalog, Urdu, and Yiddish), and worked with the CFB to print and distribute these forms to libraries, post offices, and other sites where New Yorkers register to vote. The Mayor’s office, MOIA, and the CFB joined forces to raise awareness of this new and valuable resource. In addition, MOIA assisted NYC Votes in registering new citizens at a naturalization ceremony in October 2016.

## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Throughout the past year, dozens of community groups, service organizations, and private-sector firms have partnered with the CFB to register voters, provide information about elections, and engage more New Yorkers in the electoral process. A few notable efforts:

The **Legal Aid Society** focused their efforts on a complicated issue: the voting rights of New Yorkers with criminal records. In July 2016, Legal Aid’s Community Justice Unit visited all of the NYC Department of Corrections’ (DOC) adult facilities to register anyone eligible to vote and disseminate information about voting rights, including a palm card detailing the “can’s” and “cannots” of voting in New York for anyone with a criminal record. The team met inmates who were unsure of their voting rights or believed—incorrectly—that once they had a felony conviction, they would never be able to vote in New York again. They encountered skepticism about accessing the electoral process and reluctance to disclose personal information on registration forms. Many detainees thought that their votes would be thrown away. The team found that even DOC staff were unaware of voting rights for New Yorkers with criminal records. In just a month’s time, the team registered 493 people to vote, which is roughly 5% of the adult population under the DOC’s purview. They also collected 324 absentee ballot applications.

In June 2016, NYC Votes’ partner **Dominicanos USA** announced an unprecedented milestone: its New York-based, grassroots voter registration efforts had registered over 100,000 voters in two years. As in past years, Dominicanos joined NYC Votes on NVRD. The organization also conducted a major GOTV effort for the 2016 elections within the Dominican community.

## NYC Votes Partners

92.3 FM Shoboy in the Morning	DYCD NYU Lutheran Family Health Centers
Acacia	DYCD Ridgewood
AHRC New York City—Disability Services	East Side Community High School
Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Delta Rho Omega	Edward A. Reynolds West Side High School
Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Tau Nu Omega	Elmhurst Senior Center
Automotive High School	Empire BlueCross BlueShield HealthPlus
Baruch College	Food Bank For New York City
Bayswater Senior Center	Forest Hills Community House NORC
Borough of Manhattan Community College	Fort Greene Christopher Blenman Neighborhood Center
Bronx Community Board Three	Fort Independence Senior Center
Bronx Community College	Generation Citizen
Bronx Defenders	Graduate School and University Center
Bronx Science Key Club	Green Acres Mall
Bronx Voices for Change	Guttman Community College
BronxWorks, Inc.	Help 1
Brooklyn College	Help Women's Shelter
Brooklyn Museum	Henry Street Settlement
Brooklyn NAACP	Hostos Community College
Brooklyn Technical High School	Hot 97
Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens	Hunter College Office of Student Activities
Children's Aid Society	Independence High School
Chinese American Voters Federation	Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA)
City College	Jack and Jill of America, Inc., Brooklyn Chapter
City University of New York	JASA Warbasse Cares NORC
College of Staten Island	JCC of Staten Island - South Shore
Con Edison	John Jay College of Criminal Justice
CUNY Law School	JP Morgan Chase
CUNY University Student Senate	Ketty's Place
Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation	Kings Plaza Mall
Dalton High School	Kingsborough Community College
Dalton Political Action Club	Korean American League for Civic Action
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc., North Manhattan Alumnae Chapter	LaGuardia Community College
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., East Kings County Alumnae Chapter	League of Women of Voters of Saratoga County
Delta Sigma Theta, New York Alumnae Chapter	League of Women Voters of the City of New York
Department of Homeland Security	Legal Aid Society
Diana H. Jones Senior Center	Lehman College
Dominicanos USA	Lenox Family Center
	Lenox Hill Neighborhood House

## NYC Votes Partners

Lincoln Center	Pathways to Graduation—Davidson Avenue
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts	Pathways to Graduation—Port Richmond High School
LiveOnNY	Pathways to Graduation—Schermerhorn Street
LSA Family Services	Peter Cardella Senior Citizens Center
Marymount Manhattan College	Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., Epsilon Sigma
Medgar Evers College	Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., Rho Epsilon Sigma
Metropolitan Hospital Center	Powers Family Residence
Midwood Neighborhood Center	Queens Academy High School
Millennium Development	Queens College
Muslim Volunteers for New York	Queensborough Community College
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NYCHA Branch	Roy Reuther Senior Citizen Center
Neighborhood Together	South Asian Fund for Education Scholarship Training (SAFEST)
New York City Board of Elections	Samaritan Village—Forbell Men's Shelter
New York City College of Technology	Sebco Senior program
New York City Health + Hospitals/Kings County	Selfhelp Latimer Gardens Senior Center
New York City Housing Authority	Services Now for Adult Persons, Inc.
New York City Public Library 125 <sup>th</sup> Street Branch, Harlem	Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., Eta Nu Zeta
New York City Veterans Alliance	Simpson Street Development Association
New York Democratic Lawyers Council	Spring Creek Senior Partners NORC SSP
New York Immigration Coalition	The City University of New York
New York Institute of Technology	The Greater Ridgewood Youth Council
New York Public Interest Research Group	Transport Workers Union Local 100
New York Public Library	Urban Assembly School for Applied Math and Science
New York Public Library, Mid-Manhattan Branch	Urban Word NYC
New York University	Validus Preparatory Academy
New York University—Goddard Hall	Voyages Preparatory High School
New York University—Wagner Graduate School of Public Service	Wayside Tompkins Park Senior Center
New York Urban League Young Professionals	YM & YWHA of Washington Heights and Inwood
Ocean Parkway Senior Center	YMCA Glebe Senior Center
Pan Hellenic Council of Greater New York	York College
Park Slope Center for Successful Aging	Young Israel of Forest Hills Senior League
Parkview Hotel	Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., Phi Zeta Zeta
Pathways to Graduation—Bronx Regional Referral Center/Hub	Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., Sigma Nu Zeta



## VOTER ENGAGEMENT

Getting voters registered is only the start of NYC Votes' outreach work. Many voters need reminders about voting and how it can make a difference in their communities, impacting issues from the quality of neighborhood schools to the cost of living. NYC Votes tailors programming to New Yorkers at all levels of civic engagement, from those who cast a ballot in every election to those who are newly registered or unsure about the importance of their votes.

NYC Votes builds on existing community networks throughout the city to maximize its impact. VAU Manager Sabrina Castillo works with civic groups and community-based organizations to build voter engagement activities into their existing public programs. NYC Votes partners help register new voters, build support for election reform in Albany, and encourage New Yorkers to learn more about and participate in elections.

In 2016, there were four regularly scheduled elections in NYC: the presidential primary in April, the congressional primary in June, the state and local primary in September, and the general election in November. In February 2017, a special election was held to fill a vacant seat in Manhattan's 9<sup>th</sup> Council District. NYC Votes worked diligently to educate voters about each of these elections and encourage them to go vote.

NYC Votes published online Voter Guides for each contest, disseminated election information on social media, registered new voters, and conducted GOTV activities such as phone banking and sending postcard reminders.

### DAYS OF ACTION

In 2016, NYC Votes launched its "Day of Action" initiative. A Day of Action is a one-day effort focused on giving a political voice to an underserved community through face-to-face outreach. In addition to organizational partners, everyday New Yorkers often volunteer to join these efforts. Volunteers knock on doors, register new voters, provide information about upcoming elections in the district, and seek to foster civic engagement.

In June 2016, NYC Votes and its volunteers teamed up with Assembly Member Michael Blake to engage residents of two NYCHA developments, Twin Parks East and East 180<sup>th</sup> Street-Monterey Avenue in the Bronx. On October 1, 2016 NYC Votes

## Election Dates

**APRIL 19, 2016**

Presidential Primary Election

**JUNE 28, 2016**

Congressional Primary Election

**SEPTEMBER 13, 2016**

State and Local Primary Election

**NOVEMBER 8, 2016**

General Election

**FEBRUARY 14, 2017**

City Council District 9 Special Election

**nyc votes DAY OF ACTION**

Helping Bronx residents register and get ready for the 2016 elections!

**Twin Parks East**  
2070 Clinton Avenue  
Bronx, NY 10457

**Saturday, June 4, 2016**  
11:00 am - 3:30 pm

with Assemblymember  
Michael Blake

Members from NYC Votes, NAACP-NYCHA, Dominicanas USA, and the Pan-African Community Development Initiative will go door-to-door answering your questions. For more information, contact Sean O'Leary at 212-409-1842, or at soleary@nycvotes.info.

**nyc votes**

teamed up with DHS to hold a Day of Action in nine separate homeless shelters. The Pan Hellenic Council of Greater New York, a membership organization representing local African-American fraternities and sororities, led the volunteer pool, speaking with shelter residents about their rights and registering them to vote. NYC Votes also led 30 volunteers in an effort to get out the vote at NYCHA's Rangel Houses prior to the Council District 9 special election on February 14, 2017. Volunteers knocked on nearly 550 doors, spoke with over 100 residents about the importance of voting in the special election, and left behind door hangers with election information for residents who were not at home.

To date, NYC Votes has conducted Days of Action in five NYCHA developments and 9 homeless shelters. More than 130 volunteers have participated, knocking on 1,100 doors and registering 175 new voters.

## YOUTH VOTER ENGAGEMENT

2016 marked an important shift in the American political landscape, as increasing numbers of younger Americans came of age and become eligible to participate in elections. Millennials and baby boomers now constitute equal shares of the voting-eligible population, about **31 percent each**. But younger voters aren't wielding the power they could and, historically, older voters have voted in higher numbers than their younger counterparts.

NYC Votes devotes significant time and energy to encouraging younger New Yorkers to register and make their voices heard at the polls. Since its inception, NYC Votes has extended its nonpartisan message of civic engagement to thousands of youth through city schools and partner organizations. NYC Votes

*Millennials and baby boomers now constitute equal shares of the voting-eligible population, about 31 percent each.*

programs geared specifically towards youth include the Youth Poet Laureate program, Student Voter Registration Day, the Street Team internship program, and classroom workshops.

### *New York City Youth Poet Laureate Program*

The New York City Youth Poet Laureate (YPL) program is a voting-themed spoken word poetry competition designed to promote civic engagement among NYC teens. 2016 Youth Poet Laureate Nkosi Nkululeko and the 2016 YPL ambassadors finished a highly successful year engaging NYC youth in December 2016. The newly crowned 2017 Youth Poet Laureate, Sharon Lin, who won for her poem, "A Footnote on a Hollywood Blockbuster," is a senior at Stuyvesant High School and co-founder of StuyHacks, a student-led high school hackathon, and BitxBit Camp, a middle school computer science mentorship program. She has been featured in Fusion, Women 2.0, The Huffington Post, and Yahoo! Finance. Four runners-up—Ianna Hayes, Ta'Shea Parham, Keanna Hunter and Khalin Vasquez—will serve as YPL ambassadors and support Sharon in encouraging youth throughout the city to vote.

## “A Footnote on a Hollywood Blockbuster” by Sharon Lin

Tilda Swinton, your yellowface is not to blame  
 If Hollywood’s standards state that Natalie Dormer is  
 Japanese enough to play an Asian girl  
 If Scarlett Johansson in a black wig and contacts  
 Is enough to replace the thousands of Japanese  
 Americans interned away for your film  
 For the millions of Asian girls who never see themselves  
 Except as exotic sex toys on television  
 The first Chinese American woman elected to Congress  
 And the Senate both in the same year  
 Why have we waited so long?  
 Is it because you couldn’t give up your chow mein  
 Your Kung Pao Chicken and Egg Foo Young  
 Long enough to give us a chance to rise from  
 The firecracker ashes to give us a voice?  
 Is it because you prefer your petite Asian girls  
 In porn than in government, that our names are just  
 Too hard to pronounce?  
 Is that why you called the first Asian American  
 Miss America ugly, because she didn’t fit your  
 Sexual fantasies, wasn’t a China Doll  
 for your yellow fever?  
 Is that why Jeremy Lin made headlines simply because  
 You couldn’t believe that an Asian man could  
 Have anything but a small penis and small voice?  
 Is that why you call us a model minority, then  
 Slander our tiger parents when maybe  
 Your standards are just too damn low?  
 Is that why our girls are starved sick,  
 told that if they aren’t perfect then they are nothing?  
 Is that why I still get asked on the subway  
 Where I’m from, because being a first generation  
 American isn’t enough to show that I’m anything  
 More than fresh off the boat?  
 Is that why my almond eyes and yellow skin  
 Beg whether I speak English or Chinese?  
 Is that why we’re nothing but a monolithic sea of

Yellow, that everything we touch becomes Asian  
 American privilege, that our bamboo ceiling defines  
 Our place in society, that you can just ignore us  
 Because we’re too complacent to speak up?  
 Is that why you confine us to dumpling houses  
 Exile us to the slums of the city, and still sell  
 Your movies for China’s sweet, sweet yuan?  
 Is that why we can never find our kind  
 In a black and white society where we are simply  
 Another color of people?  
 Is that why you ignore that whole  
 Century of systematic lynching  
 Of rat tails and laundry cells  
 Of the railroad system that we build  
 But were never acknowledged for?  
 Is that why you wipe our history and blame  
 It on our silence, why you shred our past  
 And claim that we work too hard, that we  
 Steal jobs when our immigrants are working  
 Twenty hours a day to make a living  
 In a society that wants us out?  
 Is that why when we stand in solidarity  
 Against racism, we are shunned because  
 Being Asian means shutting up and taking  
 It in the ass?  
 Is that why you can’t find enough Asians  
 At poetry slams for inspiration, why we  
 Can’t be CEOs or heroes, because we’re  
 The ones who have to be saved?  
 Is that why you fear us, because you’re afraid  
 Our chink eyes will see right through your lies  
 That you know that our voices will rise  
 Like a dragon’s flame, that our 200 dialects  
 Will expose you, so you shove us to the ground  
 And bury us under centuries, till we’re nothing  
 But a footnote on a Hollywood blockbuster?

## NEW YORK CITY CAMPAIGN FINANCE BOARD

The YPL program is a regular partnership between NYC Votes and Urban Word NYC that has reached tens of thousands of young New Yorkers through poetry slams, performances at youth conferences, Poem in Your Pocket Day, library workshops, social media, and television interviews. For this eighth year of competition, NYC Votes and Urban Word worked to increase and diversify the applicants and participants. Applications were sent to over 1,000 young people throughout New York City. Fifteen finalists were selected to enter the competition, based on their age, location, resume, and proposed service project. NYC Votes conducted two workshops for YPL participants: a voter registration workshop on how to host a successful drive at a community event and a civic engagement workshop that discussed ways to get involved in civic life and engage their community as well.



Sharon Lin  
2017 NYC Youth Poet Laureate

This year's Grand Slam Final was held in the Celeste Bartos Forum at the New York Public Library on December 17, 2016 and garnered a record crowd of 350 attendees. The participants spoke passionately on issues such as gender and racial equality.

### *NYC Votes Street Team*

The NYC Votes Street Team is a grassroots voter engagement program, now in its 5<sup>th</sup> year, led by college and high school students. Each summer, the Street Team represents NYC Votes at events throughout the city, conducting voter registration at community events and delivering presentations to student groups. The team also works with community-based organizations to develop and implement voter registration training programs.

In 2016, the Street Team registered 1,039 new registrants at 32 events, working with NYC Votes partners such as the Department of Youth and Community Development, the Department of Homeland Security, Dominicans USA, Bronx Defenders, Catholic Charities, NYCHA, HHC, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, and the NYC Veterans Alliance.

## THE NEW YORK CITY VOTER GUIDE

To help voters make informed choices at the polls, the CFB produces Voter Guides for each election. The Guide is a nonpartisan, multimedia election resource that provides voters with information about candidates, ballot proposals, and where and how to vote. The City Charter mandates that the CFB produce Guides for regularly scheduled municipal elections. Candidates running for local races are encouraged to submit profiles and prepare taped video statements, which are included in the online Guide and aired on local TV. For state, federal, and special elections, the CFB produces online Voter Guides.

Voter Guides are produced in multiple languages, in accordance with the Voting Rights Act. English and Spanish information is provided citywide, and Bengali, Chinese, and Korean are provided in targeted areas.

In 2016, many New Yorkers were asked to vote in four separate elections: the April 19<sup>th</sup> presidential primary, the June 28<sup>th</sup> congressional primary, the September 13<sup>th</sup> state and local primary, and the November 8<sup>th</sup> general election. The CFB partnered with MapLight, a nonpartisan research organization that reveals money’s influence on politics, to make more information about these elections available to New Yorkers. MapLight’s online guide, Voter’s Edge, was launched in 2014 to cover California elections. Working closely with CFB staff and the state and city BOE, MapLight launched Voter’s Edge New York in April 2016. Made available to city voters through the CFB’s website, the co-branded effort had about 25,000 visitors in 2016.

For the fall election to permanently fill a vacated Council seat in the Bronx’s District 17, NYC Votes produced and mailed printed primary election Voter Guides to over 60,000 voters. The complementary Video Voter Guide, produced in partnership with BronxNet TV, was aired on Optimum 67, FiOS 33, and [bronxnet.tv](http://bronxnet.tv) on multiple days prior to the September 13th primary.

In February 2017, a special election was held to fill a vacated Council seat in Manhattan’s District 9. The CFB published a comprehensive online guide covering the competitive race and produced a video guide that aired on Manhattan Neighborhood Network.

## TOOLS AND RESOURCES

NYC Votes is committed to providing partners and New Yorkers with the tools they need to cast a vote and help others to do the same. It has distributed thousands of voter registration forms, disseminated important election information, and equipped agencies and organizations with the tools to register and educate voters themselves. These resources, including all 16 language versions of the voter registration form, are available online on the CFB’s website. NYC Votes also offers in-person training to agencies and organizational partners, including its signature voter registration workshop “Train the Trainer,” which supported the efforts of 56 partners this year.

## VOTER DAY AND THE VOTE BETTER NY COALITION

On May 3, 2016, the Vote Better NY coalition traveled to Albany for its third annual “Voter Day.” Four buses carried 133 coalition members to meet with state representatives and urge them to support election reforms. The coalition, which is comprised of community organizations, good government groups, and concerned NYC citizens visited 74 legislative offices. After Voter Day, a number of legislators signed on as sponsors of the bills that Vote Better NY supports:



- ◆ 19 new sponsors of the Voter Empowerment Act, for a total of 49.
- ◆ 37 new sponsors of early voting, for a total of 53.
- ◆ 17 new sponsors of the Voter Friendly Ballot Act, for a total of 39.

To learn more about the Voter Better NY coalition and its efforts to improve elections in New York State, and find out how you can get involved, visit [www.votebetterny.org](http://www.votebetterny.org).

## GET OUT THE VOTE (GOTV)

Once voters have registered through an NYC Votes-sponsored program, VAU follows up to keep newly registered voters engaged and aware of upcoming elections. NYC Votes and its partners use direct mail, email, phone banking and door-to-door canvassing to encourage newly registered voters to get to the polls.

### DIRECT MAIL

NYC Votes sent postcards to newly registered voters thanking them for registering and reminding them about the multiple elections in 2016. The postcards were customized with each voter's election district and polling site, and directed recipients to the CFB's Voter Guide for information about the candidates running.

### SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a powerful tool for engaging and informing New Yorkers about voting and civic engagement. NYC Votes has 18,700 followers on Facebook, 4,800 on Twitter, and 600 on Instagram. The Public Relations Unit posts frequently about upcoming election deadlines and voter resources and deploys customized Twitter and Facebook advertisements to reach New York City voters with the information they need to cast an informed ballot.

#### *Voters of New York*

In October 2016, NYC Votes launched its “Voters of New York” social media series of portraits and interviews with local voters about the importance of voting. The project aims to encourage people toward the polls by showcasing the thoughts and motivations of everyday New Yorkers on fulfilling their civic duty. Most of the portraits and interviews in the series were produced by Jessica Su, an intern who came to the CFB via [Generation Citizen's Community Change Fellowship](#). The fellowship places New York City students in internships in city government and politics, aiming to ensure they are equipped to become full participants in our democracy. Jessica, who is now a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student at Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music and Performing Arts, captured the images and recorded the interviews armed only with her iPhone. She attended voter registration events with the NYC Votes Street Team and interviewed voters on the streets of New York City to ask people why voting matters to them. The result was 37 striking portraits, published on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, of New Yorkers sharing why it is important for them to participate in elections. You can find the full series on Instagram at @votersofnewyork.



## PHONE BANKING

Led by Field Coordinator Sean O’Leary, NYC Votes ran GOTV phone banks for all four major elections in 2016. Over 14,000 calls were made, including a four-day effort to get out the vote for November’s general election, when more than 100 volunteers made over 8,000 phone calls to newly registered voters.

Volunteers for the GOTV initiative came from the following organizations as well as from NYC Votes’ volunteer pool:

- ◆ Jack and Jill of America—Brooklyn and Metro Chapters
- ◆ Urban Assembly School for Applied Math and Science
- ◆ New York Urban League Young Professionals
- ◆ New York University—Goddard Hall
- ◆ Dalton High School
- ◆ Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., Kappa Sigma Chapter

Many phone bank volunteers are everyday New Yorkers who want to be more engaged with their city. Contact [volunteers@nycffb.info](mailto:volunteers@nycffb.info) to become an NYC Votes GOTV volunteer for the upcoming citywide elections.

## VOTING.NYC

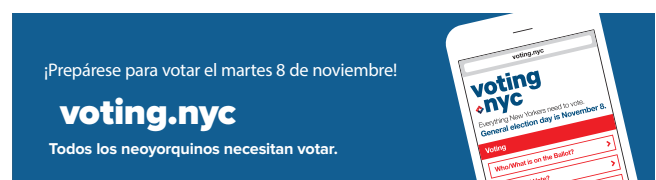
In September 2016, NYC Votes launched [voting.nyc](http://voting.nyc) to provide New Yorkers with the essential resources they need to cast their vote at one easy-to-remember address.

[Voting.nyc](http://voting.nyc) gives New Yorkers a single, clean, and user-friendly site where they can do everything from registering to vote, to learning about the candidates, to locating their poll site on Election Day. Previously, these New York City voting resources were scattered over a number of sites.

[Voting.nyc](http://voting.nyc) was developed in collaboration with the Mayor’s Office of Technology and Innovation (MOTI), and launched in time for the historic November election. The CFB alerted city voters to this new resource with advertisements on bus shelters and in *Metro*, *amNY*, and *El Diario*.

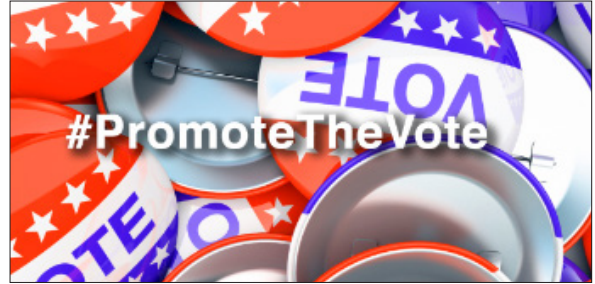
*“Voting.nyc is how government should work in the smartphone era. It’s a great example of how government can use everyday digital technology to make life — and voting — easier for the average person.”*

—John Kaehny, co-chair of the NYC Transparency Working Group and executive director of Reinvent Albany



## #PROMOTETHEVOTE CAMPAIGN

In the lead up to the 2016 general election, Association for a Better New York (ABNY) and the Partnership for New York City launched a campaign to increase voter participation in New York State's primaries and elections by highlighting a New York State law that grants employees two hours of paid leave to vote if they do not have four consecutive non-working hours between polls opening and closing. NYC Votes and its partner Small Business Services (SBS) joined the effort to bring this information to city businesses.



#PromoteTheVote successfully reached more than 80,000 businesses who committed to posting about this law, covering over 1 million employees.

## VOTER ANALYSIS

New York State is typically uncompetitive in presidential elections and has lower turnout, especially in comparison to battleground states. Nevertheless, over half a million new voters in the city registered in time to cast a ballot in November 2016. Turnout among active registered voters in the general election rose to 60.6% as New Yorkers chose between New York's former U.S. Senator and a Manhattan real estate mogul to occupy the White House. This was an increase from the 58.0% turnout in 2012, though still less than the 63.5% turnout in the 2008 election, which saw record turnout nationwide.

While this influx of new registrations in NYC reduced the percentage of eligible citizens who are unregistered from 19.0% to 14.3%, there were still 755,000 New Yorkers who could have voted but were not registered by November 8, 2016.<sup>1</sup> At the state level, New York ranked 41<sup>st</sup> in voter turnout among all 50 states,<sup>2</sup> with only 57.3% of the voting eligible population<sup>3</sup> participating in the

*New York ranked 41<sup>st</sup> in voter turnout among all 50 states.*

<sup>1</sup> For the 2014 midterm elections, nearly 1 million New Yorkers were unregistered to vote. "990,776 Reasons Why We Need Universal Registration," <http://www.nycffb.info/media/blog/990776-reasons-why-we-need-universal-registration>.

<sup>2</sup> "America Goes to the Polls 2016," published by NonProfit Vote and the U.S. Elections Project, <http://www.nonprofitvote.org/documents/2017/03/america-goes-polls-2016.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> The voting eligible population (VEP) is a measure of the U.S. Elections Project, and is calculated at the state level by subtracting non-citizens and people ineligible to vote due to felony convictions from the voting age population (VAP). Further information for VEP calculation can be found at <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/faq/sold>.



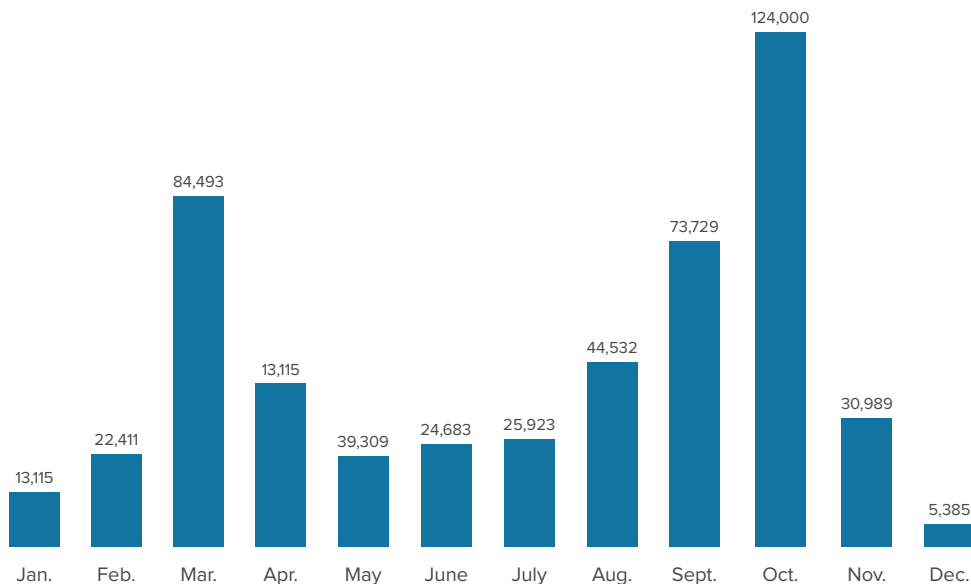
presidential election. Turnout was even worse at the city level, with only 51.9% of citizens of voting age<sup>4</sup> participating.

With just over half of eligible citizens casting a ballot in the presidential election, New York City's turnout continues to be dire. While it may not have affected the outcome of New York State's electoral votes, it is troubling that more than two million citizens decided not to make their voices heard in the presidential contest. This has grave implications for down-ballot races as well. Engaging the interest of presidential voters in the less high-profile 2017 citywide and 2018 midterm elections, where turnout is typically much worse, will be challenging, and even more so when it comes to engaging those who never participated at all.

## NEW VOTER ANALYSIS

With the influx of registrations in 2016, the New York City voter rolls grew to over 4.5 million active registered voters. Of these, 510,337 were new registrants, with nearly all registering in time to vote in the November election. While the Board of Elections processed new registrations year round, spikes occurred at the major registration deadlines: over 40,000 people registered the week of March 20<sup>th</sup>, at the deadline for the presidential primary, and 73,341 registered the week of October 9<sup>th</sup>, at the deadline for the general election. The spike in registrations the week of October 9<sup>th</sup> represented 14% of all new registrations for the entire year.

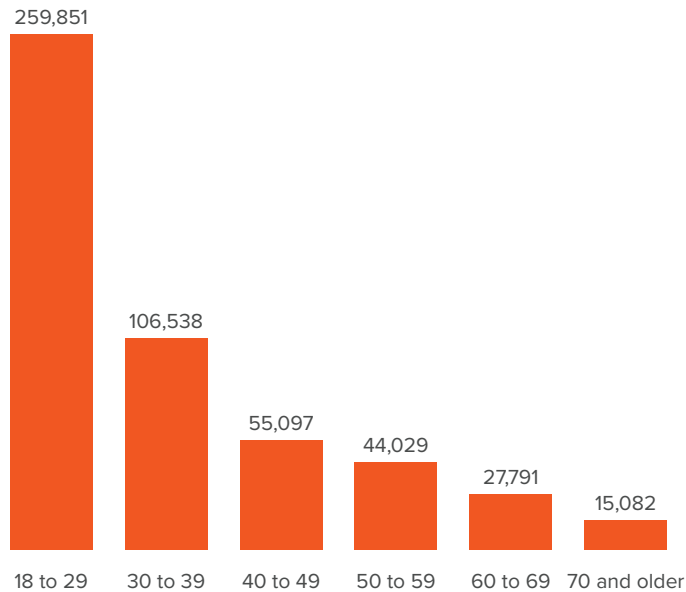
Number of New Registrations by Month in 2016



<sup>4</sup> For the population of eligible voters in New York City, we use the citizen voting age population (CVAP), which is calculated using the American Community Survey 2015 5-year estimates. CVAP is the sum of both the number of U.S. citizens born in the United States or its territories over the age of 18, plus the number of naturalized citizens over the age of 18.

As is typical, newly registered voters skewed young as youth voters came of age and registered to vote for the first time. Over half of new registrants were under the age of 30, with nearly 260,000 (51%) between the ages of 18 to 29. An additional 107,000 (21%) new registrants were between the ages of 30 to 39.

### 2016 Registrations by Age Group as of November 8, 2016



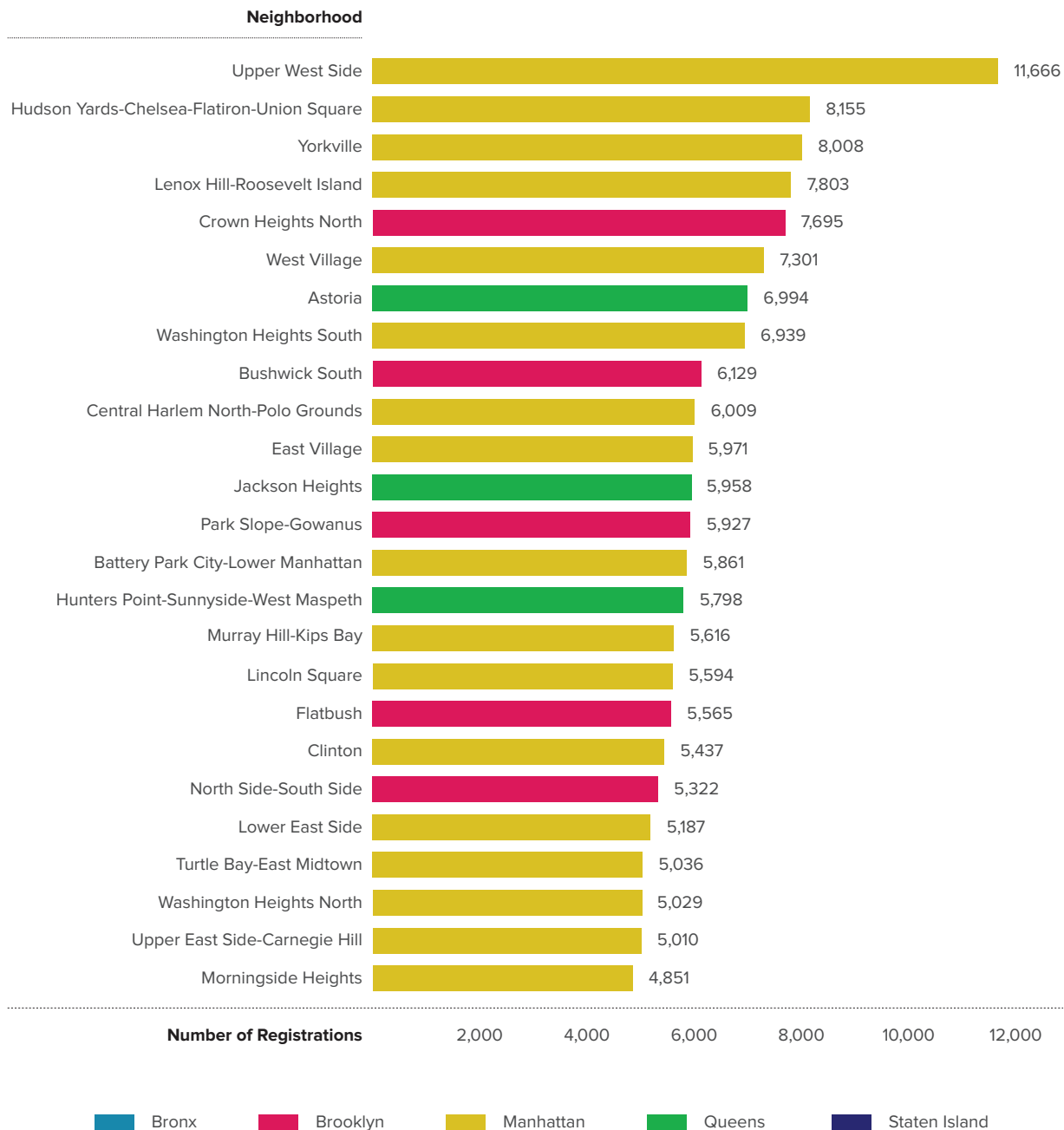
The average turnout for these newly registered voters was 66.0%—several points higher than the 60.6% turnout among active registered voters overall. There was a narrow range in turnout, with newly registered 18–29 year old voters turning out at a slightly lower rate of 63.3%, compared with the highest turnout rate of 70.8% for 30–39 year olds.

### Turnout of Newly Registered Voters by Age Group

AGE RANGE	RATE OF TURNOUT
18 to 29	63.3%
30 to 39	70.8%
40 to 49	68.2%
50 to 59	67.8%
60 to 69	67.5%
70 and older	64.4%

New voter registrations came from all around the city, with every neighborhood seeing an uptick in registered voters from a few hundred to a few thousand. The top neighborhoods for new voter registrations were the Upper West Side (11,666), Hudson Yards-Chelsea-Flatiron-Union Square (8,155), Yorkville (8,008), Lenox Hill-Roosevelt Island (7,803), and Crown Heights North (7,695). Of the top 25 neighborhoods for new voter registrations below, 17 were in Manhattan; 5 were in Brooklyn; and 3 were in Queens.

### Top 25 Neighborhoods for New Voter Registrations



## NEIGHBORHOOD ANALYSIS

At the neighborhood level,<sup>5</sup> there were wide disparities in both voter registration rates and voter turnout. Sixty-six out of 188 neighborhoods had registration rates<sup>6</sup> of 90.0% or more, including five neighborhoods with registration rates higher than 100.0%.<sup>7</sup> Of those neighborhoods, two were in the Bronx, two were in Brooklyn, and one was in Manhattan. On the other end of the spectrum, five neighborhoods had registration rates lower than 70.0%. Of those, two were in the Bronx, two were in Brooklyn, and one was in Queens.

However, registration rates did not necessarily correspond with turnout rates among eligible citizens at the neighborhood level. For example, 10 of the top 25 neighborhoods for voter registration were in the Bronx, yet none of these neighborhoods were among the top 25 for voter turnout. In fact, only 5 of the 25 top neighborhoods for voter registration were also top neighborhoods for voter turnout. On the other end of the spectrum, 11 of the 25 neighborhoods with the lowest registration rates were also among the 25 lowest neighborhoods for voter turnout. Overall, neighborhood registration rate has a moderate relationship with neighborhood turnout rate.<sup>8</sup> While a high rate of registered citizens did not guarantee a similarly high turnout rate, *low* registration rates could be predictive of low voter turnout.

A handful of neighborhoods had turnout rates<sup>9</sup> higher than 60.0% of the citizen voting age population. These high turnout areas tended to correspond with wealthier areas of the city, including the Upper East Side, the Upper West Side, Lincoln Center, and Clinton in Manhattan; the Riverdale section of the Bronx; Westerleigh in Staten Island; and the brownstone neighborhoods of Brooklyn Heights, Cobble Hill, Carroll Gardens, Clinton Hill, Prospect Heights, Park Slope, and Windsor Terrace in Brooklyn.

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<sup>5</sup> To analyze participation patterns at the neighborhood level, we use the Neighborhood Tabulations Areas (NTAs) created by the Department of City Planning. These boundaries are aggregated using Census tracts to areas that have a minimum population of 15,000. While NTAs do not perfectly overlay with historical neighborhood boundaries, they are a useful approximation to capture local dynamics. More information on NTAs is available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/planning/data-maps/open-data/dwn-nynta.page>.

<sup>6</sup> The registration rate for each neighborhood is calculated by dividing the number of registered voters by CVAP.

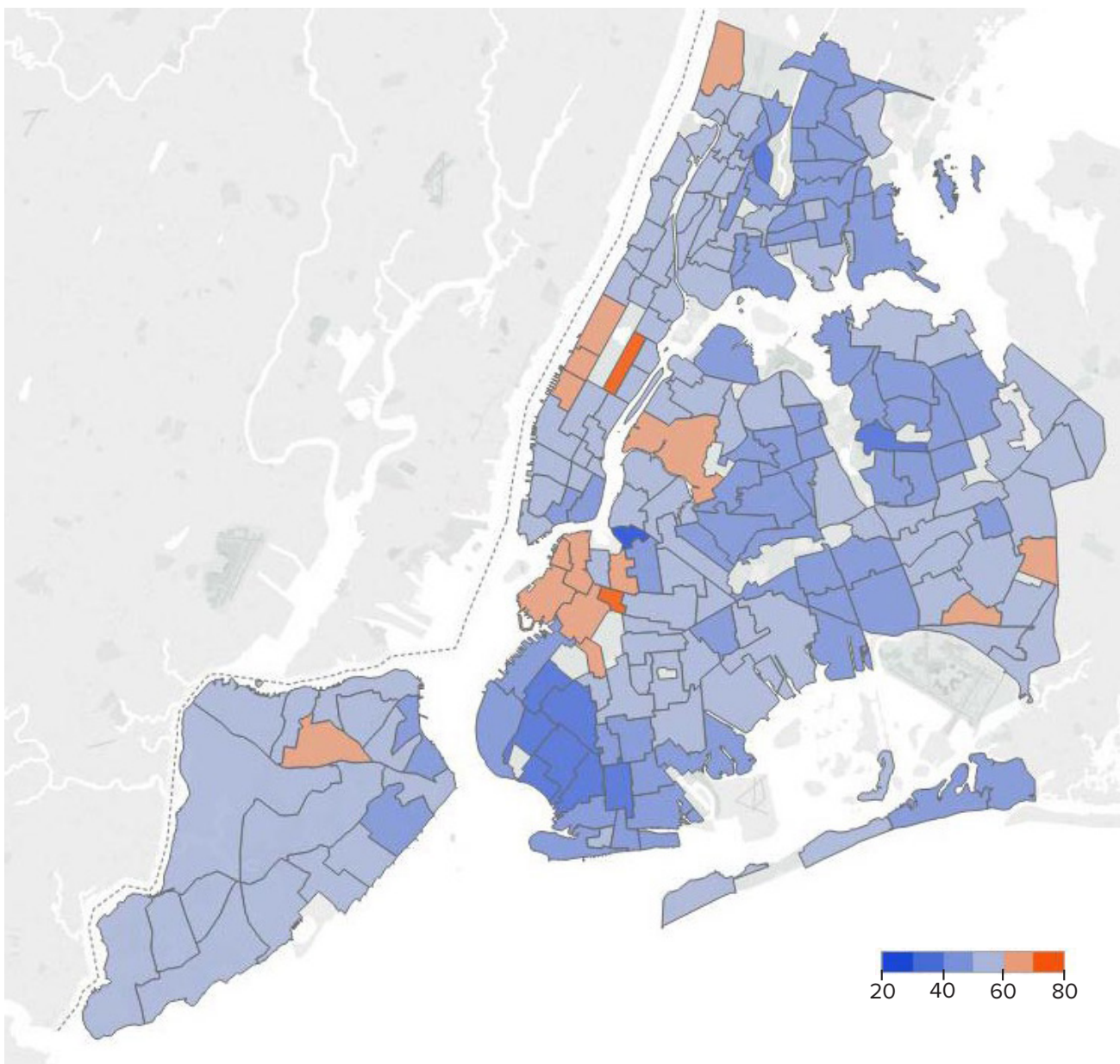
<sup>7</sup> These registration rates likely reflect a combination of state and federal laws governing voter roll maintenance, which outline procedures for removal of voters and institute safeguards to prevent voters from being erroneously removed from the voter list, as well as imperfect data collection for population estimates that occurs outside the decennial Census.

<sup>8</sup> The two measures had a Pearson correlation of 0.558,  $p = 0.01$ .

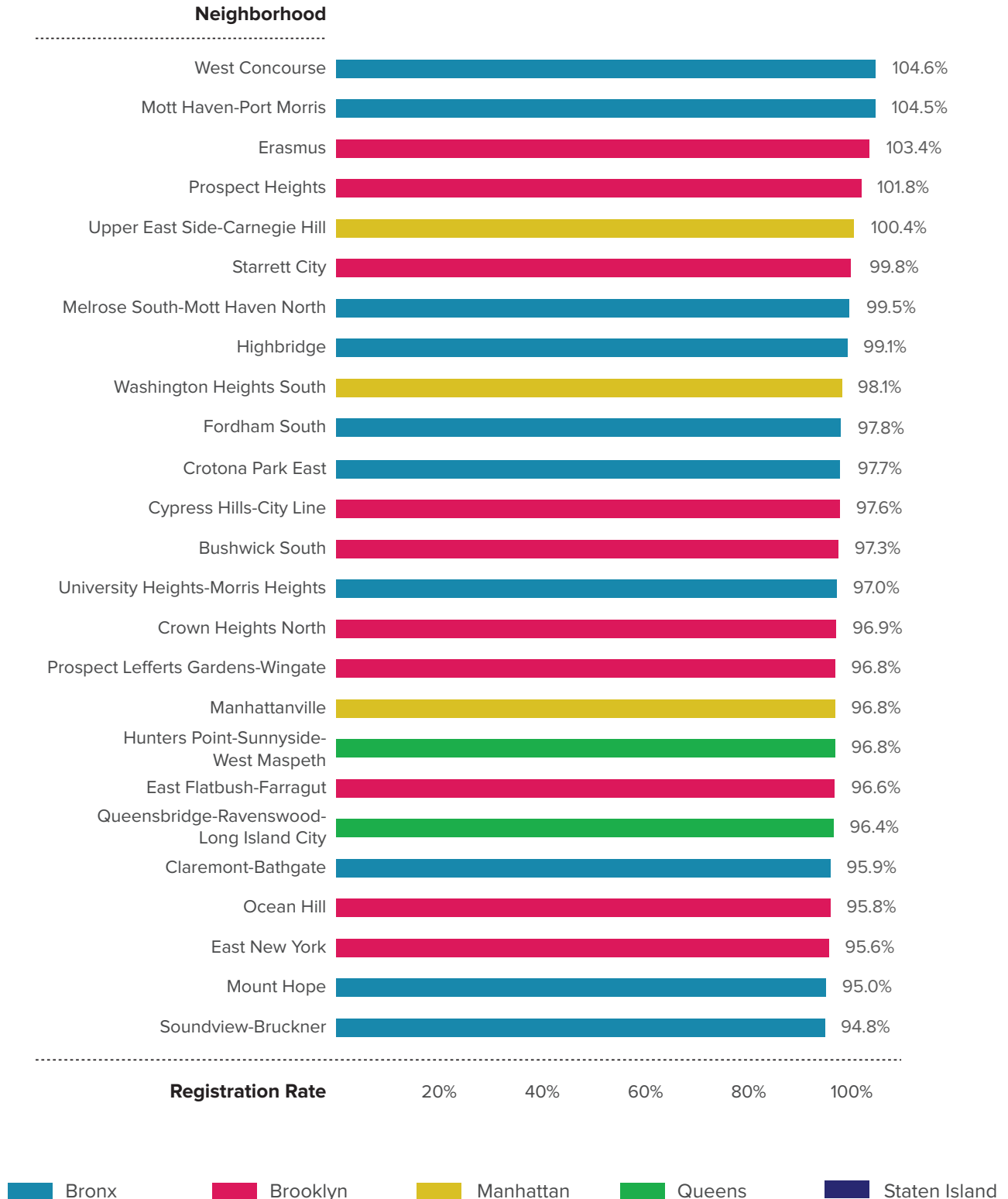
<sup>9</sup> Here we calculate turnout by taking the number of voters who participated in the 2016 general election and dividing it by CVAP.

A number of neighborhoods also had turnout rates lower than 40.0% of citizens of voting age. This included Belmont in the Bronx; Queensboro Hill, a section of Flushing in Queens; and south Williamsburg, where only 22.8% of eligible citizens cast a ballot. However, six of the 10 neighborhoods with less than 40% turnout were concentrated in south Brooklyn. These neighborhoods include Sunset Park East, Borough Park, Dyker Heights, Bensonhurst, Bath Beach, and Homecrest.

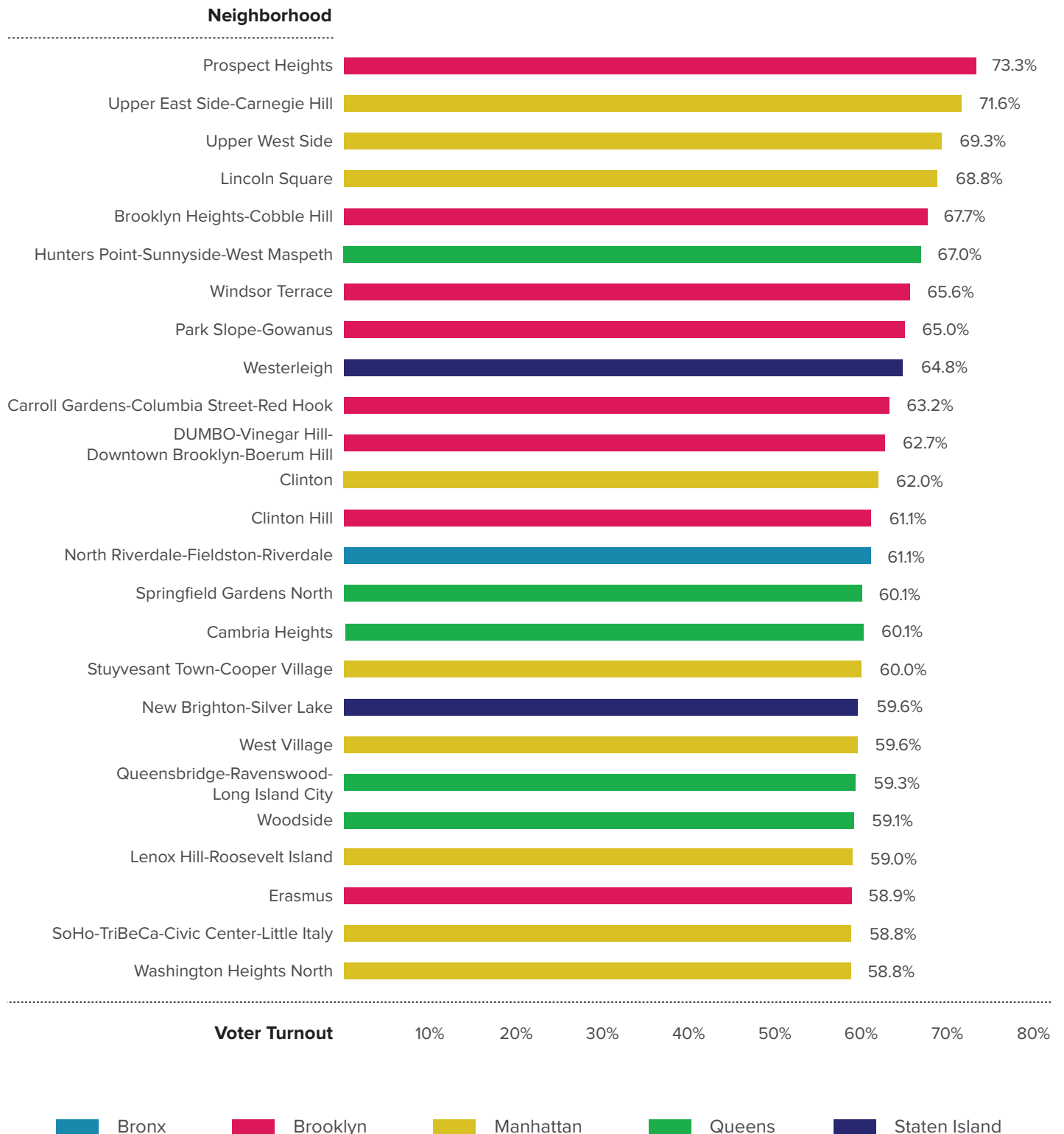
### Voter Turnout Among Citizens of Voting Age by Neighborhood, 2016 General Election



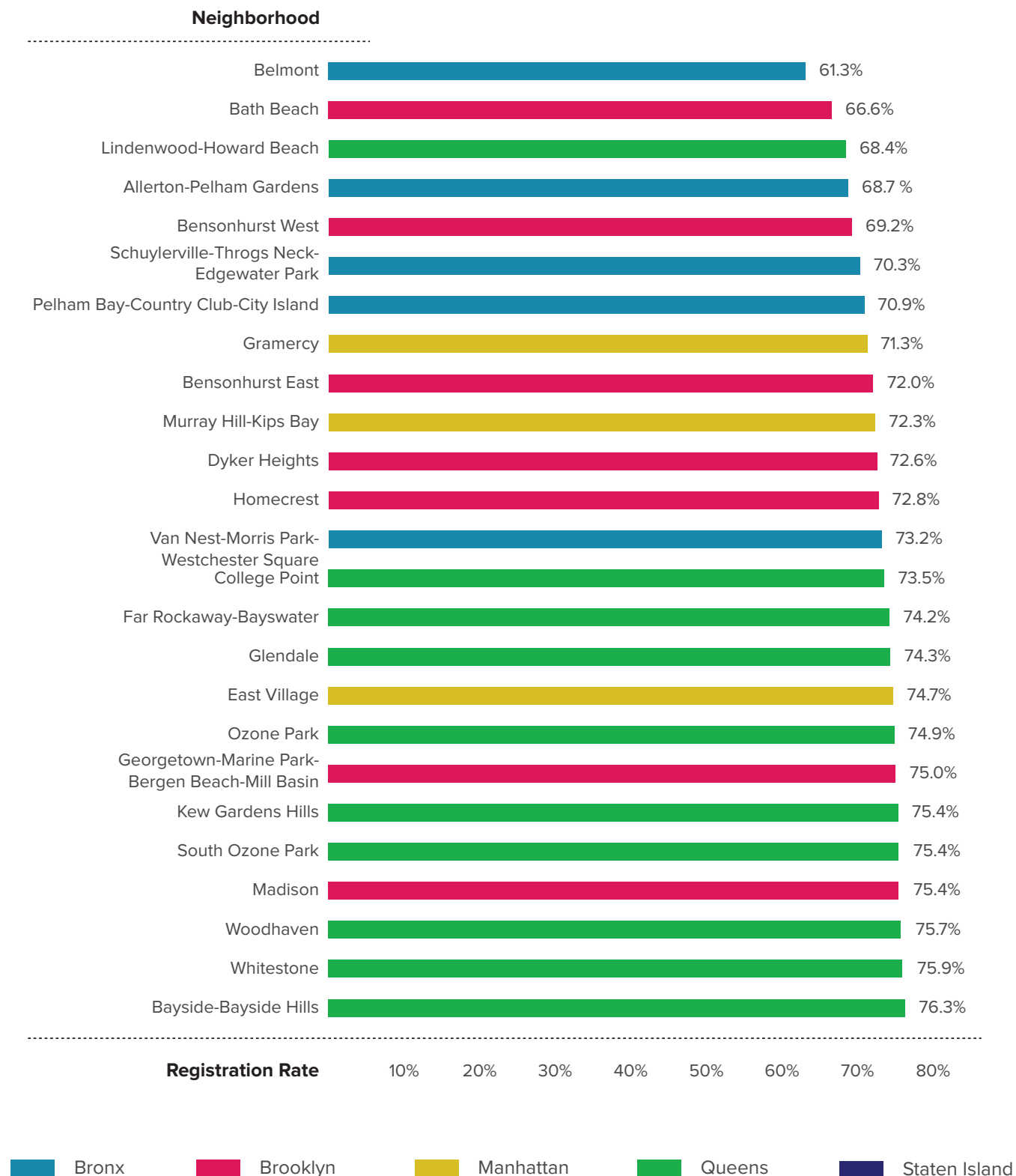
## Top 25 Neighborhoods for Voter Registration



## Top 25 Neighborhoods for Voter Turnout

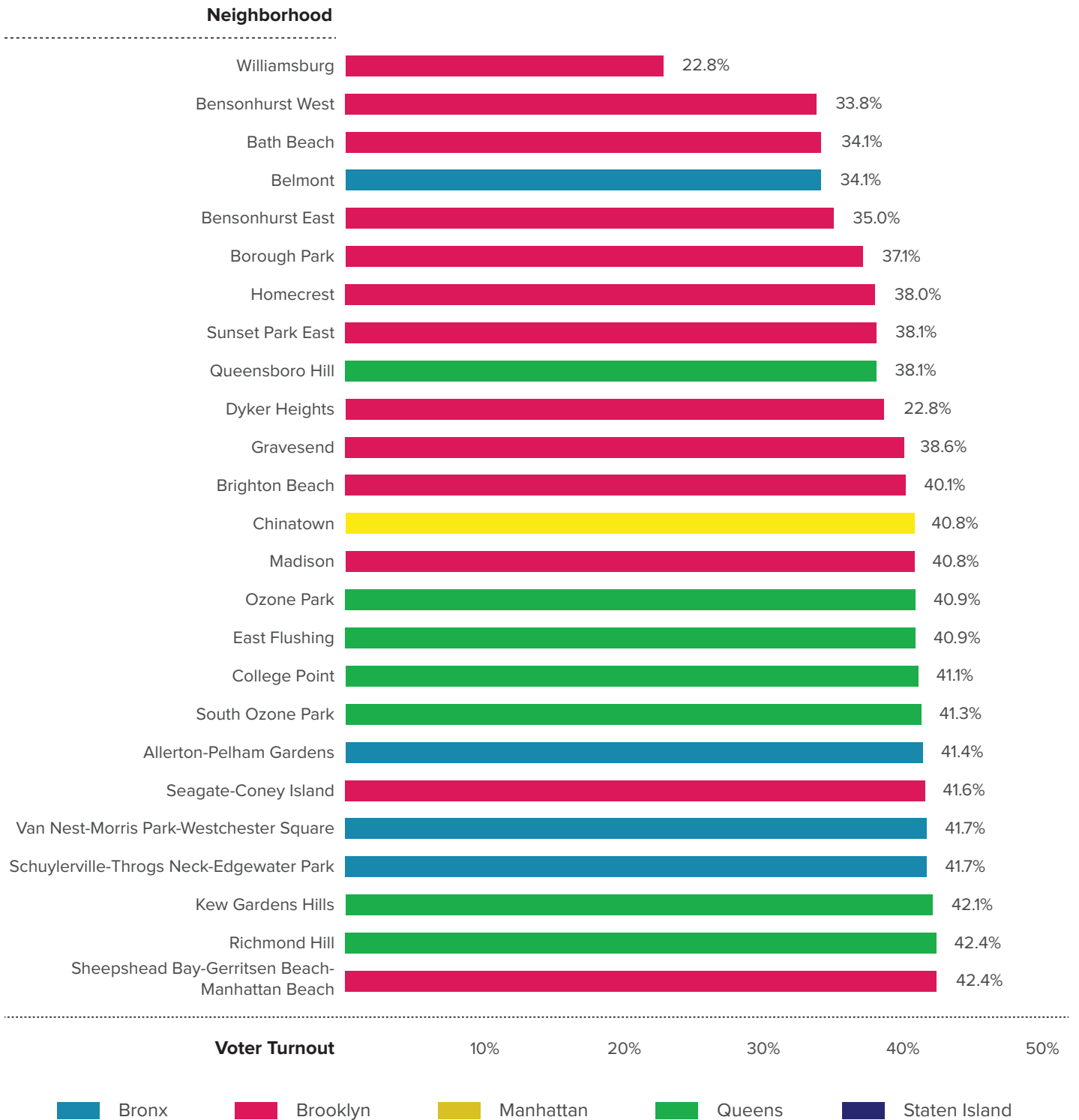


## Bottom 25 Neighborhoods for Voter Registration





### Bottom 25 Neighborhoods for Voter Turnout

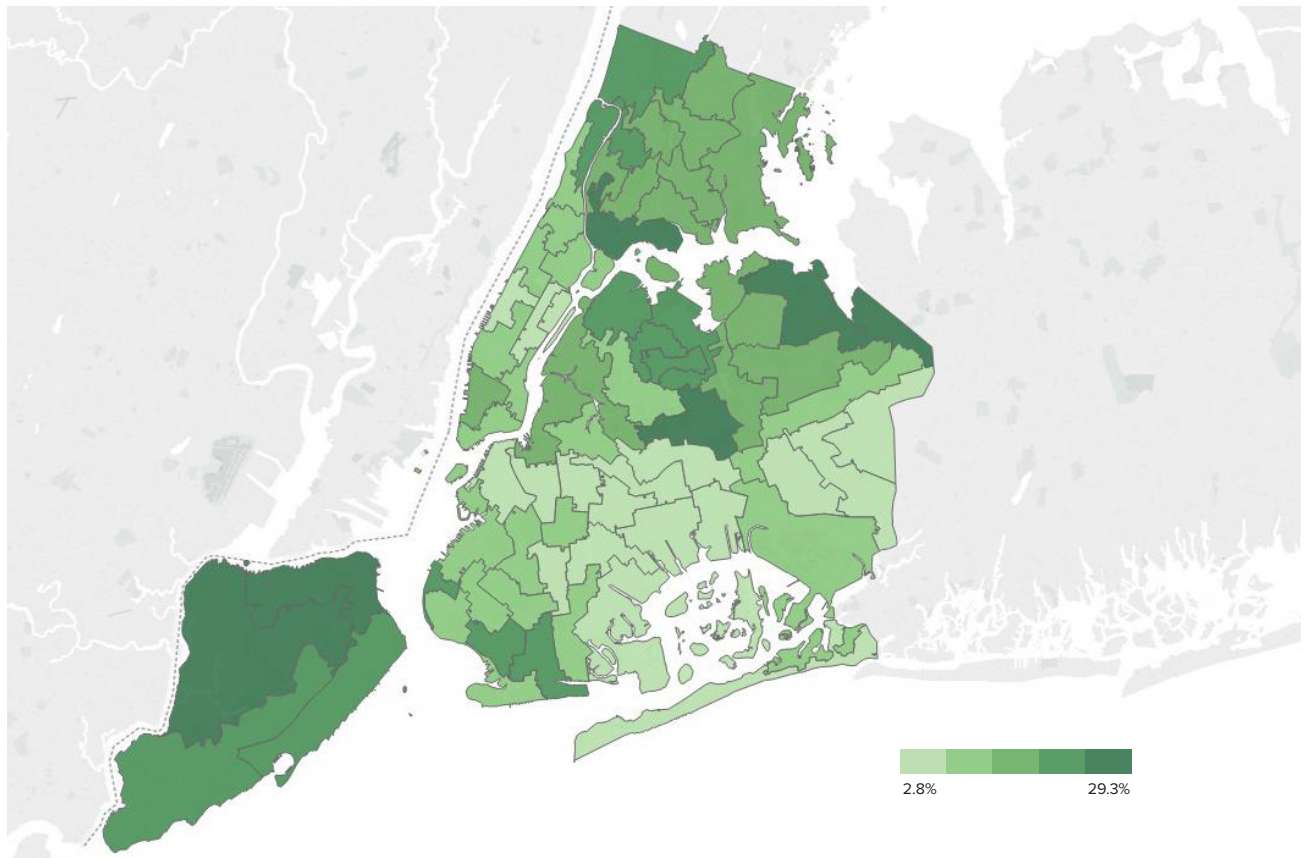


## DROP-OFF PARTICIPATION IN STATE RACES

Presidential elections are typically a high point of participation as voters cast a ballot for the nation’s highest office. However, this surge in turnout does not necessarily translate down the ballot. While higher turnout in presidential years guarantees that more voters will take part in state-level elections than they do in midterm years, a number of voters will vote for president but leave their ballots blank for state-level races. Here we calculate the “drop-off” percentage at both the Assembly and Senate level.<sup>10</sup>

In some Assembly districts, drop-off was minor, with as few as 2.8% of voters casting a vote for president without voting for their state Assembly member. However, in five districts, at least one-quarter of voters who cast a ballot did not cast a vote in their state Assembly race. At least four of these districts (Districts 26 and 28 in Queens, and Districts 61 and 63 in Staten Island) were uncontested—only one candidate appeared on the ballot. District 84 in the Bronx was contested, but was uncompetitive. The incumbent, Carmen Arroyo, won 26,652 (94.2%) of the 28,294 votes cast in the race.

### Dropoff in Voter Participation for Assembly Races, 2016 General Election



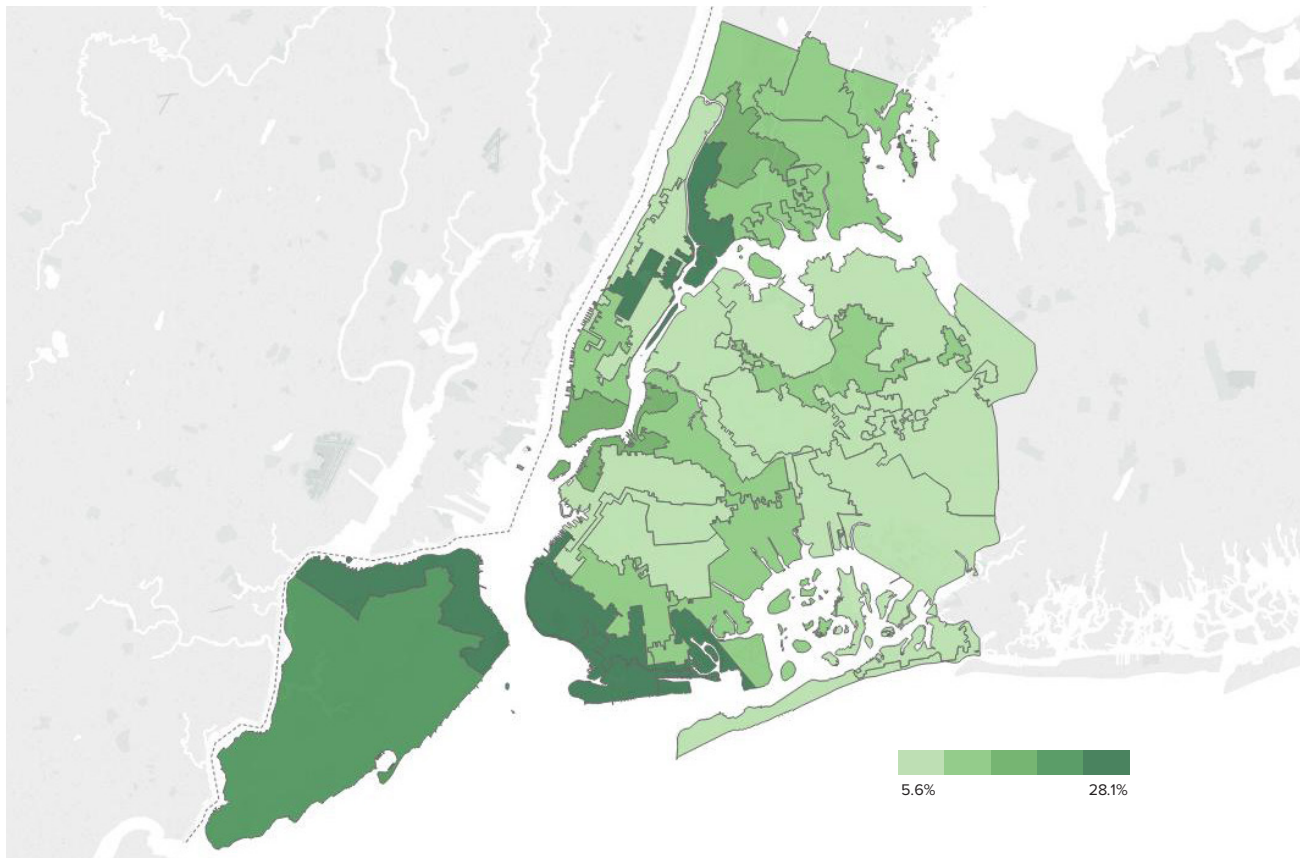
<sup>10</sup> To do this, we took the number of ballots cast in each state race during the general election, and used the number of blank ballots in the race, comparing it to the number of voters who were recorded in the voter file as having participated in the general election.

Overall, open seats for the Assembly saw an average drop-off rate of 9.6%, compared to 14.2% in races where an incumbent was running for re-election. Contested races had a drop-off of 11.9% on average, while uncontested races saw an average drop-off rate of 16.3%. The lowest level of drop-off was in contested races for open seats, at 8.5%.

Looking at drop-off in State Senate races, three districts had a drop-off rate of 25.0% or more — District 29, spanning the Bronx and Manhattan; District 22 in south Brooklyn; and District 23 in a section of south Brooklyn and northern Staten Island. Districts 22 and 23 were uncontested, while District 29 was contested but uncompetitive. The incumbent in that race, Jose Serrano, won 42,761 (94.5%) of the 45,264 votes cast.

Unlike the Assembly races, there was little difference in drop-off between open seats and incumbent-held seats; it was 11.7% for open seats and 12.6% where incumbents sought re-election. However, there was a bigger difference in contested versus uncontested races: drop-off for contested seats was only 10.3% on average whereas for uncontested seats it was 18.5%.

## Dropoff in Voter Participation for Senate Races, 2016 General Election



## LOOKING AHEAD TO 2017 AND BEYOND

Over half a million new voters cast a ballot for the first time in 2016. It is critical for NYC Votes to engage these first-time voters in the upcoming citywide election for two reasons: to ensure that their voices are heard at the local level, and to help foster the habit of turning out for every election, not just once every four years. Looking back at voters who registered and voted for the first time in the 2012 presidential election, fully two-thirds of them never voted again from 2013-2015; not in primaries, not in city elections, nor in mid-term or special elections.

While it is important to continue reaching out to the 755,000 eligible citizens who are unregistered, data suggests that to increase voter turnout, it is crucial to engage New Yorkers who are *already* registered and provide them with information about upcoming elections and the candidates running for office. This was demonstrated by voters who left their ballots blank in down-ballot races for the State Assembly and Senate in 2016, even in contested races without an incumbent. Research suggests voters don't vote when they do not have enough information about candidates to make an informed choice, or even worse, they are unaware of what these state and local elected officials do and how they can impact voters' everyday lives.<sup>11</sup>

In the 2013 citywide election, only 26.0% of registered voters went to the polls. If the same pattern holds from 2016 to 2017 as it did from 2012 to 2013, as many as 1.6 million New Yorkers who cast a ballot for president could sit out the upcoming citywide election. NYC Votes will focus on educating and engaging these voters to address this significant projected drop-off, emphasizing the real-life outcomes of voting in local elections.

## A NEW YORK AGENDA FOR INCLUSIVE, PARTICIPATORY ELECTIONS

NYC Votes commits significant resources to communicating directly with New Yorkers about voting. That effort is necessary in large part because New York's election laws present real obstacles to participation.

This is a critical moment in history for voting rights in New York and across the entire United States. After eight years under a federal administration committed to protecting and expanding access to voting for all Americans, the ground has shifted uncomfortably for many citizens.

Despite his victory, President Trump has claimed that as many as five million votes were cast illegally in the 2016 elections, and has demanded a "major investigation" into voter fraud. While in-person voter fraud is virtually nonexistent,<sup>12</sup> the specter of fraud is used regularly by state lawmakers as a pretext for blocking access to the ballot.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, <http://knightfoundation.org/features/votelocal>

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g. <http://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/debunking-voter-fraud-myth>

Without the Section 5 protections of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) that were stripped away by the Supreme Court in 2013, hard-won progress on ballot access is under attack across the nation. At the same time, states like Ohio and Florida that are closing poll sites and reducing early voting days can (and do) point to New York as an example of a “blue” state where more restrictive voting laws are still on the books.

Our election laws were outdated a generation ago. New York can and should demolish its longstanding barriers to voting once and for all and show the nation what a modern, inclusive, and participatory election system can look like.

*This is a critical moment in history for voting rights in New York and across the United States.*

What is needed is strong, affirmative leadership from our governor, our legislators, and engaged voters across New York State.

Our city and our state are strongest when all citizens can participate equally in choosing our common priorities. That is what elections are for.

## REMOVING BARRIERS TO REGISTRATION: GET EVERY ELIGIBLE NEW YORKER ON THE ROLLS

Expanding access to voting must begin with voter registration.

Of course, a well-functioning registration system must enable election administrators to ensure that only eligible New Yorkers are permitted to vote. But our current voter registration model presents a real barrier to voting. Before eligible New Yorkers can vote, the law requires them to fill out a form in order to register. Instead of granting the most basic democratic right of citizenship freely, New York (and most other states) requires its citizens to step forward and claim it.

What’s more, New York’s pen-and-paper voter registration system is hopelessly out of date. Bad handwriting, data entry mistakes, and misplaced forms have left the voter rolls riddled with errors. Every election generates new stories of long-time voters arriving at the polls only to find their names missing from the poll book. While more New Yorkers are registered to vote than ever before, more than 755,000 voting-age citizens are left off the voter rolls in New York City alone.<sup>13</sup>

This is no longer acceptable. New York State can remove these obstacles by taking bold measures designed to guarantee that *all eligible New Yorkers* are on the voter rolls.

A modern, participatory approach to elections in New York State must start with **automatic voter registration**. One of the most effective ways to expand the franchise is for state government to take responsibility for registering its citizens to vote. Instead of waiting for residents to complete and submit a registration form, an “opt-out” system would add eligible unregistered voters to the

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.nycfb.info/media/blog/990776-reasons-why-we-need-universal-registration>

rolls electronically and automatically whenever they interact with the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), unless the voter declines to be registered.

A similar system has been fully implemented in Oregon, which has registered nearly 300,000 voters through its program since the start of 2016. California, West Virginia, Vermont, and Alaska have also enacted laws to implement automatic voter registration. In addition to expanding registration of eligible New Yorkers, automatic registration would distribute the load of new registrations more evenly throughout the year, eliminating the overwhelming surge of registrants that our county boards of election often struggle with near election time. Governor Cuomo’s “Democracy Project” includes automatic registration for customers of the state DMV. Automatic registration is an important step forward that would show New Yorkers that the state values their participation in the democratic process.

However, we also know that the DMV is not the only point of frequent access New Yorkers have with their state government. To make our state’s voter rolls as accurate and inclusive as possible, New York should initiate a similar system of **electronic voter registration** across state government by allowing more public-facing government agencies to register voters electronically. This approach would provide every eligible New Yorker with the opportunity to register to vote whenever they do business with a state agency and make New York State a national leader in expanding access to voting for its citizens.

Under the Voter Empowerment Act, agencies offering voter registration opportunities under the National Voter Registration Act could electronically transmit voters’ information to the state Board of Elections (BOE). This would allow New Yorkers applying for public benefits, or enrolling at CUNY or SUNY, to register to vote in one easy step.

New York State currently provides access to online registration to New Yorkers with driver’s licenses or state-issued IDs through the DMV. The DMV is a logical first step for online voter registration, but stopping there relegates millions of voters who do not interact at all with the DMV to second-class status. Consequently, millions of New Yorkers—many of whom, after all, rely on the nation’s largest public transit system for their transportation needs—are effectively blocked from submitting or updating their voter registration online.

*Automatic registration is an important step forward that would show New Yorkers that the state values their participation in the democratic process.*

**Universal online voter registration**, provided through the state BOE and available to every eligible voter, would allow any New Yorker to register using just their Social Security number. It would also allow registered voters to take ownership of their voter record and update it when their information

changes. New York is only one of three states where electronic voter registrations are maintained by the state motor vehicle agency.<sup>14</sup>

Election law currently requires voters to supply a “wet signature” (i.e., a signature in ink on the voter registration form) when they register to vote, except those who register through the DMV. Expanding access to online registration requires changing election law to allow boards of election to **accept electronic signatures**. A number of states have adopted this practice, and Delaware and Missouri even accept finger-based signatures from touch screen devices, such as tablets.<sup>15</sup>

*Parolees live in our neighborhoods, work, and pay taxes, but lack a voice in our elections.*

Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers move to a new residence every year, but many are unaware that they must submit a new voter registration form to change their address with the BOE. As a result, the number of inaccurate, out-of-date addresses on the voter rolls grows ever larger. Our own research shows that high residential turnover has a significant and negative impact on voter turnout.<sup>16</sup> Enacting **portable voter registration** would enable boards of election to use information from the National Change of Address System to keep New Yorkers’ registrations up-to-date whenever they move within the state.

Voters between the ages of 18–24 are the least engaged of any age group. They have the lowest registration rates and the lowest turnout rates. **Allowing pre-registration of 16- and 17-year olds** would draw our youngest citizens into the voting process as soon they become eligible at age 18. This would provide new pathways for young people to join the voter rolls—through their high schools, through their first interactions with the DMV—and start their civic engagement habits early.

New York, along with 47 other states, bars otherwise eligible New Yorkers from voting if they are incarcerated for a felony conviction. However, New York’s voting prohibition for felons extends beyond prison; individuals reentering their communities are barred from voting while on parole. Parolees live in our neighborhoods, work, and pay taxes, but lack a voice in our elections. Joining the 15 states that grant **voting rights to parolees** would end widespread confusion over eligibility, eliminate the need to re-register, and restore the franchise to tens of thousands of New Yorkers.

A system designed to guarantee that all eligible New Yorkers can exercise their right to vote must also include **same-day voter registration**. Beyond its obvious potential to increase voter turnout, same-day registration offers an additional benefit: while a modern, inclusive voter registration system would dramatically reduce errors on the voter rolls, some mistakes are bound to occur with any system, leaving some voters’ names out of the poll books. Same-day registration provides the means to correct such mistakes on Election Day, ensuring that every eligible voter’s ballot is counted.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/multimedia/data-visualizations/2016/state-online-voter-registration-systems>

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/05/ovr\\_2015\\_brief.pdf?la=en](http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/05/ovr_2015_brief.pdf?la=en)

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.nycctfb.info/PDF/news\\_media/reports/issue\\_report\\_2012\\_who\\_votes.pdf](http://www.nycctfb.info/PDF/news_media/reports/issue_report_2012_who_votes.pdf)

New York is the only state that prohibits voters from changing their party enrollment in the year of an election. This extreme deadline prevents many voters from participating in party primaries. In the months before New York's 2016 presidential primaries, many unaffiliated voters with great interest in the race between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton found themselves unable to participate. The state legislature should **change the party enrollment deadline**, moving it much closer to the election so that more New Yorkers can participate in primary elections.

The Board of Elections currently requires voter registration forms to be returned 25 days before an election, so there is time for new registrations to be processed and printed in the poll books. **Electronic poll books** would ease this administrative burden, allowing the BOE to extend the deadline to 10 days prior to the election (as set out in the state Constitution) or better yet, to enable same-day registration. Electronic poll books connected to a computerized statewide voter registration database would also empower poll workers to assist voters by updating their records in real time or directing voters to their correct polling place. Electronic poll books are used in some form in 25 states, and New York should join that list.<sup>17</sup>

## REMOVING BARRIERS TO VOTING: GET EVERY REGISTERED VOTER TO THE POLLS

To cast a ballot, New Yorkers who have successfully registered must still navigate an election system that is not designed to meet their needs. In New York, elections are run—with a few changes—the way they were throughout most of the last century. Voters have a 15-hour window in the middle of the work week to show up at their designated polling place, wait in line, find the table for their election district, complete their ballot, and cast their vote. If a voter goes to the wrong site, a poll worker might be able to re-direct them—or they can cast a provisional ballot, which may not be counted. Absentee voting is available, but discouraged. In a banner year for voter turnout in New York State—with two New Yorkers atop the presidential ballot—our state still ranked 41<sup>st</sup> out of 50.

Outside New York, many voters have an entirely different experience. Single-day Tuesday elections are no longer the norm. Early voting is the law in 36 states. In last year's presidential election, one in three voters—more than 47.2 million—cast their ballot before Election Day.<sup>18</sup> Early voting increases voters' access to the ballot. During high-turnout elections, early voting can spread voter traffic across several days, easing long lines and giving poll workers more time to address errors or fix malfunctioning ballot scanners.

*Early voting in New York should include a 12-day early voting period that encompasses the two weekends before the election.*

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/multimedia/data-visualizations/2017/a-look-at-how-and-how-many-states-adopt-electronic-poll-books>

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.electproject.org/early\\_2016](http://www.electproject.org/early_2016)



**Early voting** in New York should include a 12-day early voting period that encompasses the two weekends before the election. It should set flexible requirements for polling places per county based on population size, with at least one polling location per 50,000 registered voters. At least some of those poll sites should stay open beyond the standard business hours of 9:00 am to 5:00 pm on early voting days.

An early voting system in a densely populated city like New York would require centrally located voting sites, which would serve a much broader population than the average poll site currently does on Election Day. Central voting sites would also require electronic poll books and the capability to print on-demand ballots for voters' individual political subdivisions.

*Amending the constitution to allow no-excuse absentee voting is an important step.*

Together, these technologies can enable New York to adopt **vote centers**, which would allow voters to cast their ballots at the easiest site for them to reach—whether it is near their home, their place of employment, their child's school, or another convenient location—and eliminate the possibility of voters appearing at the “wrong” site. Eleven states currently allow vote centers, and New York should follow suit.<sup>19</sup>

However, some voters will be unable to cast their ballots in person, even with more convenient places and additional days to vote. Currently, the state constitution requires New Yorkers to provide a “valid excuse” to cast an absentee ballot. The official instructions warn voters that it is a felony to make a false statement in an application for an absentee ballot—stern language that discourages even voters with valid reasons.

If we are seeking to encourage more participation, amending the constitution to allow **no-excuse absentee voting** is an important step. It would further remove barriers and create new opportunities for New Yorkers to cast a vote that counts. Allowing more New Yorkers to vote by mail is an important supplement to early voting, especially in smaller counties with sparse populations.

New Yorkers should not be deprived of their franchise by procedural changes or new regulations. Until 2013, the federal Voting Rights Act (VRA) protected the voting rights of minorities in states across the South—and in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx—from new barriers to voting. The VRA required election boards to seek Department of Justice preclearance for a broad range of administrative actions, from moving poll sites to redrawing district lines. **Requiring preclearance** at the state level would provide New Yorkers with assurance that their access to the ballot will be protected.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vote-centers.aspx>

New York adopted the use of optical scanners in 2010, but election law still contains ballot requirements that are designed for the old lever machines. Though county administrators have exercised some flexibility under the law, confusing layouts and readability challenges persist. This is not simply an issue of aesthetics—New Yorkers who cannot decipher the ballot lose their opportunity to be heard. The law should be changed to enable **better ballot design** that is tailored to the capabilities of the optical scanners.

## Voting Reform Legislation in the 2017–2018 Session

- ◆ **EARLY VOTING:** A2064 (Kavanagh); S2950 (Stewart-Cousins)  
Establishes a 12-day early voting period ending the Sunday before a general, primary, or special election; requires one polling location per 50,000 registered voters up to a maximum of seven per county; grants flexibility to establish more locations or set hours based on local needs.
- ◆ **VOTER EMPOWERMENT ACT:** A2278 (Kavanagh); S3304 (Gianaris)  
Includes automatic voter registration, pre-registration for 16- and 17-year olds, portable voter registration, universal online registration; changes the registration and party enrollment deadlines.
- ◆ **NEW YORK VOTES ACT:** A5312 (Cusick); no Senate companion  
Includes early voting, automatic registration, same-day registration, universal online registration, portable registration, no-excuse absentee ballots; changes the party enrollment deadline, among other reforms.
- ◆ **PRECLEARANCE FOR VOTING-RELATED REGULATIONS AND POLICIES:**  
A5925 (Walker); no Senate companion  
Requires counties with at least 10 percent of any minority population to get approval from the NYS Attorney General before making any changes to the voting process.