

“Social justice should be the underlying goal of all humanity.”

-Alan V. Lowenstein, Institute Founder



Testimony of Heather Richner  
New Jersey Institute for Social Justice  
In Support of S585  
New Jersey Senate State Government, Wagering, Tourism  
& Historic Preservation Committee  
Monday, March 23, 2026

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**do social justice.**

Good morning, Chairman Beach, Vice-Chair McKeon, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of S585, establishing “The Voter Convenience Act,” allowing voters to vote at any polling location in their municipality on election day.

My name is Heather Richner, and I am an Associate Counsel with the Democracy and Justice Program at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (the “Institute”). The Institute’s cutting-edge racial and social justice advocacy seeks to empower people of color by building reparative systems that create wealth, transform justice, and harness democratic power—from the ground up—in New Jersey.

We believe S585 can help serve New Jerseyans by increasing access to the polls and thus overall voter turnout. The Institute supports the passage of this bill with amendments to ensure that polling places are not consolidated and addressing some confusion regarding polling places.<sup>1</sup>

S585 has the potential to streamline access to voting by allowing voters to choose their polling location in their municipality and making it more convenient to cast their vote. At a time when voting locations across the country are closing and access to the ballot is facing increased challenges, it’s clearer than ever that New Jersey must protect its own voters, especially voters of color who already face far too many barriers to the ballot.

New Jersey’s current law requires individuals to vote only at their assigned multi-district polling place in their county. At said location, voters must then find the table for their assigned election district. This has historically led to long lines at some assigned district tables while other district lines are empty.<sup>2</sup> One way to increase voter participation among populations that have been historically deliberately disenfranchised is to make it easier for them to vote by choosing which polling location in their municipality is most accessible.<sup>3</sup>

The current voting process leaves people behind; even with early voting periods, many voters cannot make it to their designated polling location in time to vote due to distance from the location, access to transportation, single-day travel issues, busy schedules, and long lines that they may not be able to

wait on.<sup>4</sup> And these barriers to voting are more present in Black and brown communities, low-income communities, and among students.<sup>5</sup>

Notably, voter turnout gaps are higher among Black and other voters of color. Data from the 2020 presidential election shows voter turnout in New Jersey as follows: over 78% of eligible white voters turned out, the number drops to 60% of eligible Black voters, 53% of eligible Latina/o voters and 50% of eligible Asian voters.<sup>6</sup> Expanding access to the polls by opening all polling locations in a municipality to its residents will make it easier to ensure that voter turnout accurately reflects the state's diversity. By removing geographic barriers and simplifying voting procedures, this Act would make the democratic process more accessible and efficient for New Jerseyans.

S585 would also allow younger voters to better participate in democracy. In 2024, the City of Newark passed an ordinance permitting 16-and-17-year-olds to vote in local School Board elections.<sup>7</sup> Also in 2024, New Jersey passed the New Voter Empowerment Act which allows 17-year-olds to vote in the primary election if they are 18-years-old by the time of the general election,<sup>8</sup> While these laws allow younger people to vote, voter turnout is often lower because many people in these age groups attend schools that are not close to their designated polling locations, and between school/polling location hours, after-school activities and other responsibilities, they often face significant barriers to making it to the polls.<sup>9</sup> The Voter Convenience Act would allow young people to cast their vote at their own school if it is a polling place, or any location convenient to them. This is especially important because research shows that the earlier young people engage in the democratic process, the more likely they will continue to.<sup>10</sup>

We are generally supportive of this bill, but we are concerned that, without guardrails, it could lead to future consolidation of polling locations and create some initial confusion for voters trying to locate their polling place. Polling place consolidation is the process of closing or combining voting locations,<sup>11</sup> which could lead to fewer locations overall and some people traveling even further to access a location.

Polling place consolidation is particularly harmful for the turnout of Black and other voters of color.<sup>12</sup> A study documenting the turnout effects of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that polling place consolidation severely debilitated turnout during the 2020 presidential primary in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and these effects impacted Black voters more than white voters.<sup>13</sup> Transportation access issues resulting from consolidation disproportionately affect voters of color, and will affect older populations as well due to existing transportation-related voting obstacles they already face.<sup>14</sup>

The current language of S585 also leaves it unclear as to whether this bill would create new, universal polling locations, or if it would change, but keep existing polling locations in each municipality. If it is the former, we strongly recommend including language to ensure that any *new* polling locations created for purposes of this Act are in compliance with early voting requirements pursuant to Title 19 Section 19:15A-1. Further, S585 section 2(b) is unclear as to the meaning of guidelines developed at the county level and whether these guidelines apply to any polling place at both the county and municipal level. We therefore urge you to remove this section entirely or significantly modify it to ensure it is in compliance with Title 19 Section 19:15A-1.

Finally, to make sure this bill does not lead to harmful consolidation of polling places and voters have access to enough polling locations, S585 should be amended to include the following provision:

*The bill prohibits any polling place consolidation or closures beyond what is permitted under existing New Jersey law.*

In sum, The Voter Convenience Act has the potential to improve voter access and convenience across municipalities by allowing voters to choose their polling place on Election Day. It is a promising step toward reducing lines and enhancing participation in the democratic process.<sup>15</sup> However, we must be careful it does not unintentionally create more obstacles for voters, especially voters of color. We therefore urge you to make the suggested amendments and to vote S585 out of Committee today.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> New Jersey S. 2865 (2024), [NJ Legislature](#); David Wildstein, *Senate panel advances bill to allow voters to pick polling location*, N.J. Globe (May 17, 2024), <https://newjerseyglobe.com/campaigns/senate-panel-advances-bill-to-allow-voters-to-pick-polling-location/>

<sup>2</sup> *Voter Convenience Act Factsheet*, NJ State League of Municipalities, (last visited Mar. 22, 2026), <https://www.njlm.org/DocumentCenter/View/11760/Voter-Convenience-Act-fact-sheet>.

<sup>3</sup> Dana Rowangould et al., *Does access to voting locations affect the choice to vote?*, Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Jan. 2024, at 2, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590198224000150>.

<sup>4</sup> *How Ease of Access to Polling Locations Impacts Participation in Elections*, Fair Elections Center, (May 19, 2025), <https://fairelectionscenter.org/media/polling-locations-blog/>.

<sup>5</sup> Dan Garisto, *Smartphone Data Show Voters in Black Neighborhoods Wait Longer*, Scientific American, (Oct. 1, 2019), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/smartphone-data-show-voters-in-black-neighborhoods-wait-longer/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2020*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU (Apr. 2021), <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-585.html> (Table 4b, Reported Voting and Registration, by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin, for States: November 2020); These gaps could be much worse than they appear. Recent research indicates that the Census Bureau's statistics on turnout may overestimate the incidence of voting among communities of color. See Stephen Ansolabehere et al., *The Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement Overstates Minority Turnout*, 84 J. POL. 1850, 1853–54 (2022).

<sup>7</sup> *Vote 16 Newark*, New Jersey Institute For Social Justice, (last visited Mar. 22, 2026), <https://njisj.org/vote16newark/>.

<sup>8</sup> New Jersey A. 3690 (2024), <https://legiscan.com/NJ/bill/A3690/2022>; Adam Ahmadi and Hoorain Fatima, *Eagleton experts discuss new state law allowing 17-year-old voters to participate in primary elections*, (Jan. 29, 2024), <https://dailytargum.com/article/2024/01/eagleton-experts-discuss-new-state-law-allowing-17-year-old-voters-to>.

<sup>9</sup> *How Ease of Access to Polling Locations Impacts Participation in Elections*, Fair Elections Center, (May 19, 2025), <https://fairelectionscenter.org/media/polling-locations-blog/>.

<sup>10</sup> Micauri Vargas et al., *Let us Vote Policy Brief*, (Aug. 2023), <https://njisj.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Let-Us-Vote-Policy-Brief-Final.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> *Polling Place Consolidation: Negative Impacts on Turnout and Equity*, Voting Rights Lab, (Jul. 2020), <https://votingrightslab.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Polling-Place-Consolidation-Negative-Impacts-on-Turnout-and-Equity.pdf>, at 1.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Impact of Voter Suppression on Communities of Color*, Brennan Center for Justice, (Jan. 10, 2022), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/impact-voter-suppression-communities-color>.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> Next Avenue, *Why Too Many Older Adults Face Voting Obstacles*, (Nov. 3, 2016), *Polling Place Consolidation: Negative Impacts on Turnout and Equity*, Voting Rights Lab, (Jul. 2020), <https://votingrightslab.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Polling-Place-Consolidation-Negative-Impacts-on-Turnout-and-Equity.pdf>, at 4. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2016/11/03/why-too-many-older-adults-face-voting-obstacles/>; .

<sup>15</sup> *Voter Convenience Act Factsheet*, NJ State League of Municipalities, (last visited Mar. 22, 2026), <https://www.njlm.org/DocumentCenter/View/11760/Voter-Convenience-Act-fact-sheet>.