

**Testimony of Kamolika Das, Policy Analyst
At the Public Hearing on the
Paid Leave to Vote Amendment Act of 2019
DC Council Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
June 13, 2019**

Chairperson Allen and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Kamolika Das and I am a Policy Analyst at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI promotes opportunity and widespread prosperity for all residents of the District of Columbia through independent research and thoughtful policy solutions.

I'm here today to express DCFPI's strong support for the Paid Leave to Vote Amendment Act of 2019. The right to vote is fundamental to the democratic process and votership has far-reaching impacts on which policies are adopted. Multiple studies have found that states with smaller voting gaps across incomes had policies more favorable to low-income communities such as higher minimum wages, stricter predatory lending laws, and more generous health benefits.¹ In DC, voter turnout in Wards 7 and 8 is shockingly low. In the District's 2018 primary election, fewer than 12 percent of registered voters in Ward 7 and fewer than 8 percent in Ward 8 voted compared to 22 percent west of Rock Creek Park. Although voter turnout has dropped across the entire District, it has dropped much further east of the Anacostia River since 2014.²

Although there are likely numerous factors at play that lead to these inequities, guaranteeing paid leave to vote will help remove at least one important barrier to higher voter turnout. According to Census Bureau studies, registered voters cited conflicting schedules as the most common reason for not voting in 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014, and as the second most common reason in 2016.³ Low-wage workers are disproportionately likely to cite conflicting schedules as a barrier given the unpredictable and inflexible schedules in service sector industries. Practical barriers to voting also fall along racial lines. According to a Caltech/MIT survey of eligible voters, Black and Latinx citizens were substantially more likely than white voters to report practical issues such as transportation, time, and location as reasons for not voting while white voters were more likely to cite disapproval of candidate choices.⁴

Since voters are required to vote near their homes, longer commute times from work to people's respective polling locations is also an important factor in voter turnout and again, disproportionately impact registered Black voters in Wards 7 and 8. A *Washington Post* analysis reveals that commuters in some areas of Southwest and Southeast DC have longer commute times than commuters in suburbs like Gaithersburg or Reston. District Department of Transportation (DDOT) data supports this claim, noting that Ward 8 residents have the longest average commutes in the District.⁵ Therefore, the commute from work to residents' polling places could take at least an hour each way – cementing the need for a minimum of 2 hours' paid leave. Further, a Center for American Progress study finds that Black voters are, on average, forced to wait in line nearly twice as long to vote as white voters.⁶

In many crucial ways, DC has been ahead of the curve in promoting voter participation. DC has approved automatic voter registration, permitted teenagers to pre-register, and allowed same-day voter registration, early voting, and no-excuse absentee voting. Yet nearly half of all states have laws requiring companies to give workers paid time off to vote and nearly all states have some type of leave policy stating that workers cannot be disciplined or fired for taking time off to vote.

In 2018, 44 percent of US employers offered their workers paid time off to vote.⁷ The fact that nearly half of employers have already adopted this practice shows that this is not a huge burden on employers. Low-wage workers are disproportionately less likely to receive these benefits, which is why the Council should ensure that they are provided the same protections for voting. Increasing votership is a long-term process that requires a number of strategies from renewing civic trust in the electoral process to making voting more convenient and targeting outreach. But in the meantime, the Council's proposal to guarantee at least two hours of paid leave to vote will help move the needle towards better voter participation, better representation in government, and hopefully, better outcomes for the District's most underserved communities.

¹ McElwee, Sean. "Why the Voting Gap Matters." *Demos*, 23 October, 2014, https://www.demos.org/research/why-voting-gap-matters#footnote20_5mb03ux

² Jamison, Peter and Fenit Nirappil. "Are D.C.'s poorest neighborhoods falling off the electoral map?" *Washington Post*, 29 June, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/are-dcs-poorest-neighborhoods-falling-off-the-electoral-map/2018/06/29/c9bb6bbe-7631-11e8-9780-b1dd6a09b549_story.html?utm_term=.8b834ae37f0b

³ Shineman, Victoria. "Would turnout go up if we didn't have to vote on a workday?" *Washington Post*, 6 November 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/11/06/why-is-election-day-always-a-tuesday-7-things-you-should-know-about-the-timing-of-u-s-voting/?utm_term=.7124c1b7fc4a

⁴ Weeks, Daniel. "Why Are the Poor and Minorities Less Likely to Vote?" *The Atlantic*, 10 January 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/why-are-the-poor-and-minorities-less-likely-to-vote/282896/>

⁵ Siddiqui, Faiz, Armand Emamdjomeh and John Muyskens. "When commuting in the DC region, distance doesn't tell the whole story." *Washington Post*, 15 April, 2017,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/when-commuting-in-the-dc-region-distance-doesnt-tell-the-whole-story/2017/04/15/b466fdb6-1ef1-11e7-a0a7-8b2a45e3dc84_story.html?utm_term=.9df72d4c7c55

⁶ Root, Danielle and Liz Kennedy. "Increasing Voter Participation in America," *Center for American Progress*, 11 July, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2018/07/11/453319/increasing-voter-participation-america/>

⁷ "2018 Employee Benefits" *The Society for Human Resource Management*, <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/2018%20Employee%20Benefits%20Report.pdf>