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Testimony of Kay Kyungsun Yu
Before the
Presidential Commission on Election Administration
September 4, 2013

My name is Kay Kyungsun Yu and I am a partner at the law firm of Ahmad, Zaffarese & Smyler. Thank you for this opportunity to testify before this Presidential Commission on a topic that is of vital importance.

I have been and currently still am affiliated with a number of organizations that have dedicated themselves to voter rights. These include the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations, of which I am the former Chairperson, the Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Pennsylvania, as a current Executive Committee member and a Past President, and the Southeastern Pennsylvania Chapter of Americans for Democratic Action, as a board member.

The activities of these organizations include:

- The Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations joining in the Brief of *Amici Curiae* filed by the City of Philadelphia Law Department on behalf of the City and the City Commissioners Stephanie Singer and Anthony Clark, in *Applewhite v. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*
- The Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Pennsylvania joining with the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund filing an *amicus* brief in the same matter
- Americans for Democratic Action, Southeastern Pennsylvania Chapter, that is hosting a forum on *Safeguarding the Vote: Overcoming Barriers and Expanding Voter Access*, which will take place on September 25, 2013 at 6:30pm at the Ethical Society of Philadelphia

However, I appear before you today, not on behalf of any specific organization, but to speak from my own experience as an immigrant and a naturalized citizen.

I was born in Seoul, Korea and moved to the United States when I was a small child. My mother sacrificed everything as she sought a better life, not for herself, but for me, in America.

Our move to this country, however, took its toll. My family and I suffered tremendous hardship with our immigration status.

I recall that, as a young teenager, I came up deportation notices for the entire family. I was shocked to accidentally discover that, for some period of time while I was a child, I had been out of status. Some would have called me an illegal alien.

Through my teenage years, I was terrified by the idea of being sent back to a country I did not know and could not remember.

Fortunately, for me, with the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, I became a permanent resident and, ultimately, a naturalized citizen of the United States.

Tragically, this legislative solution came too late for my mother, who passed away just a year before, in 1985.

Perhaps it is because the right to vote was not a birthright that I have come to cherish my enfranchisement. I view it not only as my right, but as my responsibility.

As a nation of immigrants, we must strive for protecting voter rights and expanding access to the ballot place for all citizens. Too often, though, state legislatures enact laws that serve to suppress the vote and disproportionately impact minorities.

Specifically with respect to Asian Americans, we are the fastest growing minority group in the United States and constitute the largest percentage of new immigrants. In Pennsylvania, over 400,000 residents identify themselves as Asian, making Asian Americans the third largest minority group in the Commonwealth. More than 70% of Asian American voters in Pennsylvania are naturalized citizens.

Immigrants carry a unique devotion to the principles, rights and responsibilities, of American democracy. Voting, which I value so much that I would make mandatory, is one such principle. To that end, I support your attention to:

- Language access;
- Uniform federal regulation of polls;
- Early voting, voting on weekends, or on a federal holiday; and
- Civic education for an informed electorate.

I would like to close with one last point. Today, Congress and the President are at the precipice of the first major immigration reform since the 1986 law. Regardless of the how final bill is written, millions of immigrants are likely to experience a new status as naturalized citizens.

With my immigrant experience, I identify with the Dream Act kids of today; young people who live in fear of deportation through no fault of their own.

I ask this Commission to urge the Administration to actively recognize the voting and participatory potential of millions of new Americans as we press forward with comprehensive immigration reform so that we safeguard the precious right to vote for all citizens.