

Testimony in Support of Election Day Voter Registration

Saul Carlin

45 Wyllys Ave

Middletown, CT 06459

(301) 807-7477

saul.carlin@gmail.com

Thank you Chairperson Slossberg, Chairperson Spallone. Good morning, my name is Saul Carlin. I'm a student at Wesleyan University and president of the Wesleyan chapter of the organization Democracy Matters. I am also Vice-President of the Student Body at Wesleyan. I am here today to present testimony on the proposed Act Concerning Election Day Registration and to share my on-the-ground expertise as someone who spent hundreds of hours last fall working to help Wesleyan students and people from underprivileged backgrounds in the North End neighborhood of Middletown register to vote.

First, I want to commend the committee for raising this bill again and for being so persistent and enthusiastic about improving democracy in the state of Connecticut. I'm confident we can work together to avoid the sorts of issues that came up in 03 and 07.

I spoke briefly with Representative Spallone and Representative Reeves last week about the role a voter registration team called WesVotes played on campus in the fall and the challenges we faced. But I wanted to take this current opportunity to go a little more in depth on those challenges. For those who haven't heard about WesVotes, we were a non-partisan group; we didn't ask or care who students intended to vote for. We simply asked whether they wanted assistance registering. And although some students were already registered in other states, most were registering for the first time to vote, either by absentee or here in Connecticut.

WesVotes had someone in every hall on campus, talking with their neighbors, letting their fellow students know about deadlines and absentee requirements; about residency requirements and proper ID. That's a lot of information to worry about. It was confusing for us - let alone the students we were trying to help! WesVotes folks had to act like "voting nannys" to make sure everyone did everything right. Not everyone in the state is lucky enough to have a voting nanny. But even with voting nannys, things still went awry.

Students originally from out of state are very fortunate to have a choice to vote either in their home state or register at their school address here in Connecticut, like I did. But every state has different laws. These students first need to make sure they're registered at home. Registering to vote has a particular deadline, and often requires a witness or even a notary. Then, they need to request an absentee ballot, and the absentee request form has a particular deadline. Finally, if their state gets everything right and sends the absentee in on time (which is a big if), they have to return it by a particular deadline, and once again, many states require a witness or a notary. Every state has different regulations, different deadlines, and different requirements. And in contentious elections, absentee ballots are often challenged by lawyers and thrown out for frivolous and minor details.

Now as I said before, students originally from out of state are very lucky in that they are allowed to vote here in Connecticut, where they spend the majority of the year anyway. But for most, by the time they realize they messed up the absentee process for their home state, it's too late to register in Connecticut. And for those who are either from Connecticut originally or intended to vote here all along, they still have to contend with filling out their confusing registration form without any assistance, and have to figure out which of the multiple state deadlines applies to their situation. Once those deadlines pass, students are limited to the disappointing option of voting for only President, and are denied the right to vote in gubernatorial, congressional, senatorial, and countless local elections, all of which have a fundamental impact on their lives.

In sum, it's exceedingly difficult to make heads or tails of these mostly arbitrary laws and deadlines - even

students who sincerely want to vote often have trouble, and for most students, they care, but it simply isn't a priority in their busy lives. As a result, the vast majority of students in Connecticut do not vote.

Even though Wesleyan had WesVotes, hundreds if not thousands of students were on their own like this and didn't have anybody to hold their hand through the process. Worse, many students I know of had things happen beyond their control that prevented them from voting. Their registration got lost in the mail, or the registrar couldn't read their handwriting and entered their name incorrectly, or they trusted someone else who was making the half hour walk downtown to hand in their form for them, only to learn it never made it.

Effective and comprehensive Election Day Voter registration would solve this problem and end the systematic disenfranchisement of students in Connecticut.

As I mentioned earlier, I'm very pleased that the legislation has been raised in this committee, and I would emphatically urge passage. However, the proposal can still be improved, and here's how...

Under the raised bill, voters must go to the registrar first to register before they can vote at their polling place. I would ask the committee to adjust the legislation to allow first-time voters to simply register at the polling place, which is how most other states with comparable legislation handle same-day registration. My concern is that by going in this different direction, we won't see our efforts validated with the same magnitude of increased turnout as other states have experienced.

Most low-information voters who would take advantage of EDR will probably be unaware of the requirement to first go to the registrar. They will be forced to go to their polling place, be turned down, go to the registrar, and then in many cases return to their polling place to actually vote. People who have an hour break from work, or students with 35 minutes between classes, simply will not have the time to run around like this. Additionally, in many of Connecticut's towns and cities, the polling places are easily accessible and spread around the municipality, but the registrar's office is almost always at the town hall. Because polling locations are spread out geographically, students will usually be able to walk to their polling place. But the town hall and registrar's office often would not be accessible on foot. So the current legislation would unintentionally disenfranchise people who lack a means of transport.

Now, in cities, voters will often use public transportation to get to the polls. It's perfectly reasonable to expect voters to take public transportation to the polls and then back to their work or home, but this legislation would require first time voters to take public transport to the polls, then to the registrar's office, then back to the polls, and then back to their destination. That takes inordinate amounts of time and patience; many voters will simply give up.

The purpose of this legislation is to remove unnecessary obstacles to voting. An EDR bill which allows people to register to vote at the polls would accomplish just that.

I want to close by taking a brief moment to address the issue of cost. Right now, with a massive budget deficit of either \$6 or \$8 billion, passing costly legislation would be irresponsible. However, the costs of this proposal are minimal at worst, and are most likely to be offset by the savings. Back in 2003, a major objection to this proposal was the need to hire additional staff at SEEC to handle the extra work of implementation. However, with the recent Citizen's Election Program, the staff at SEEC has ballooned from a small handful to many dozen, and they would have no trouble at all in incorporating the minimal responsibilities of implementation into their current tasks. Additionally, registrars are currently flooded with problematic absentee and registration forms, which decrease the efficiency of their office and increase costs. This system would actually simplify their job and remove the confusion of having multiple arbitrary deadlines. After implementation, which as we've seen most recently in Iowa would have no costs besides educating registrars on the new program, this legislation would probably end up saving municipalities money. Thank you for your time.