

**TESTIMONY OF CAROLYN THORNBERRY
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GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION & ELECTIONS COMMITTEE
PUBLIC HEARING—MARCH 2, 2012**

Thank you Senator Slossberg, Representative Morin and members of the committee for this opportunity to submit testimony in support of several bills needed to improve voter registration and voting in Connecticut:

- ***HB 5024 - AN ACT CONCERNING VOTING RIGHTS***
- ***HJ 2 - RESOLUTION PROPOSING AN AMENDMENT TO THE STATE CONSTITUTION TO ALLOW FOR NO-EXCUSE ABSENTEE VOTING***
- ***HB 5022- AN ACT CONCERNING INCREASING PENALTIES FOR VOTER INTIMIDATION AND VOTER INTERFERENCE***

Connecticut may be “The Land of Steady Habits,” but lately voting is not one of them. Declining voter turnout is dangerous in any democracy because voting is how we assure participation, representation and accountability.

The decline in voter turnout may mirror some deeper erosion in our traditional civic beliefs and values. Toxic political rhetoric, disconnect between the public expectations and deliberate pace of government, and weak civic education in our schools all take a toll. But government at all levels can do more to encourage voter participation.

Fortunately, Governor Malloy and Secretary of the State Merrill have offered several legislative proposals that will significantly help:

* **Same-day voter registration** is successful in other states and could help in Connecticut. With the usual required identification, there is no reason to believe it cannot work here and help assure that every potential voter will be counted rather than turned away at the polls.

It is important to remember that registration by a government official or office does not bestow the right to vote to an individual. This right attaches to citizens in good standing upon birth or naturalization and resides with a person whether the government has placed their name in a computer or on a list. What government does is make it easier or harder to exercise that right. While critics foresee an election-day variation of “stuffing the ballot box” by groups of individuals paid by political campaigns to influence or change election outcomes, there is no evidence this is true in states that allow same-day voter registration.

* **On-line voter registration** brings the process into the modern age of information technology and citizen expectations. On-line registration is especially helpful in reaching and facilitating younger voters who expect business in this way.

Currently, residents of West Hartford can access the voter registration form on our website. They can complete directly the required information on the form, but instead of clicking through and sending it, completion in the original requires that they print out the form, sign it, address an envelope, stamp it and mail it in. This truly reduces the number of completed registrations. Of course, we will also need to identify improvements in the statewide voter database security and training for local election officials to make this work well.

* The state constitutional amendment to permit **no-excuse absentee voting** is long overdue. There is still much to be said for encouraging the experience of citizens voting together -- but not at the expense of others missing out on voting just because they cannot show up at the polls. Here my only concern is being sure the Town Clerks have the resources to handle what could be a significant increase in absentee voting. Also, greater availability of absentee voting should not be an excuse to lessen the accessibility of polling places.

* Finally, legislation strengthening criminal penalties for **voter intimidation and interference** can help assure that voters will be protected in the exercise of their voting rights. My related concern is that Registrars of Voters have the necessary training themselves and in order to instruct their poll worker to recognize voter fraud and intimidation and report it.

Thank you for your consideration.

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