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Government Administration and Elections
Committee
Room 2200, Legislative Office Building
Hartford, CT 06106

Re: House Joint Resolution 2 (LCO# 1420)
HB 5022 – AA Increasing Penalties for Voter Intimidation and Interference
HB 5024 – AAC Voting Rights

Senator Slossberg, Representative Morin and members of the Committee:

is Pua Ford, and I have been a registrar of voters in Bethany for just over a year. Before this I served as a pollworker and helped register students at our regional high school for several years. I am here only to offer my own viewpoint, not that of my town or the registrars' office.

I strongly favor the purpose of these three bills to increase citizens' participation in the voting process, whether at the polls or by absentee ballot. I am still new in the registrar job, so I try to listen to what experienced colleagues and the town clerks have to say about the proposed changes. I hear two general objections to easier access to voting: either (1) the security of elections is threatened or (2) the increased work and cost implied is unfair to election officials at the municipal level.

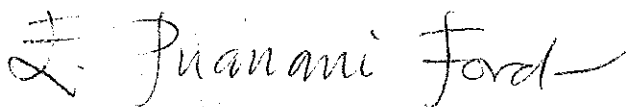
My written testimony has more thoughts about those objections. I would like to address something basic: "Why Election Day Registration? Why can't people just register beforehand?"

Most people in this room have civic matters at the top of their personal list of things to do. But there are reasonable, caring, perfectly intelligent people who don't. Before I was a registrar, I saw that sometimes my friends forgot to vote on local things—not stupid people: a pediatric nurse, a drug counselor, moms with kids who struggled in school. When they forgot about a referendum, they were chagrined. When I reminded them, they were happy. People who have a load of everyday problems often move civic duties on the back burner. Reasonable, caring people also don't get around to registering.

My daughter graduated college last year and got a job in New York. She found an opening for a roommate in Brooklyn, but didn't know if it would work out, so she kept Bethany as her permanent address. When she found out she was paying income taxes to both NY and CT, she made Brooklyn her permanent address. I asked her if she had registered to vote in NY yet. She balked. I looked up a NY voter registration form online, found the link to the Brooklyn clerk's contact information and sent it all to her. I know she wants to vote. But I also know she often doesn't get home from work until 8 p.m.

If we limit the vote to people with very little chaos in their lives or those with nagging mothers, then we don't have a truly representative government. Please support these bills.

Thank you again for hearing me.

Pua Ford

Concerns about Security of the Vote

I believe that both HB 5022 and HB 5024 should alleviate security concerns. HB 5022 takes on a possible abuse of absentee ballots, one we have heard about in recent news. There should be time to address any other possible problems after amending our Constitution, as proposed in the first section of the substitute for HJ 2.

The proposed procedures in Section 1 of HB 5024 should quell most of the security objections to Election Day Registration. The detailed process of verifying an applicant's qualifications should deter any would-be double-voters. In fact, it may deter some people from taking advantage of EDR. It took me some time to work out the statutory language, so I made a flowchart to keep track of all the steps. EDR ballots would be no less secure than current absentee and overseas ballots. Sanctions for abuse of the elections process, for perjury on the ballot envelope, are already in place; if enforcement is a problem, then that should be addressed by administration.

But the intense security will mean additional labor or equipment expenses for the towns.

Concerns about added work and expense

Everyone hates it when the boss hands them an extra task. I sympathize for the veteran registrars of voters and town clerks who see these bills as onerous. Since I am approaching this new, the addition of EDR would be just one more thing out many to learn. It doesn't frighten me in particular as much as the entire job.

When asked to serve, I hesitated to take on one more part-time job as a registrar. The scope of the job is daunting: The registrars of voters have to be comfortable with technology to handle the voter database and the ballot tabulators, know the statutes well enough to comply, and know enough about their local pollworkers to organize them effectively. In most small towns we only have to retain all this expertise for limited periods just before elections, and then we are free to attend our other jobs and duties and forget what we learned.

Managing human resources requires a delicate, less technical talent. Taking in a new voter registration card that's marked "interested in working at the polls" is like finding a gold nugget. We do our best to cultivate new people and make their civic contribution rewarding. We need to think about how to attract more pollworkers. We will need them in the polls and in the clerks' offices to get started on these additional tasks until we get the technology to make it easier.

As for the additional expense these initiatives would represent, it will be difficult in Bethany as it is in other places. I have discussed the possibility of extra fundraising for pollbooks with my registrar counterpart. Perhaps we can argue that the extra equipment is at least as important as the GIS system that the town approved for land records a few years back. The Vote is important, and we should try to make it available to all our qualified citizens.

Having the electronic systems in place to make EDR and the online registration (section 11 of HB 5024) secure and convenient for all is paramount. It will take time to get it right. One body that could help move e-Government forward is the Connecticut Broadband Internet Coordinating Council (CBICC), which has representatives from the academic, private business and government sectors. CBICC figures prominently in the CT Academy of Science & Engineering's report on improving broadband services in the state, including government services on the internet. But CBICC's establishing statute (Sec. 4d-100) was repealed last year in an amendment to the bill putting the Dept. of Energy and Environmental Protection together. I hope members of this committee will also support any effort to re-establish CBICC.

Beyond the Scope of the Bills

To reduce the burden of people lining up for EDR, we should make better use of the special voter registration sessions already in place. We need to take the registration process to prospective voters more than we do now. Currently we are required to hold the special Saturday sessions before elections in the registrars' offices. There are probably cities and towns where this makes sense, but in Bethany no one comes to Town Hall to register on Saturday, even when there are signs and balloons outside. If we had some leeway to set up voter registration at the town's recycling center or the bank, this might yield some voters and the town would not be wasting money to staff an office that no one enters.

Examples

Woodbridge registrars coordinate the voter registration drive at our regional high school with Bethany and Orange. We used to set up tables near the cafeteria during the lunch hours and attract the attention of the older students as they passed through the halls. Even when 17-year-olds were allowed to pre-register, this would only yield 1-2 dozen cards. More recently, with cooperation of school administration and staff, the Woodbridge registrars schedule a day or two to walk into classes, talk briefly with students, and distribute & collect registration. This has been much more successful.

In 2004, the grocery store chain A&P asked the League of Women Voters to hold voter registration drives at their stores. LWV Amity made arrangements for training in the registration process from SOTS staff. I spent several hours with another Leaguer on a Saturday at the A&P in Naugatuck, under an awning to stay out of the rain from the edge of Hurricane Ivan. We collected 40-50 registration cards for 4-5 towns. Most people said that they had just moved and hadn't gotten around to changing their registration yet. We hand-delivered the registration cards to registrar offices. I don't know if the local Leagues and businesses would do this again, but if this kind of project could help take some pressure off Election Day Registration.

I need to emphasize that this kind of registration needs properly trained workers. This week I heard a sad story about a college student who registered to vote on campus with his permanent home address, and then drove home across the state to vote on Election Day only to find that his registration card never made it to the office. If registrars and their staff were involved, it might help reduce that kind of problem.