

**TESTIMONY OF SHAWN T. WOODEN, PRESIDENT OF THE HARTFORD CITY COUNCIL, BEFORE
THE GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE, IN SUPPORT OF H.B.
6904 MARCH 9, 2015**

Senator Cassano, Representative Jutila, and members of the committee, I am Shawn T. Wooden, President of the Hartford City Council. I thank you for the opportunity to testify on an issue of great importance not only to the people of my City but to all the residents of Connecticut and, indeed, to our whole country: assuring the integrity of the election process. To do that in our Capital City, I ask that you support H.B. 6904 so that we can do what Hartford voters approved in 2013: hire a professional, nonpartisan registrar to run our elections.

The members of this committee are, I am sure, familiar with the fiascos that occurred in Hartford during the 2014 general election. Indeed, people throughout the country now associate Hartford with a botched election, and they have added that impression to their more distant recollections of problems in Bridgeport and other locations in 2010 and 2012. Connecticut, I fear, now carries the stigma so long borne by Florida as the State that can't run elections.

Just to refresh your recollection, many polling places in Hartford did not open on time on election day, because the Registrars of Voters had not delivered the voting lists to them on time. The Registrars missed the statutory deadline for delivering election materials because they had failed, for reasons that they still cannot explain, to complete the process of checking off as having voted the people who had cast absentee ballots before election day. When people turned up at the polls at the statutory opening hour, some moderators turned them away. Others allowed them to vote, usually without requiring the statutorily mandated affidavits, and often without segregating their ballots so that they could be identified in the event that the voters turned out not to be on the registry lists.

After the election, the City's returns were late, but more importantly, they were not accurate. We know now that 70 absentee ballots appear not to have been counted and were lost. When the City did file its returns, they showed something that should be impossible: substantially more votes were counted for candidates for Governor than the City's returns identified as having voted. Even now, Hartford's third amended official return, filed 3 weeks after the election and available on the Secretary of the State's website shows, on its first page, a total of 17,210 votes cast for the various candidates for Governor. On the seventh page, that return reports that 15,668 names were checked as having voted. There is no explanation for how it is possible to report 1,542 more votes than people who voted. (The moderator who signed the final report under oath, a Registrars' appointee, attempted to resolve the difference by stating on the 7th page that 15,668 votes were cast for Governor, completely ignoring the vote count which he reported (and also swore to) on the first page of his return.)

We all can imagine the statewide chaos that would have resulted from the obvious and large discrepancy in Hartford's vote had this year's gubernatorial election been decided by the same margin as the election in 2010.

Why did these failures occur? State law requires partisan registrars, and it grants those registrars the authority to run elections without providing any means of resolving issues and getting the work done when the registrars disagree, or when one of them fails to carry out the tasks that she has agreed to undertake. In Hartford, where state law gifts us with 3 registrars, rather than the normal 2 -- because in recent years the Republican candidate has run behind the Working Families candidate -- getting the work done in the face of conflicting personalities and questions of competence is especially difficult. The report of the Council's Committee of Inquiry, copies of which I have distributed to the committee, lays out in excruciating detail the extent of the dysfunction in the Registrar's office.

Although state statutes tie the registrars to partisan affiliations, the work of that office is not partisan -- it is the basic work of our democracy: setting up polling places, providing accurate voter lists, and counting votes promptly and accurately.

We are not the only municipality where the current system has failed in recent years, but we do have a long enough record of failure that, in 2013, our voters approved a charter provision calling for the creation of a professional, nonpartisan registrar's office, if allowed by state law. State law does not now allow the creation of such an office. On behalf of the voters of Hartford, I am asking you to let Hartford take that step. Even though the Council is likely tonight to take the unprecedented, costly, and painful step of initiating removal proceedings against the present Registrars, history and logic tell us that solving the problem for the long run requires reforming the partisan structure of the office, not merely changing its occupants.

Our residents deserve the right to vote in professionally-run elections where the polls open on time, all votes that are cast are counted, and the entire state is assured that all votes are cast by people who have been duly registered and have not previously voted in the same election. They were denied that right in the 2014 election.

As we celebrate the anniversaries of the Selma march and the passage of the Voting Rights Act, please let us assure that Hartford's residents are not again deprived of their right to an election system that works and an accurate and timely count of the votes they cast. Change is hard. But, I ask that this committee be inspired by courage of those who marched in Selma to take this critical step in protecting citizens' fundamental right to vote.

Thank you.