



Testimony of  
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**Raised Bill No. 1051, An Act Strengthening Connecticut's Elections**  
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Good afternoon, Chairman Cassano, Chairman Jutila, Ranking members McLachlan and Smith and members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee. My name is Dr. Bilal Dabir Sekou, and I am an Associate Professor of Political Science in Hillyer College at the University of Hartford. My research and teaching focus includes race and politics, urban politics, and campaigns, elections and voting behavior. I also serve as the Chair of the board of directors of the Connecticut chapter of Common Cause. It is my pleasure to be here today and to speak to, *Raised Bill No. 1051, An Act Strengthening Connecticut's Elections*.

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Voting Rights Act. In fact, just this past weekend we marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March from Selma to Montgomery where a group of peaceful demonstrators were brutally beaten on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, because of their campaign for voting rights. Dr King and others marched in Selma because they understood that the right to vote is the bedrock that our democracy is built on; an important tool the people can use to influence every move that the people's government makes.

As a Black man who has benefited from the struggles of those who came before me, this anniversary reminds me of the importance of always remaining vigilant about protecting the right to vote and having in place an election system in which: 1) everyone who wants to be registered is registered; 2) everyone who wants to vote can vote; and 3) every vote that is cast is a vote that is counted.

So today I appear before you to support, *An Act Strengthening Connecticut's Elections*, because it addresses one of the most fundamental roles of a strong election system – the administrator. Election administrators play a critical role in implementing federal, state, and local election laws. Election officials across the country have a number of responsibilities that are essential to the functioning of a healthy democracy: they determine eligibility and register individuals to vote; print ballots; hire and train poll workers; select the locations where votes are cast; and

purchase and maintain equipment used by voters. The administration of elections in the United States is extremely decentralized which gives local election officials a great deal of administrative discretion. As a result, there are tremendous differences in how election administrators interpret and implement election laws from one jurisdiction to the next one.

Generally speaking a large majority of local election administrators are elected to their office and most affiliate with either the Democratic or Republican Party. In most states, county governments are responsible for the administration of local elections except in New England where some or most of the responsibility is handled at the municipal (city or town) level. Moreover, appointed boards or appointed election officials and nonpartisan election officials tend to be more common in the Northeast. In many towns and cities in New England, a nonpartisan municipal clerk is the election administrator.

Connecticut's current system is like no other state in the region – for Registrar of Voters, two partisan officials are elected. When town committees appoint registrars they generally do so without asking about their technological competency, or other things like their experience supervising and training people. We should be open to adopting what other states in the region have learned by using their professional models.

Last, in a day and age when most Connecticut voters have chosen to not affiliate with any party, I question why the major parties are the only ones with members qualified to serve as registrar. It seems to me to be a very outdated perspective. If we are not going to add another registrar for unaffiliated voters, or other third parties then the logical alternative is to simply remove the party affiliation and make the registrar a nonpartisan position.

As a scholar who studies, teaches and writes about elections and voting rights, I would urge you to remember that that this topic is about more than the two people in every town that hold the position of registrar. It's about the state's two million voters and their interest in a system that is reliable, modern and unquestionably fair.

I commend the committee for hearing this bill today, and putting these ideas forward. I think this is a model that could serve our state better than the current system and I urge you to support it.