



Testimony before the Government Administration and Elections Committee

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Senator Cassano, Representative Jutila and distinguished members of the GAE Committee, my name is Cheri Quickmire. I am the Executive Director of Common Cause in Connecticut. Common Cause is a nonpartisan, non-profit citizens' lobby that has worked to improve the way Connecticut's government operates since 1971. We have more than half a million members nationwide and 7,500 members and activists in Connecticut.

I want to thank the Committee for addressing critical issues that relate to our democracy - elections and election law. This committee now and in previous years has insured that we lead the nation in an active and successful program of public financing of elections, modernizing our election procedures through election-day voter registration and online registration.

I am here to testify on the following bills:

HB 5501 AAC Executive Sessions of Public Agencies

HB 5511 AAC Disclosure of Coordinated and Independent Spending in Campaign Finance In favor

H.B. No. 5514 AAC The Department of Motor Vehicles and Automatic Voter Registration In favor

SB 342 AAC Electronic Filing of Campaign Reports In favor

SB 361 AAC Revising the State Codes of Ethics In favor

HB 5501 AAC Executive Sessions of Public Agencies

We oppose this bill and believe that the proposed exemption in this bill damages the public's right to know. This proposed exemption is too expansive and will not lend to what we believe is a critical – the public's right to know.

HB 5511 AAC Disclosure of Coordinated and Independent Spending

This is a bill which we support for the most part, but have serious concerns with aspects the bill. We have the best campaign finance system in the country, passed by a state legislature at a time of great scandal in our state with leadership from this GAE Committee. The US Supreme Court and some leaders in Connecticut have weakened some of our laws and opened up new avenues for moneyed interests to exert undue influence over our elections. We cannot allow the laws to be weakened further and we cannot permit additional dark money in the system. We share the concerns that the State Elections Enforcement Commission has offered on several of the sections about impact on the law overall.

And as the state is, at this moment in a legal conflict with the Democratic Governors Association vs Brandi (State Elections Enforcement Commission) where the restrictions of the Citizens' Election Program are being challenged, we do not believe that there should be changes to the law as relates to disclosure of coordination and independent spending.

We support the proposed improvements in the areas of disclosure of independent spending in campaign finance and independent expenditures. Disclosure is the strongest response Connecticut has in the wake of the Citizens United ruling short of a constitutional amendment to overturn. Disclosure here has been weakened but we have an opportunity to strengthen it. We urge you to do so.

HB 5514 AAC The Department of Motor Vehicles and Automatic Voter Registration

Common Cause and other reformers including the Brennan Center first proposed Automatic Voter Registration nearly a decade ago. In the years since, there has been real progress here and in other states. In 2015, California and Oregon passed and signed breakthrough laws to automatically register voters when they interact with the DMV. Connecticut can do the same.

Automatic voter registration shifts the mechanism of voter registration from the individual to the state. We are pleased that HB 5514 AAC the Department of Motor Vehicles and Automatic Voter Registration ensures that all eligible persons can vote unless they opt-out of being put on the rolls. It is clear here that the DMV is only one of the possible agencies that can replace our antiquated process of filling out paper forms in order to cast a ballot on Election Day.

We would urge the committee to name additional agencies to insure that potential voters are not exclusively those who engage with the DMV and of course that each individual meets all eligibility requirements for admission as an elector, including being a United States citizen. These may include medical health exchanges, colleges and universities and public assistance agencies.¹

Automatic voter registration will be more efficient for voters and election administrators, and will make voter lists more accurate. It will also allow organizations

and campaigns to, rather than spend resources and time on voter registration, focus on educating voters and getting them to the voting boothⁱⁱ.

As Common Cause Board Chair Dr. Bilal Dabir Sekou shared in his testimony, we believe that Automatic Voter Registration will increase voter registration and ultimately voter turnout. This is a critical point especially in local elections where turnout is lower and possibly less diverse than in Presidential election turnout. Presidential general election turnout is generally 60% of the voting-age population, but local election turnout averages 27% and in some cases is less than 10%. As overall turnout declines in local elections, the electorate may become less representative of the racial diversity of the community as a whole. ⁱⁱⁱ

Latino and Asian American turnout increased but remains low. Turnout rates among both Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans in presidential elections remain 10 to 15 percentage points below black Americans and 15 to 20 points below white Americans.^{iv}

SB 342 AAC Electronic Filing of Campaign Reports

It is past time for this to be law. Requiring electronic filing of campaign finance disclosure statements with the State Elections Enforcement Commission (SEEC) for certain committees that raise or spend one thousand dollars or more is a good idea. There is even an exception when the commission waives such requirement on a demonstration of good cause. Given the decreased staffing at SEEC it is unreasonable to expect them to be entering data from committees that is submitted hand-written.

SB 361 AAC Revising the State Codes of Ethics

We are in support of this bill. It fixes a “loophole” in the law that exempts appointees of the Lieutenant Governor from the State Code of Ethics for Public Officials. As we understand it the bill makes the State Innovation Model (SIM), an initiative of the administration with all committee members appointed by the Lieutenant Governor or her appointees, in line with other state governing bodies. SIM has expansive authority and should be subject to Connecticut’s State Code of Ethics and not weakened policies. We urge you to pass this bill.

Thank you for addressing these important issues. We look forward to working with you as they go forward.

ⁱ The Democracy Initiative, 2016.

ⁱⁱ The Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law, The Case for Automatic Permanent Voter Registration, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ State of Race in Politics, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Brown-Dean, et.al, 2015.

^{iv} State of Race in Politics, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Brown-Dean, et.al, 2015.