



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 Dr. Bilal Dabir Sekou. I am the Chair of the Board of Common Cause in Connecticut and Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Hartford. Common Cause is a nonpartisan, non-profit citizens' lobby that has worked to improve the way Connecticut's government operates since 1971. Common Cause in Connecticut has a long history of working to increase transparency in government and advocating for the removal of the corrosive influence of special interest money in government and politics. We have more than half a million members nationwide and 7,500 members and activists in Connecticut.

I want to thank the Committee for your leadership on critical issues of elections and election law. Connecticut has long been committed to engaging as many eligible voters as possible and to insuring that every vote counts. This is extremely important to me as my area of expertise is race and politics and civic engagement. I am proud that, as a state, we lead the nation in an active and successful program of public financing of elections, election-day voter registration and online registration and I am pleased that we are leading on automatic voter registration.

I am here in support of the following bill:

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

Common Cause and other reformers including The Brennan Center for Justice, first proposed Automatic Voter Registration nearly a decade ago. In the years since, there has been real progress 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. But it is also clear to us 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 urge the committee to name additional agencies to insure that potential voters are not exclusively those who interact 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.<sup>i</sup>

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 booth<sup>ii</sup>.

We also believe that automatic voter registration along with other election reforms have the potential to boost voter turnout by people of color, hence, closing the gaps in political participation between whites and nonwhites:

- Since 1965, the black/white racial gap in voter turnout has decreased dramatically in presidential elections. Turnout among black Southerners exceeded that of their white counterparts in four of the twelve presidential elections since passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and other reforms that make it easier to vote at the state level. Nationwide black voter turnout rates exceeded white turnout in presidential elections for the first time in 2008, and then again in 2012.
- Local election turnout is lower and possibly less diverse. Presidential general election turnout is normally 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.
- Latino and Asian American turnout has increased in recent years, 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.<sup>iii</sup>

We strongly believe that every citizen should have an equal opportunity to get, and stay, registered to vote and government should do its part by clearing bureaucratic obstacles to the ballot box. Automatic voter registration would vastly improve American democracy and I urge your support.

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<sup>i</sup> The Democracy Initiative, 2016.

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

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