



**Testimony of Emily O'Hara, New Voter Project Coordinator  
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Connecticut Public Interest Research Group (ConnPIRG)**

**in support of**

**H.J. No. 161 RESOLUTION PROPOSING AN AMENDMENT TO THE STATE CONSTITUTION TO ALLOW FOR EARLY VOTING AND NO-EXCUSE ABSENTEE VOTING.**

Chairperson Flexer, Chairperson Fox, and members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today in support of **H.J. 161 RESOLUTION PROPOSING AN AMENDMENT TO THE STATE CONSTITUTION TO ALLOW FOR EARLY VOTING AND NO-EXCUSE ABSENTEE VOTING.**

Since 1972, ConnPIRG has worked to give students the skills and opportunity to practice effective citizenship. Both on campus and out in the world, we mobilize students to investigate big social problems, come up with practical solutions, convince the media and public to pay attention, and get decision-makers to act.

A functioning democracy depends on the participation of its citizens. Every American – Democrat, Republican, or independent – has a fundamental right to have their vote counted. Step one to participation in elections is registering to vote. In an effort to expand participation, ConnPIRG regularly runs voter registration drives at the University of Connecticut and other campuses where students express an interest.

In this past election cycle, our New Voters Project registered more than 2,000 students to vote and worked to increase voter turnout at the Mansfield polling location, which serves UConn. Our volunteers spoke in classrooms, knocked on dorm doors, and held events on campus. These efforts, along with a campus-wide Get Out The Vote initiative, helped to increase turnout at this location by almost 90% from the previous midterm. While we all know turnout for this election was high, these numbers dwarf the state average increase of 29% over 2014. It's clear that here in Connecticut, students are invested in democracy.

Our experience at UConn this past November also highlighted the challenges of student voter participation. While we organized buses to transport students from campus to the community center election site, long lines for the buses and again at the polling place certainly discouraged some from making the trip. Once there, there was concern from some that they wouldn't be allowed to vote. It is critical for all those students who did make the trip, that we must be sure they have the opportunity to

vote. We are proud of the high turnout in this past election, but intend to do all we can do to make sure every student who wishes to vote has that opportunity.

For us, the work does not stop at 8 PM on election night. We will continue to push for increased access to the polls for all people, to advocate to make the right to vote a simple one to exercise. Democracy is not a spectator sport.

In addition to making it easier to get to the polls, early voting:

- Reduces long lines at the polling place which can prevent students and others on a tight schedule from voting.
- Allows for correction of registration mistakes that sometimes occur when registering large numbers of new voters.

At the end of the day, it is our goal to ensure that every voter who wishes to vote may do so regardless of the challenges of their schedule. Every vote matters and we need to work to make sure that our system works.

Again, ConnPIRG strongly supports this amendment to the constitution and looks forward to working with the Committee throughout the session. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.