



Testimony to the Government Administration and Elections Committee

March 13, 2019

Cheri Quickmire, Executive Director

Common Cause in Connecticut

Senator Flexer, Representative Fox and distinguished members of the Government Administration and Elections 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 1.1 million members nationwide and more than 12,000 members and activists in Connecticut. 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 and election reform.

I want to thank you for this opportunity to testify before the GAE committee on these important bills. We support the following proposals:

**HJ 161 Resolution Proposing an Amendment to the State Constitution to Allow for Early Voting and No-Excuse Absentee Voting**

**SB 1036 AAC Regionalism for Elections**

**SB 1046 AAC Election Day Registration in Polling Places**

**SB 1049 AAC Modern Elections**

**SB 1050 AAC Ranked-Choice Voting<sup>1043</sup> for Elections**

**SB 6059 AAC Organizational Changes to Election Day Registration**

**HB 7329 AAC Dark Money and Disclosure of Foreign Political Spending and of Political Advertising on Social Media**

**SB 1043 AAC The State Elections Enforcement Commission and Regulation of Dark Money**

**SB 1042 AAC Automatic Dismissal of SEEC complaints**

## **HJ 161 Resolution Proposing an Amendment to the State Constitution to Allow for Early Voting and No-Excuse Absentee Voting**

This is a follow up to a resolution we supported in 2014. We are eager to again pass it through both chambers and hopefully this time at the ballot. It was a challenging lift to get it as far as it went – the language of the resolution was confusing, there was precious little public awareness but where we spoke and shared information about the opportunity the resolution posed for individual voters, people were enthusiastically supportive. Our outreach and education approached many individuals. In particular commuters are supportive (we met many people at train platforms along the metro north line in advance of the vote), students (are universally supportive because of their unpredictable schedules and difficulties with transportation to polling places), low-income individuals (extremely supportive especially in rural areas with limited transportation and urban areas with confusing and changing polling places).

Voter approval of the State Constitutional Amendment will provide Connecticut with the opportunity to enact laws to allow any eligible voter to cast a ballot before Election Day and make better use of absentee ballots.

- 39 states permit Early Voting, (including 3 that mail ballots to all voters) and the District of Columbia. Any qualified voter may cast a ballot in person during a designated period prior to Election Day. No excuse or justification is required. Passage of the Constitutional Amendment could allow Connecticut to do so as well.
- Nationwide, it is estimated that more than 40 million American voters cast their ballots before Election Day in 2018 — breaking previous records.
- If the State Constitutional Amendment is approved by voters, state law does not change automatically. The state legislature would determine whether, when and how updated procedures, such as Early Voting, would be permitted in Connecticut.

We support passage of HJ 161 and look forward to passage in the House, Senate and at the ballot.

## **SB 1036 AAC Regionalism for Elections**

Common Cause supports the concept of regionalism. In a state with 169 towns and cities and multiple election operations it makes perfect sense. We can appreciate taking some time to study the options and opportunities with the expectation of cost savings, efficiencies and benefits to Connecticut voters. We look forward to a report and recommendations before the up-coming election.

Common Cause supports SB 1036

### **SB 1050 AAC Ranked Choice Voting for Elections**

Ranked Choice Voting allows voters to rank candidates from first to last choice on the ballot. A candidate who collects a majority of the vote wins. If there is no majority, then the last-place candidate will be eliminated and votes reallocated. The process is repeated until there's a majority winner.

It's important to examine the feasibility of this reform before implementation and we appreciate the thought that has gone into the development of a working group that will submit recommendations to this committee.

### **SB 1046 AAC Election Day Registration in Polling Places**

### **SB 6059 AAC Organizational Changes to Election Day Registration**

We are hopeful that the institution of election day registration at polling places will alleviate some of the challenges on Election Day that result from a crush of people eager to register to vote.

As an onsite witness to the chaos at city hall in New Haven I think it is critical that reforms happen before the next election. Hundreds of individuals attempting to register to vote waited for hours, some as many as four hours, to exercise their right to register and vote. It was completely unacceptable that the polls were inadequately staffed, it was completely unacceptable that election staff at city hall were telling people who were waiting that it was unlikely that they would be able to vote and should go home.

“A Superior Court judge ruled that about 64 Connecticut residents caught in same-day registration chaos at City Hall could vote, but the ballots were set aside until a challenge to the process goes to a hearing Friday.

The Connecticut Republican Party went to court election night challenging, mainly Yale students, who were sworn in by election officials after filling out voter registration applications and allowed to cast a ballot, but who had not yet been entered into the secretary of the state's database”.<sup>1</sup>

It was fortunate that Yale law school students were available to assist with registration and checking on qualifications to register but having an inadequately staffed election site in unacceptable.

Election day registration should be available at more than one site in the city or town. Clearly one site is not adequate, particularly in college towns like New Haven and Mansfield where there was also a chaotic scene. Decisions about EDR sites could be made by registrars and town clerks in consultation with the Secretary of the State.

SB 1046 and SB 6049 will facilitate necessary changes to EDR operation and Common Cause CT urges passage.

### **SB 1049 AAC Modern Elections**

Common Cause supports making our elections as accessible as possible. We support eliminating the requirement for the check-in/call backs to the town where an individual was previously registered. We support requiring registrars to submit staffing plans for election day registration – as noted above. And we agree that the Secretary of the State should develop a system, similar to the online voter registration system hosted by the SOTS. Capturing electronic signatures for online submission of absentee ballot applications should be developed. Making it possible for election officials at polling places beyond the registrar’s office to access the CVRS system will be key to successful implementation. Registrars or designated/certified election officials at additional polling places should be able to complete the processing of election day registrations as soon as possible after the election.

### **H.B. No. 7329 AAC Dark Money and Disclosure of Foreign Political Spending and of Political Advertising on Social Media**

#### **S.B. No. 1043 AAC The State Elections Enforcement Commission and Regulation of Dark Money**

Common Cause supports efforts to increase transparency of election spending, revealing sources of dark money and disclosure of political spending in our elections. HB 7329 and SB 1043 are important efforts in this regard.

Connecticut has one of the strongest clean elections financing program and disclosure requirements in the nation – we require reporting when the expenditure is made and when it is obligated to be made – with significant expectations in terms of timing of reporting. In terms of Independent Expenditure spending that requirement comes within 24 hours prior to an election. Our research, however, shows just how difficult it is to track this multi-layered spending and how difficult it is for candidates to respond to last-minute IE attacks.

It is particularly egregious to know that foreign money and influence are coming into Connecticut elections, to not have the details we need to take appropriate investigative steps. We need to take immediate measures to prevent this.

We need to strengthen the law to make sure that Connecticut voters know who is spending in our elections and limit its impact on our democracy. Connecticut is a leader nationwide on campaign finance issues. These bills should be passed to continue to strengthen our program and CT’s national leadership.

#### **S.B. No. 1042 AAC the Automatic Dismissal of State Elections Enforcements**

##### **Enforcement Commission Complaints**

We support SB 1042. We opposed passage the ill-advised automatic dismissal of SEEC complaints the session that it was passed and urge repeal. One year is an inadequate timeframe for serious investigation of violations of campaign finance laws.

---

<sup>i</sup> O'Leary, Mary, *Judge rules last-minute registrants in New Haven can vote*, New Haven Register, (Nov. 7, 2018)