

Good Evening.

My name is Brandon Stephens, and I am a member of Yale College Democrats. I write to express my support for HB 161, a resolution to permit early voting and no-excuse absentee voting, because I believe that every Connecticut citizen should be able to vote without restriction. As of now, 39 states have either early voting, no-excuse absentee voting, or both. Connecticut is not one of them. I expect Connecticut to hold itself to a higher standard when it comes to voting and better support its citizens' voting rights.

There are numerous benefits to Early Voting, but the biggest of which is bolstering voter turnout. We have seen a rapid increase in early voting and voter turnout since 2016. And in the 2018 midterms, a record **36 million people voted early**, marking a huge increase from the 27.2 million who voted early in the 2014 midterms. This increase in early voting **coincided with a large increase in overall voter turnout**. In the 2018 midterm elections, **over 47% of eligible voters voted, up from a 36.7% turnout in 2014**. A lack of early voting constitutes a profound barrier to voting rights, one that needs to be removed. In the words of **Secretary of the State Denise Merrill**: “We should continue to **remove barriers to Connecticut voters exercising their most fundamental right to vote** by joining the overwhelming majority of states that allow their voters to cast a ballot before Election Day. This **popular, common-sense election reform** will help ensure that not only can every Connecticut citizen easily register, but that every registered voter can conveniently vote.” Early voting would also benefit the elderly and disabled. In 2017, Senators Bob Casey and Amy Klobuchar created a report, in which they detailed how “Suppressive voting laws and issues of accessibility **affect tens of millions of older Americans and people with disabilities**. In the 2016 election, **30 percent of the voters were between the ages of 50 and 64-years-old** and 13 percent were 65 and older. Sixteen million (11.5 percent) of the 139 million votes were cast by people with disabilities. As the **baby boomer population** continues to age, these restrictions and barriers are likely to adversely impact more Americans.” Early voting would also, and possibly most importantly, prevent long lines at the polls. As we saw within New Haven, there were often long lines at the polls, adding an extra burden to voting. Allowing the option to vote early can help people avoid having to stand in line.

There's also the point of no-excuse absentee voting. Why is absentee voting important? Fundamentally, the American representative democracy functions through citizens voting for elected leaders. Anything that inhibits citizens from voting inhibits the democratic process. Given record low voter turnout, laws should be making it easier for people to vote. In addition to being convenient for voters, no excuse and permanent mail voting is **convenient for state workers**, who are less likely to make an error when they don't have to sort through excuses.

HJ #35 is **crucial for older voters**, who may not have a specific disability but benefit greatly from the comparative ease of voting from home. It shortens lines on Election Day and **reduces the chaotic process** that dissuades many from voting. CT will be less affected by failures on Election Day, like machines breaking. It **eases the work of election officials**, making it less concentrated around Election Day.

*National Support*

- **27 states and the District of Columbia already have no-excuse absentee voting in place.**
- **The total number of voters who voted early, absentee or by mail more than doubled from 24.9 million in 2004 to 57.2 million in 2016, representing an increase from one in five of all ballots cast to two in five of all ballots cast.**
- **In 2016, 16 states showed a combined percentage of greater than 50 percent of votes cast early, by mail, or via absentee voting.**

### *Considerations and Implementation*

- Fear of increased voter fraud
  - Counterargument: levels of voter fraud have not increased in the states where no-excuse absentee voting is already implemented.
  - Action: include language in amendment that limits the number of applications an individual can pick up at a local board of election office
- Cost and burden of mailing and counting ballots
  - Counterargument: HJ #35 will end the election litigation (and state cost) that cases discerning what constitutes a valid excuse for mail voting. It will also spread out the work of election officials, rather than concentrating it, increasing administrative accuracy. These forces should counteract concerns.
  - Action: The committee should consider a digitized or streamlined system for counting mail ballots that emphasizes efficiency.
- Fear of more compromised ballots
  - Action: Create an online tutorial, in person demonstration at local board of election offices, and clear instructions on ballots so voters send in mail ballots correctly and their votes aren't discounted.

I am a firm believer in our Democracy, and believe it must flourish unimpeded. The United States has some of the lowest voter turnout in the civilized world, and it is something that must be addressed head on. This means making the voting process easier and more accessible to the citizens of Connecticut in an increasingly hectic, and uncompromising world. “The reasons for allowing residents to vote absentee are surprisingly narrow and require people to swear out an affidavit that they won’t be present on Election Day. In today’s world, people travel for work on a moment’s notice. They can be called upon to care for a sick or elderly family member. A single parent working two jobs doesn’t necessarily get Election Day off and might not be able to spend an hour waiting at the polls. The current law does not allow for these ‘might happen’ situations. You cannot swear out an affidavit for an absentee ballot under those circumstances. Allowing any Delawarean to request an absentee ballot gives everyone an equal opportunity to have their voice heard.” - Delaware State Representative **Earl Jaques**

Sincerely,

Brandon Stephens