March 25, 2019

Sen. Mae Flexer
Rep. Daniel J. Fox
Sen. Rob Sampson
Rep. Mike France

Government Administration and Elections Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 2200
Hartford, CT 06106

Re: Testimony from Governor Ned Lamont in Support of HB 7160, An Act Increasing Voter Access

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Governor’s Bill 7160, an Act Increasing Voter Access.

I urge you to support this bill, which, along with smart reforms proposed by the Secretary of the State, will help increase participation in our democracy, increase the use of technology to improve and streamline voter registration opportunities, modernize election operations to make election processes more effective and more efficient, and make it easier for state agencies to comply with federal law.

We worked with the Secretary of the State’s office on the proposals in this bill. I am grateful for Secretary Merrill’s leadership on these important issues. I am confident that this bill aligns with, and builds on the election modernization proposals Secretary Merrill has put forward in several bills, which I also urge this committee and the General Assembly to support.

Increasing Young People’s Participation In and Knowledge of the Democratic Process

Section 1 will provide a process for high school and college students to receive academic credit for helping election officials prepare for and conduct elections. This bill will promote engagement of young people in the democratic process, especially helping them understand that operating and preserving a democracy requires the contribution of all citizens. In doing so, it could help local election officials with the always-challenging task of recruiting sufficient election workers for the
important work they do both on, and in the months leading up to, each election. Importantly, the bill requires important stakeholders, including election officials and education leaders, to be consulted in developing the standards for academic credit.

**Celebrating Election Day and Increasing Voter Access**

Section 2 makes Election Day a state holiday, recognizing again that participation in democracy is critically important to preserving it. Access to the ballot should be available to all eligible citizens, and this bill will remove barriers to many working people who, through no fault of their own, have difficulty getting to polling places on a work day, especially those who have limited flexibility in their schedules or who must commute long distances to their jobs. This proposal is made revenue neutral by combining the celebration of President Lincoln’s birthday with President Washington’s birthday, aligning with federal practice.

**Reducing Delays During Election Day Registration**

Sections 3 and 4 will address the long lines and delays related to Election Day Registration (EDR) that voters in some towns and cities have experienced in recent statewide elections. First, the bill allows eligible voters who are in line for EDR before 8 p.m. to vote even if the registrars complete their registration after 8 p.m. Last November, voters who arrived for EDR hours before the 8 p.m. deadline were told they would likely not be allowed to vote, and indeed, some were not allowed to vote. This is unacceptable. The uncertainty about how this deadline was applied also reached into the courts. This is something we must not allow to happen again. We must improve and safeguard this important method of providing access to the ballot.

While everyone should be encouraged to register ahead of time, those who follow the law and arrive on time should have the same rights as those who are in line to vote by 8 p.m. This proposal aligns with the same proposal in Secretary Merrill’s bill, **SB 1049, An Act Concerning Modern Elections**, and has the potential to reduce confusion and frustration among voters who follow the law.

Second, to reduce the lines and delays in any one EDR location, the bill allows registrars, with the permission of the Secretary of the State, to open more than one EDR site in each town. This could reduce the crush of EDR voters in any one location, and would allow registrars to set up EDR sites near to where large segments of voters live, for example on a college campus, while maintaining their traditional EDR site that longtime residents are familiar with. Nothing in the bill would force registrars to establish a second location or require a college or private property owner to host one, but it does have the potential to make voting much more accessible for first-time voters, students, and citizens who have recently moved to Connecticut by removing the current prohibition on registrars establishing a second location.

**Modernizing Special Elections**

Sections 5 through 8 modernize special elections in Connecticut. In line with my administration’s plans to digitize more government operations, the bill allows electronic delivery of writs of special election. This simplifies the process for notifying city and town clerks of special election dates, saves taxpayer money, and speeds up the delivery process. In the modern age, when delivery and receipt to city and town clerks can be confirmed electronically, there is no need to impose an overly formal requirement for hand delivery. The bill also removes the prohibition on conducting special elections
on a Saturday or Sunday. While it does not require elections to be held on such days, it allows the option. Low turnout for special elections is a recurring concern; allowing special elections on weekend days allows many more people to vote without having to take time off from work. I believe we should maximize participation in every election – this provision offers another way to do so.

Building on the Success of Connecticut’s Revamped Motor-Voter Program

The state’s revamped motor-voter program, which allows but does not require voters to register during licensing transactions, has been a huge success. The Department of Motor Vehicles has processed and forwarded to local registrars more than 400,000 new voter registration applications since the system went live in 2016, and increased its ability to audit, track and verify voter registration transactions while reducing paperwork and mailing costs. The current, modern motor-voter system is a requirement of the National Voter Registration Act, and is subject to a binding agreement with the United State Department of Justice. The DMV’s electronic system makes this process smoother and allows electronic transmission of voter registration applications to registrars each night. Previously, the DMV would have to process each voter registration application manually and mail them to registrars in 169 cities and towns. Registrars get the applications on the existing online registration system, review them, and have the final say on whether someone becomes an elector.

Section 9 of the bill builds on this success by further reducing the steps and time required when voters register at DMV, while increasing security and reliability. It would allow the DMV to confirm eligibility factors for some voters, such as age, address, and citizenship, using information it already has independently verified. Voters would retain control over the process, including complete control and privacy over whether to register and choose their party affiliation, but voters not be forced to provide duplicate information that DMV has already asked for and verified. For example, since DMV already has each customer’s age, it could determine whether a voter will be old enough to vote by the next election. If the DMV does not have independently verified information, the voter would still have to certify each eligibility factor.

Section 10 makes registrars’ jobs easier by removing the requirement for them to send a voter registration application to someone who has moved to a new town if that voter has just completed a voter registration application in the new town through DMV. One requirement of the NVRA and the 2016 agreement with the Department of Justice is that when a voter completes a change of address transaction through DMV, whether in person or through the mail, the voter registration address must be updated in the new town, unless the voter opts out. To accomplish this, the DMV and SOTS automatically sends an updated registration to the registrars in the new town. For these voters, the current statutory requirement for the registrar in the voter’s previous town to send a voter registration application is unnecessary and duplicative. Section 10 conforms Connecticut statute to the current practice mandated by the NVRA and the agreement with DOJ.

In addition, Sections 12 through 14 provide for more use of electronic forms and applications by state agencies and educational institutions who are already required by state or federal law to offer voter registration opportunities and assistance. This may be as simple as posting a link prominently on an agency’s web site, but also would allow future integration of voter registration opportunities through mobile applications and other online systems.
Modernizing Election Forms and Using Electronic Signatures

Section 11 provides for the Secretary of the State to use a secure system to verify electronic signatures for online voter registration, as well as develop electronic forms and applications for all types of election and voter registration operations. This proposal aligns with a proposal by the Secretary in SB 1049, An Act Concerning Modern Elections, and reflects my administration’s effort to move more of citizens’ interactions with the state online. The electronic signature proposal will also make online voter registration available to more people, because it will offer online registration, with secure and reliable signature verification to people who do not have a signature on file already with the DMV or another agency. This feature could also help expedite Election Day Registration by providing a more reliable way to use the Online Voter Registration System to pre-register people who are waiting in line at EDR sites and process their applications faster.

Providing Fair Representation for Communities Affected by Incarceration

Section 15 recognizes that people have closer ties to their home communities than to the towns where they are incarcerated. Furthermore, communities with high numbers of residents of color are disproportionately affected by incarceration, and therefore disproportionately lose political representation under the current policy of counting incarcerated people where they are in custody for purposes of electoral redistricting. In addition, these communities most often become the homes of returning citizens after their incarceration, and therefore shoulder the majority of the fiscal and administrative burdens necessary to successfully support their reintegration. For all of these reasons, it makes sense to count incarcerated people in their home communities for purposes of electoral redistricting after each decennial census. It is important to make this important reform before the next Census, which will occur in 2020. Nothing in this bill would change how state grant funding or other assistance to municipalities is allocated.

In conclusion, I ask again for your support for these common-sense reforms. We must make voting and voting registration easier and more accessible to every eligible voter. We must allow for and promote maximum participation in the democratic process. We must use technology to increase access to the ballot and reduce costs and resources. And we must provide for fairness in representation for all communities. I am grateful for your consideration and urge you to support HB 7160, An Act Increasing Voter Access. I stand ready to work with this committee and the General Assembly to make our elections system the most modern and efficient in the country.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Ned Lamont
Governor