Testimony of
Emily O’Hara,
UConnPIRG Chairperson

in support of

SB 233, AN ACT CONCERNING ELECTIONS

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 SB 233, AN ACT CONCERNING ELECTIONS. My name is Emily O’Hara and I’m from Litchfield, Connecticut. I am currently a senior at UConn and I’m the former New Voter Project Coordinator for UConnPIRG, now serving as the Chair of the UConn chapter of ConnPIRG.

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. Much of the voter registration at UConn occurs through ConnPIRG and other student organizations.

The experience at UConn in November 2018 highlights the challenges of student voter participation. In 2018, 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. Additionally, student groups are working to form a coalition around voting at UConn. It’s clear that here in Connecticut, students are invested in democracy.

In 2018, we witnessed lines for the buses and again at the polling place, discouraging some from making the trip. Once there, there was concern that they wouldn’t be allowed to vote. It is critical for all of those students who did make the trip to have the opportunity to vote. We are proud of the high turnout in this past election and intend to do all we can do to make sure every student who wishes to vote has that opportunity.

Automatic Voter Registration, which has been passed in 16 states, presents an opportunity to facilitate the civic engagement process for students as they attend state colleges and universities like UConn. With the high numbers in registration on-campus, it’s apparent that students are
engaged once they arrive at UConn and want to be active voters in their district. Automatic Voter Registration presents an opportunity to make registering to vote as straightforward as the websites, apps, and tools we already use that make our lives automatic.

Automatic Voter Registration:

- Has the potential to increase registration rates for people of color, women, and those with lower incomes
- Ensures accurate voter registration data
- Facilitates the voter registration process and alleviates the burden of Election Day Registration, which many students utilize with their restrictive school and work schedules.

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