



**GAE Committee
Public Hearing
March 26, 2021**

TESTIMONY OF SECRETARY OF THE STATE DENISE W. MERRILL REGARDING:

- **S.B. No. 5, AN ACT CONCERNING INCREASED OPPORTUNITIES FOR ABSENTEE VOTING, SAFE AND SECURE IN-PERSON VOTING AND VOTER REGISTRATION**
- **S.B. No. 820, AN ACT CONCERNING A STATE VOTING RIGHTS ACT**

Good morning Chairmen Fox and Flexer, Vice Chairs Haskell and Thomas, Ranking Members Sampson and Mastrofrancesco, and members of the committee. My name is Denise Merrill and I am the Secretary of the State of Connecticut. I would like to address several bills before the committee.

- **S.B. No. 5, AN ACT CONCERNING INCREASED OPPORTUNITIES FOR ABSENTEE VOTING, SAFE AND SECURE IN-PERSON VOTING AND VOTER REGISTRATION**

S.B.5 shares key concepts with H.B. No. 6578, **AN ACT CONCERNING PARTICIPATION IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS** and S.B. No. 1017, **AN ACT CONCERNING ELECTION ADMINISTRATION**, that would make it more convenient for Connecticut citizens to participate in our democracy, to choose the people who will represent them in government, and to make their voices heard.

Connecticut law currently allows people on probation to once again exercise their right to vote, but not people on parole. This bill would bring Connecticut in line with the 18 states and the

District of Columbia, including all our neighbors in New England, that allow voting rights to reattach automatically when people's period of incarceration comes to an end.

A real problem we often face when we try to get every eligible voter to register and every registered voter to vote, is in getting people to know at what point in the process of leaving the criminal justice system they regain their right to vote. This bill would remove the confusion over parole versus probation and simplify the restoration of voting rights to the physical release from prison.

Reattaching voting rights to people as they leave their period of confinement doesn't just alleviate confusion that can dampen registration, it also will help people to reintegrate into the civic life of their community. Voters who exercise their right to vote sooner are more likely to become lifetime voters.

This bill would also bring how people who were convicted of federal or out-of-state crimes in line with how people who were convicted in Connecticut law are treated with regard to the restoration of voting rights after a period of confinement. Currently, only individuals with federal or out-of-state convictions are required to pay fees before their voting rights are restored; individuals who were convicted in Connecticut have their voting rights restored regardless of whether any fees or fines are outstanding. Only seven states (all in the Deep South except for Connecticut and Arizona) use court debts alone to prevent an individual from voting, and only Connecticut treats individuals differently depending on the jurisdiction in which they were convicted. Current law is both unfair and confusing to voters.

This bill would also codify our existing automatic voter registration, streamline the process to make it more convenient for voters, and allow the expansion of the program to other Voter Registration agencies under the National Voting Rights Act (the so-called Motor Voter Act).

Since Automatic Voter Registration implementation was begun administratively in August of 2016, more than 550,000 new Connecticut voters have used Automatic Voter Registration at the DMV to register, and more than 700,000 voters have made changes to their registrations. In addition to easing registration, Automatic Voter Registration also provides local election officials with more up to date information, leading to cleaner, more accurate voter rolls. Codifying, streamlining, and expanding this process will make it even easier for eligible voters to register and will significantly expand the number of voters who are able to cast their ballots and make their voices heard on Election Day.

The electronic signature provision would require the development of a system under which Title 9 forms could be signed and submitted electronically. That would allow for absentee ballots to be requested electronically, as well as opening the online voter registration system to an increasing number of people who are eligible to vote in Connecticut but do not possess a Connecticut Driver's License. This system could be as simple as allowing emailed endorsement forms to my office or registration forms to the registrars of voters, or as complicated as a database that stores images of signatures for future use on another election-related form.

I would be remiss if I did not point out that I have testified against concepts, like those contained in Section 27, that would allow electronic delivery of ballots. There simply is no way to ensure the security of those ballots at this time, and until such time as the University of Connecticut's Voter Center has approved a method that they deem secure, I will remain in opposition to concepts like this one.

This bill is a voter-centric bill that is meant to make participating in the electoral process more convenient for Connecticut citizens and to make it easier for them to make their voices heard. Although I may not agree with every part of this bill, I look forward to working with the proponents on language that works for every Connecticut voter.

- **S.B. No. 820, AN ACT CONCERNING A STATE VOTING RIGHTS ACT**

S.B. No. 820, **AN ACT CONCERNING A STATE VOTING RIGHTS ACT** would create a Connecticut state version of the federal Voting Rights Act. The story of American democracy is one of growing enfranchisement, too slow and in fits and starts, followed by retrenchment. Nationally, the Voting Rights Act has lost its power to redress historic inequities and lingering disparate impacts on racial and ethnic minorities. Some states have responded by enacting policies that disproportionately make it harder for members of those groups to participate in the political process, to cast their ballots, and to make their voices heard.

Connecticut has the opportunity to do the opposite. At a time when we engaged in a great debate over systemic inequities in our society, this bill would be a strong step towards identifying and eliminating systemic inequities in Connecticut's voting systems. Connecticut can be a leader in protecting voting rights of all of its voters at a time when the federal government appears to be either unable or unwilling to so.

Voters should choose their elected officials, elected officials shouldn't choose their voters. This bill would promote the former at the expense of the latter.

I support this bill.

Thank you.