

Government Administration and Elections Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HJ-58

RESOLUTION PROPOSING A STATE CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT TO

Title: ALLOW NO-EXCUSE ABSENTEE VOTING.

Vote Date: 3/5/2021

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 2/22/2021

File No.: 96

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

The Government Administration and Elections Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

The passage of the joint resolution will allow for voters to consider the constitutional amendment to allow for no-excuse absentee voting. In order for the question regarding no-excuse absentee voting to appear on the ballot in November 2022, the resolution would need to pass in both chambers of the Connecticut General Assembly by a super-majority, which constitutes 75% of the members in each body. The question that shall appear on the ballot will read as follows: "Shall the Constitution of the State be amended to permit the General Assembly to allow each voter to vote by absentee ballot?"

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Denise W. Merrill, Secretary of the State: Secretary Merrill's testimony was supportive of the resolution to amend the Connecticut Constitution to allow for no-excuse absentee voting. She noted the fact that 43 states across our country allow for early voting and/or no-excuse absentee voting. Connecticut is one of the few states with the most restrictive voting laws in the country. Citing recent polling, Secretary Merrill made clear that there is bipartisan support for no-excuse absentee voting, with 73% of Connecticut voters being in favor of such a change. After the resounding success of the 2020 election, where 35% of Connecticut voters took advantage of the temporary voting changes made in light of the pandemic, she makes clear that it is time to amend the constitution to allow for permanent changes. Secretary Merrill stated that she supports the resolution with some clarifying language changes. Until the current language in the constitution is removed, Secretary Merrill contends that no

conversations can take place in terms of the exact implementation measures for no-excuse absentee voting.

Connecticut Senate Democrats: As a caucus, Connecticut Senate Democrats offered testimony in support of the resolution. Senate Democrats identified the fact that Connecticut is just one of sixteen states where no-excuse absentee voting is not allowed. As a result of expanding absentee ballots, Senate Democrats believe that voter turnout will increase and voters will be more enthusiastic about casting their vote. Additionally, Senate Democrats noted the potential for cost savings. With no-excuse absentee voting, municipalities might find themselves in situations where they will be able to reduce the amount of workers needed at a polling place. Ultimately, Senate Democrats see the resolution as an opportunity to expand access to voters who wish to exercise their right to vote.

State of Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO): In the testimony provided to the committee, the CHRO recognized the disproportionate effect that Connecticut's restrictive voting laws have had on Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian voters, as well as disabled people, seniors and young people. According to the Secretary of the State, the temporary changes made in light of the pandemic led to a 5% increase in voter turnout in the largest cities in Connecticut from 2016 to 2020. This growth shows that expanding accessibility and convenience allows for more people to participate in elections. Identifying accessibility problems that people of color and low-income people face, the CHRO strongly supports eliminating barriers to voting imposed by the Connecticut Constitution so that all people have a voice.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Kelly McConney Moore, Interim Senior Policy Counsel, American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT): Recognizing that Connecticut is just one of six states without early voting and one of sixteen states without no-excuse absentee voting, Ms. Moore identifies Connecticut as one of the worst states in terms of voting options. In her testimony, she highlights the success of the last election in terms of administration and popularity. Historically speaking, Ms. Moore contends that voters of color are disproportionately impacted by factors like long lines, lack of access to transportation and childcare, as well as language and identification barriers. By passing the resolution, Ms. Moore believes that voters will have expanded opportunities for voting.

Laurie McFadden, constituent from Middletown, Connecticut: In her testimony, Ms. McFadden wrote about her husband's job as a line mechanic, which is oftentimes unpredictable, involves long shifts and calls for extensive travel across the state. Because of the circumstances with his job, there have been several occasions where he has not been able to cast his vote. By expanding absentee ballot access, Ms. McFadden believes that people in similar positions as her husband would no longer feel disenfranchised from participating in our democracy.

Sue W. Larsen, President, Registrar of Voters Association of Connecticut (ROVAC): On behalf of ROVAC, Ms. Larsen's testimony does not state a particular position on the resolution. Ms. Larsen's requests that the legislature include local Registrars and elections officials in any conversations in terms of the implementation of no-excuse absentee voting.

Anna Posniak, President, Connecticut Town Clerks Association (CTCA): In the testimony provided to the committee, Ms. Posniak writes that the CTCA strongly supports the resolution to expand absentee voting. She recommends the immediate establishment of a legislative task force to examine any statutory changes, identify new funding and technology upgrades, and review current protocol. All of the aforementioned recommendations would help implement expanded absentee voting in the smoothest manner possible.

Paula Bacolini, Founder, Make Voting Easy CT: Ms. Bacolini expressed dismay over the fact that the emergency voting changes made last year were temporary and not permanent. As a senior in the high risk category, she acknowledged the fact that COVID-19 is still among us, making it a challenge for citizens of high risk to go out and vote. Citing bipartisan support and a lack of any evident voter fraud, she believes that the resolution should be passed in the interest of safety, security and convenience for the voters of Connecticut.

Jason Perry, constituent from Norwalk, Connecticut: Mr. Perry describes the difficulties encountered by voters who work hourly wage jobs, are self-employed, or those in the freelance industry. He writes about the expense of voting for certain individuals. He contends that taking off a few hours from work to go vote could pose an economic burden for some people. Mr. Perry concludes that democracy is stronger when all voices are heard.

Joanne Kelleher, Director, Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington: In her capacity as director of the Early Childhood Collaborative, Ms. Kelleher discussed the challenge that childcare providers and parents face when they want to cast their vote on Election Day. Ms. Kelleher detailed one instance when a childcare provider had to go to her polling place with all six of the children under her supervision. She writes that waiting in line with children can be taxing on parents and childcare providers. She expressed her full support for the resolution to expand early voting.

Charlene Janecek, constituent from Chester, Connecticut: Citing her experience working during local elections, Ms. Janecek recommends that absentee ballot counting no longer be a task for the Town Clerk. Instead, she suggests that the Registrar of Voters and their staff count absentee ballots. Additionally, she believes that allowing for no-excuse absentee ballots would alleviate the need for early voting.

Molly Norris, Field & Community Engagement Coordinator, Western CT Area Labor Federation: Ms. Norris, who lived in Oregon up until a few months ago, expressed her dismay with Connecticut's antiquated voting protocol. She described Oregon's system for voting by mail or through early voting as seamless and stress-free. When she moved to Connecticut last June, she discussed the challenges she faced when trying to vote by mail during the general election. To cast her vote, she needed to purchase a home printer and file multiple forms. In the end, she said that all she could do was hope that her ballot was received and accounted for, since there was no confirmation system in place.

Carol Rizzolo, Retired Primary Care Physician Assistant: In her 25 year career in the medical field, Ms. Rizzolo described the unpredictable nature of a medical emergency and the potential for the emergency to occur on Election Day. Emphasizing citizens' right to vote and have their voice represented, Ms. Rizzolo implored the committee to expand absentee voting so that all citizens can vote, even if they have an unexpected medical emergency on Election Day.

Sarah Roy, constituent from Fairfield, Connecticut: Ms. Roy's testimony highlighted the array of benefits that come with no-excuse absentee voting. Along with making voting more accessible to minority, disabled and rural voters, Ms. Roy contends that expanding absentee access will reduce administrative costs, ease the burden on election officials on Election Day, shorten lines at polling places, and allow for early identification of any registration errors or voting system glitches.

Barbara Lopez, Director, Make the Road Connecticut: Ms. Lopez identified the exploitation tactics used by political operatives in Bridgeport who seek to abuse absentee ballots and target vulnerable groups in order to sway the outcome of elections. She writes that these tactics have driven voter turnout and civic participation down in Bridgeport by nearly 23% in the past 3 years. By passing the resolution and allowing citizens to access absentee ballots with more ease, she believes that autonomy will be returned to the voters of Bridgeport. With these changes, the voters will be able to vote on their own accord without the undue influence of those trying to exploit the process.

Janice and Richard Hoff, constituents from Glastobury, Connecticut: Mr. and Mrs. Hoff expressed their pleasure with the absentee ballot drop boxes placed outside of their town hall. Although disappointed that these changes were temporary, they expressed hope that the legislature would make expanded absentee access permanent. Citing the fact that 35% of Connecticut voters used absentee ballots this past election, and less than 1% were rejected, the Hoff's believe that the success of the last election shows that these changes can become permanent.

Elizabeth Brandt, constituent of Fairfield, Connecticut: Ms. Brandt expressed her support for no-excuse absentee voting. As a senior citizen who is concerned for her health and safety, she made note of the unpredictable nature of New England weather in November. She stated that she fears falling on the ice or during the rain. In addition, she spoke about the commuters in Fairfield County who make the daily trek into Manhattan. She said that the commute can make it very challenging to vote in time. Lastly, Ms. Brandt recognized the constraints that in-person voting puts on our education system, with many schools having to close because they serve as polling places.

Maureen Chalmers, President, Congress of Connecticut Community Colleges: Ms. Chalmers wrote testimony in support of the resolution. She made note of the fact that community college students work multiple jobs, rely on public transportation and help tend to family affairs, all while balancing their studies. With so much on their plate, it can be a real challenge to find time to vote. With record breaking turnout at upwards of 80% last November, Chalmers identified this as a success and attributed it to the changes that allowed for greater access to absentee voting. She hopes that the committee will pass the resolution to allow for the changes to become permanent.

The Government Administration and Elections Committee received via email over 450 pieces of testimony expressing similar views in support of HJ 58, a resolution allowing for an amendment to the state constitution to permit no-excuse absentee voting. They cited reasons similar to those listed in the testimonies above. All copies of testimony are available on line.

The following organizations submitted testimony in support of the resolution allowing for a constitutional amendment to permit no-excuse absentee voting:

Jewish Community Relations Council
Luther Weeks, Executive Director, CTVotersCount
Jeff Ellington, CEO, Runbeck Election Services
Stephen Anderson, President, CSEA SEIU Local 2001
Hartford Foundation for Public Giving
Stacey Zimmerman, Service Employees International Union Connecticut State Council (SEIU-CT)
Judy Villa, Resolutions Chair, National Federation of Democratic Women
Women On Watch (WOW)
Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut
Lori Brown, Executive Director, Connecticut League of Conservation Voters
Gretchen Raffa, Senior Director of Public Policy, Advocacy & Organizing, Planned Parenthood of Southern New England, Inc.
Ann Gadwah, Sierra Club - Connecticut Chapter
AARP CT
Jamilah Prince-Stewart, Executive Director, FaithActs for Education
Jan Hochadel, President, American Federation of Teachers Connecticut (AFT-CT)
Every Vote Counts, Yale Chapter
Christina Cowan, National Association of Social Workers
New Haven Rising
Southern New England Conference United Church of Christ
Voter Choice CT
Nancy DiNardo, Chair, Connecticut Democratic State Central Committee
Ingrid Alvarez, Vice President for Police and Strategic Engagement, Hispanic Federation
Callie Heilmann – Co-Director of Bridgeport Generation Now Votes
League of Women Voters of Connecticut
Darryl Brackeen Jr., Chair, Generation Change CT
Jeff Leake, President, Connecticut Education Association
Catherine John, Lead Organizer, Black and Brown United in Action
Winston Heimer, Executive Vice President, Connecticut Alliance for Retired Americans
Common Cause Connecticut
Susan L Yolen, Board Member, PoliticaCT
United Auto Workers Region 9A
Connecticut Citizen Action Group
YWCA New Britain
Bishop John Selders, Co-Founder, Moral Monday CT
Pamela Selders, Founder, CT Black Women
Will Wilder, Fellow, Voting Rights and Elections Program Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law
Cheri Quickmire, Executive Director, Common Cause Connecticut
Sal Luciano, President, Connecticut AFL-CIO

Testimony in support of HJ 58 from elected officials in Connecticut:

Luke Bronin, Mayor of Hartford, Connecticut
Jim Jinks, Town Councilor, Cheshire, Connecticut
Barbara Richardson Crouch, Registrar of Voters, Sprague, Connecticut

Lisa Thomas, Councilwoman, Coventry, Connecticut
Mike Uργο, First Selectman, North Stonington, Connecticut

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Anne Alycone, constituent from Westport, Connecticut: Ms. Alycone expressed her desire to make voting more readily available to all registered voters in Connecticut. She maintains concern over the potential for fraud. Before moving forward on such a measure to expand absentee voting, she believes that restrictions and procedures must be outlined to address problems should they arise. Additionally, she stated there must be an analysis of the potential increased costs incurred as a result of heightened supervision with absentee ballot counting.

Dominic Rapini, Chairman of the Board, Fight Voter Fraud Inc.: Mr. Rapini expressed opposition to the resolution, finding that it diminishes trust, has the potential to decrease turnout, and ignores the core issues with Connecticut's election infrastructure that must be addressed. If Connecticut was to implement such a monumental change in our election infrastructure, Mr. Rapino finds it necessary to update the voter rolls to accurately reflect eligible voters, offer specific training to election officials on how to process mail in voting, and ultimately make use of a signature verification system. Mr. Rapino cited the diligent and lengthy efforts in Oregon and Washington to implement mail-in voting. Mr. Rapino advocates for maintaining trust in the electoral process and ensuring that there is no opportunity for cheating.

Albert Tartaglino, constituent of West Hartford, Connecticut: Mr. Tartaglino cited his own personal experience from this past election. Mr. Tartaglino says that he received three unsolicited absentee ballot applications at his home, with just one of them being addressed to him. The other two were addressed to previous residents of the home who had not lived there for several years. Without steps to authenticate identity, Mr. Tartaglino says that he could have sent in the applications and received three ballots. Mr. Tartaglino stated that he threw out the extra ballots.

Dori Wollen, Republican Registrar of Voters, Easton, Connecticut: As the Registrar of Voters in her town, Ms. Wollen witnessed the increased workload for the Town Clerk's office, the Registrars and the absentee ballot poll workers. Due to the increased workload, she says that more funding is required, thus increasing the budget at the expense of the taxpayer. Ms. Wollen believes that the use of COVID-19 as an excuse should not apply to people who simply want the convenience of voting from their own home instead of showing up at a polling place on Election Day.

Cathy Politi, constituent from Fairfield, Connecticut: Ms. Politi believes that sending absentee ballot applications to all voters is creating a situation prone to fraud. In order to prevent fraudulent activity, she recommends that ballot requests only be sent to those requesting one. Additionally, she advocates for a signature verification system, ballot harvesting prevention measures and mandated reporting on the number of absentee ballots requested. She believes these measures would help protect voter integrity.

Jack Gorfien, constituent of Guilford, Connecticut: Mr. Gorfien expressed concern over ballot harvesting. He pointed out that mail in voting has been banned throughout Europe

because of the potential for voter fraud. In addition, Mr. Gorfien highlights the fact that mail in voting would deprive the voter of considering any news events that might break close to Election Day. These stories could be deciding factors for a voter trying to make a decision, and if they cast their vote prior to hearing such news, it is relatively challenging to go about changing their vote. Mr. Gorfien contends that if one can go to the supermarket and to restaurants during the pandemic, they should be able to go to their polling place on Election Day.

Ethan Book, constituent from Bridgeport, Connecticut: Mr. Book was the Republican candidate for State Representative for the 128th district. He bases his opposition on the fact that the bill gives the Democrat's an unfair advantage, as absentee ballot applications would be mailed out before candidates have the opportunity to campaign and meet with voters. In addition, Mr. Book expressed concern with the current condition of the voter rolls, as well as the fact that there is no system in place to verify signatures or citizenship.

Marshall Odeen, constituent from Ridgefield, Connecticut: Mr. Odeen acknowledged the fact that a third of Americans believe that misconduct and fraud played a part in the outcome of the 2020 elections. He stated that voting should only take place on Election Day, unless you are eligible for an absentee ballot under the current set of permissible excuses.

David and Linda Stoberg, constituents of Ridgefield, Connecticut: Mr. and Mrs. Stoberg submitted testimony in opposition of the resolution. Citing the potential for fraud, vote buying, forgery and illegal voting, they find that HJ 58 would destroy voter confidence in the integrity of our system. In addition, Mr. and Mrs. Stoberg strongly believe that election integrity can only be upheld by in person voting, with voter identification and paper ballots, or using the current absentee ballot system the state has in place.

The following organizations submitted testimony in opposition to the resolution allowing for a constitutional amendment to permit no-excuse absentee voting:

Linda Szynowicz, Founder and CEO, Fight Voter Fraud Inc.
Anne Manusky, President, Connecticut Republican Assembly
Arnold Goldman, Chairman, Canton Republican Town Committee

The Government Administration and Elections Committee received via email over 100 pieces of testimony expressing similar views in opposition to HJ 58. All copies of testimony are available on line.

Reported by: Trevor Hoffman

Date: 3-5-21