

# Government Administration and Elections Committee

## JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No.:** SB-471

**Title:** AN ACT CONCERNING ELECTIONS AND STATE VOTING RIGHTS.

**Vote Date:** 3/29/2022

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable Substitute

**PH Date:** 3/25/2022

**File No.:**

***Disclaimer:** The following JOINT FAVORABLE Report is prepared for the benefit of the members of the General Assembly, solely for purposes of information, summarization and explanation and does not represent the intent of the General Assembly or either chamber thereof for any purpose.*

### SPONSORS OF BILL:

Government Administration and Elections Committee

### REASONS FOR BILL:

The reason for this bill is to protect the rights of protected classes of voters, and to provide a mechanism for challenging any laws that may infringe upon such. The JFS language would place Sections 6 and 7 under the purview of the State Elections Enforcement Commission, as opposed to the Office of the Secretary of State.

### RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

**Denise Merrill, Secretary of State**, stated her support of this bill, on the grounds that it would create a version of the Voting Rights Act for Connecticut. She further stated that this bill would eliminate systematic inequities in the voting process and protect the voting rights of all voters. Finally, she raised concerns over some of the language, specifically the fact that Sections 6 and 7 should reside with the State Elections Enforcement Commission, rather than her office; this was addressed by JFS language.

### NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

**Madeline Granato, Policy Director, Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund**, testified in support of this bill, on the grounds that the bill is a necessary step to dismantle a legacy of decades worth of voter suppression within the state. She stated that Connecticut has a history of such voter suppression, and that it remains one of the most difficult states for voters of color to exercise their rights, outside of the South. She further testified that other states have had success enacting similar statewide versions of the Voting Rights Act, and that Connecticut has the opportunity to build on that success.

**Ann Gadwah, Advocacy and Outreach Organizer Sierra Club Connecticut**, offered testimony in support of this bill, stating that it would provide numerous tools to root out voter

discrimination and suppression. She testified that Connecticut's history of voter suppression along racial lines is both significant and detrimental to the state's historically disenfranchised populations.

**The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving**, provided testimony in support of this bill, stating that it would afford all citizens equal ballot access, and expand language access. They further stated that many Black and Latino voters routinely encounter long lines and other obstacles on Election Day, and this bill would provide a framework to help alleviate such barriers.

**Ed Hawthorne, President, Connecticut AFL-CIO**, testified in support of this bill, stating that racial minorities face significant obstacles to voting in Connecticut, and that with the weakening of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, such a bill is necessary to ensure the integrity of the state's democracy. He stated that the bill will expand language assistance to those who do not speak English well, and allow voters to file a lawsuit if they face voter intimidation or obstruction at the polls.

**The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc (LDF)**, offered testimony in support of this bill, stating that it would implement critical measures to restore protections modeled on the federal Voting Rights Act and expand the tools available for voting-rights protection. They stated that Connecticut is home to some of the most restrictive voting laws in the country, and that there is currently no private right of action in Connecticut state courts for voters who face intimidation or obstruction at the polls. They stated that the bill's numerous provisions would protect historically disenfranchised voters, and both detect and prevent racial discrimination at the polls.

**Yvonne Senturia, Election Law Specialist, and Mary Consoli, League of Women Voters of Connecticut**, testified in support of this bill, stating that it would provide state-level protections against voter suppression. They also testified that the bill will assist voters for whom English is a second language and will make it more realistic for voters of color to file a lawsuit if they face voter intimidation or obstruction.

**Yanidsi Velez, New England Regional Director, Hispanic Federation**, offered testimony in support of this bill creates critical and necessary voter protections against intentional or unintentional consequences that contribute to voter suppression. She stated that a state-based Voting Rights Act would support BIPOC voters and those in urban areas who routinely face long lines, ballot shortages, and other barriers to ballot access.

**Stephen Wanczyk- Karp, LMSW, Executive Director, National Association of Social Workers – Connecticut Chapter**, testified in support of this bill, stating that it will provide voters of color a mechanism to file a lawsuit if they face voter intimidation or obstruction. He also supported the language provisions, on the grounds that they would help to break down barriers to voting for individuals who do not speak English as a first language.

**Travis Woodward, President, CSEA SEIU Local 2001**, submitted testimony in support of this bill, stating that it will make it realistic for voters of color to file a lawsuit if they face voter intimidation or obstruction, and expand language assistance to those for whom English is an obstacle to casting their ballots.

**Jess Zaccagnino, Policy Counsel, ACLU-CT**, offered testimony in support of this bill, stating that Connecticut has a long history of racism in its voting laws, which this bill would help correct. She stated that currently, Connecticut is the fourth-worst state in the union for voting options, and that and that this bill has the potential to bring these failings to an end.

**Stacey Zimmerman, Associate Director, SEIU**, testified in support of this bill, on the grounds that it will protect voters of color against voter suppression

**Rosaline Brown, Social Welfare Action Alliance**, offered testimony in support of this bill, stating that it will support frequently disenfranchised communities, and provide a mechanism for legal challenges against voter intimidation and obstruction. She stated that voters in Connecticut are still at the hands of restrictive voting laws and cited an example of the town of Newington attempting to reduce the number of polling locations as one such example of voter restriction.

**Gemeem Davis and Callie Gale Heilmann, Co-Directors, Bridgeport Generation Now Votes**, submitted testimony in support of this bill, stating that this bill is needed given Connecticut's history of voter suppression and the recent weakening of the federal Voting Rights Act. They referenced several cases of voter suppression in Bridgeport as evidence of the necessity of this bill and reiterated that the bill will enfranchise communities.

**Aaron Goode, Founder, New Haven Votes Coalition**, testified in support of this bill, on the grounds that he has witnessed voter suppression in New Haven. He suggested two changes to the bill, namely instituting an explicit requirement for translation of the text on ballots in places where there are significant language minority groups (this particularly applies when referenda are on the ballot) and applying the protocols for municipal redistricting plans in Lines 174-205 to all municipalities.

**Shannon Lane, Deputy Registrar of Voters, Town of Bethany**, testified in support of this bill, stating that it would address disparities in voting and increase the number of communities that would be asked to provide language assistance for language-minority voters. She stated that the bill would also protect municipalities by providing a "safe harbor" period to remedy alleged violations before being subjected to legal action.

**The Campaign Legal Center**, offered testimony in support of this bill, stating that the bill represents an opportunity for Connecticut to be a national leader in protecting voting rights for communities of color. They compared the bill to similar measures in California, Oregon, New York, and Virginia, and reiterated the ways in which they feel SB 471 improves on the federal Voting Rights Act.

**The Registrars of Voters Association of Connecticut**, did not support or oppose the bill, but testified that they stand ready to work with the committee, given the significant changes the bill would institute.

The committee also received testimony from constituents stating that Connecticut needs a state-level Voting Rights Act, and that voters of color in Connecticut face more obstacles than in any other state outside of the South. Many also supported the expanded language assistance. These constituents include:

Karrol Ann Brown  
Jo-Ann Ansaldo  
Thomas Behrendt  
Michael Bender  
Darryl Brackeen  
Deborah Brody  
Annie Brooks  
Anne Cheng  
Sally Connolly  
Traver Cowles  
Alice Cruikshank  
Donna Curran  
Philip Davis  
Ruth Drouin  
Dori Dumas  
Diana Evans  
Robinbeth Faulkner  
Jennifer Foley  
Katy Forline  
Dawn Fuller  
Kathryn Gaffney  
Charlie Galliher  
Susan Grady  
Marilyn Greenberg  
Vilma Gregoropoulos  
Elizabeth Gullen  
Rhonda Heisler  
Andrew Henry  
Charles Herbert  
Nancy Hill  
Harald Hille  
Emily Hofstatter  
Dominique Johnson  
Roslyn Kaplan  
Melanie Klein  
William Kovacsik  
Joan Kranz  
Judy Lhamon  
Sal Liccione  
Dany Lindenbacher  
Sarah Livingston  
Michael Madden  
William Martens  
Sharon McNamera  
Georgette Miller  
Gary Mummert  
Rosanne Neri  
Georgia Newcomb  
Elsa Obuchowski

Adrienne Parkmond  
Judith Petersen  
Kate Powers  
Clare Rogers  
William Rolls  
Annea Rosenberg  
Randi Saslow  
Elizabeth Scott  
Michele Scott  
Peter Spain  
Charlie Weedon  
Marilyn Wieczorek  
Maurie Williams  
Zach Zarnow  
Ruth Zeiss

## **NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

**Matthew Waggoner, Registrar of Voters, Town of Fairfield**, testified in opposition to the bill as written, proposing a number of changes and substitutions. He stated that while he supports the goals of the bill, there were significant gaps that databases and judges could not assist with, and which required addressing at the state level, under the claim that statewide actions often create the very disparities at hand. He further testified that the bill at present does not sufficiently pay attention to the issues between towns, and rather focuses on segregation at the individual town level, and as such ignores the issue of unequal resources or unaddressed needs.

**Joan Liska, Constituent**, submitted testimony in opposition to this bill, on the grounds that this bill would single out voters on the basis of race, and that the use of "protected class" terminology is irrelevant due to the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Amendments. She finally stated that this bill will introduce voter discrimination.

**David Godbout, Constituent**, testified in opposition to all bills before the committee, on the premise of nullification.

**Reported by: Cameron Clarke**

**Date: 3/29/2022**