

Testimony of Miles Rapoport
Before the Government Administration and Elections Committee
In Support of HB 5717 and HB 5704
March 6, 2023

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Miles Rapoport. I am a West Hartford resident, and I had the privilege of serving on this committee for ten years as a legislator (1984-1994) and working closely with the committee when I served as Secretary of the State from 1995 to 1998.

I am also the co-author, with *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne, of the 2022 book *100% Democracy: The Case for Universal Voting*. I am testifying today in support of HB 5717 and HB 5704, and on the concept of universal voting in general in this subject matter public hearing.

I'd like to begin by thanking Committee Co-Chairs Senator Flexer and Representative Blumenthal; Ranking Members Senator Sampson and Representative Mastrofrancesco; and the committee as a whole for being willing to include in this hearing the introduction of a new and important idea about voting participation. I am grateful to Representative Santiago and Representative Haddad for co-sponsoring this legislation. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Congressman John Larson, representing Connecticut's 1st District, for proposing universal civic duty voting in federal legislation with H.R. 7536, the Civic Duty to Vote Act, in 2022.

The concept of universal civic duty voting is simple: It redefines voting as not only a fundamental right of Americans but also as a civic responsibility. It requires all eligible citizens to participate in this most fundamental act of self-governance.

Universal voting would immediately and dramatically increase voter participation; help reduce polarization and hyper-partisanship; expand the influence of communities whose voices and votes have been underrepresented; and create a political system more accountable to—and more reflective of—a broader base of the electorate.

In addition, I believe that one of the best ways to promote voting and to ensure equal access to the ballot is to declare voting a universal and fundamental civic duty. Under this system, every U.S. citizen would be legally obligated to vote, just as every citizen is obligated to serve on juries. By recognizing that all of us, as a matter of civic duty, have an obligation to shape our shared project of democratic self-government, we could move from our 2020 national voter turnout high—some 66.8 percent of eligible voters—much closer to 100 percent democracy. Universal voting takes seriously the Declaration of Independence's insistence that government is legitimate only when it is

based on the “consent of the governed.” Including everyone in our system of government would live up to the promise made at the birth of our republic. Universal civic duty voting would tear down barriers and elevate our civic obligations. It would put an end to legal assaults on voting rights. Those responsible for organizing elections would be required to resist all efforts at voter suppression.

Historically, some parts of the population vote at lower percentages—young people, communities of color, low income people, people with lower education—and their voices are not heard. If you have everyone voting, then you have a fully reflective and, I think, a more responsive government. It would reduce the toxic polarization you have now.

Universal voting may seem like a radical idea to some in the U.S., but in fact, it is neither new nor untested. This potentially game-changing idea for our elections and our democracy is already used in more than 26 democratic countries around the world, including 13 countries in Latin America and 5 in Europe. Belgium was the first country to adopt it in 1892, and just last December, the Chamber of Deputies in Chile voted nearly unanimously to institute mandatory voting for all citizens.

Australia offers nearly 100 years of proof of concept. Universal voting was adopted there nationwide (after several individual states pioneered it) in 1924. Voter participation immediately jumped from 60% to 90%, and it has stayed there in every election since. The system is popular, and there has never been a meaningful attempt at repeal.

How does the Australian system work? The Australian Electoral Commission is well funded and nonpartisan, and strives to enroll every citizen, assisted by the political parties and civil society organizations of all stripes. Elections are held on a Saturday, and the environment is celebratory, with a longstanding tradition of “democracy sausage” booths outside every polling place. Citizens are required to participate, but they are entitled to present a blank or “creatively” marked ballot.

The 10% of enrolled citizens who do not vote are sent a letter enquiring the reason, and any reasonable response is accepted. After two letters, people who do not respond at all are assessed a fine equivalent to about \$15 US. Roughly 10% of non-voters—1% of the population—are actually assessed. It is “light touch enforcement,” much more of a nudge than a shove, and it is a fully accepted part of the civic culture.

It is astonishing that a policy so successfully used around the world for so long has been up til now absent from policy discussions about how we should run our elections and our system of representative democracy.

It is absolutely critical to note that universal civic duty voting does not compel anyone to vote for or against a candidate or to express any opinion at all. It only requires participation in an election. A voter can return an unmarked ballot; they can mark their

ballot “none of the above;” or they can provide an explanation, such as conscientious objection, for why they cannot or will not vote. A voter is guaranteed a mechanism for expressing dissatisfaction with the candidates or even with the electoral process itself.

Universal voting would have major benefits for our elections. In addition to dramatically boosting turnout and making the electorate fully reflective of all of Connecticut’s citizens, it would have the added benefit of ratcheting down the polarizing rhetoric that currently characterizes political campaigns. The strategy of only appealing to your own base (and worse, attempting to discourage the other candidate’s base) would be counterproductive. If, as a candidate or a party, you know that every eligible citizen is required to vote, and therefore everyone is listening, you need to speak to everyone and persuade them of the merits of your candidate’s ideas.

In addition, the implementation of universal voting would necessitate energetic voter registration and education efforts by public officials, schools, media platforms, and civil society organizations. Just to mention two examples: If I were a school superintendent and I knew that every high school graduate had the requirement to vote, would I make civic education a higher priority? I think I would. And if I were an employer, and all the firm’s employees were required to vote, would I be more inclined to give the time off to vote? I think so here as well.

Of course, proponents of universal voting understand that many Americans are predisposed to push back against anything that smacks of government coercion. But our government already mandates many things that we readily accept: serving jury duty, paying taxes, educating children, getting car inspections, and buying auto insurance, for instance.

The analogy with jury duty is a strong one. In the interest of fair verdicts in our courts, it is a responsibility for our citizens to serve on a jury if they are called. As a society we insist that the jury pool reflects all parts of our community. We think the same logic applies to voting; we should insist that the decisions of the government be made by a fully reflective pool of voters.

Although Connecticut should be proud of starting a discussion of this important civic reform, you should know that Connecticut is not alone. In the state of Washington, Senate Bill 5209, An Act Establishing Universal Civic Duty Voting, was introduced with 14 Senate sponsors, including the Senate President, Majority Leader, and Elections Committee Chair and has been “exec’d” out of committee with a “Do Pass” recommendation; a companion bill, HB 1220, has been filed in the House. And in Utah, HB 452 has been introduced, which would allow municipalities to enact universal voting. Interest is also building in Colorado, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington DC, and a number of municipalities around the country.

And our own Congressman Larson, a strong supporter of universal voting, introduced H.R. 7536, Civic Duty to Vote Act, last year.

I want to applaud the Committee and the legislature as a whole for the significant advances in voting that Connecticut has made in recent years, from Same Day Registration and Automatic Voter Registration to the restoration of voting rights for returning citizens. This year, Connecticut is making additional progress, by moving forward on early voting and potentially expanded mail-in voting as well.

In my view, universal voting is a bold and exciting reform that can dramatically expand voter participation. I thank the committee for engaging in the discussion today, and it would be wonderful to see Connecticut be a leader in expanding voting to include everyone.