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Connecticut General Assembly
Government Administration and Elections Committee
Public Hearing

March 13, 2026

Testimony of Secretary of the State Stephanie Thomas Regarding:

Support

- **S.B. 395 – An Act Studying Efforts to Increase Voter Participation and Authorizing Municipal Pilot Programs to Promote Such Efforts**
- **S.B. 463 – An Act Concerning Security of Election Administration Processes, Election Sites, Election Workers and Electors**
- **H.B. 5530 – An Act Concerning a Study of Absentee Ballot Access in Unconsolidated Cities and Boroughs Within a Town**
- **H.B. 5531 – An Act Concerning Faithful Presidential Electors**

Support with Changes

- **S.B. 394 – An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Risk-Limited Audits Work Group**
- **S.B. 459 – An Act Concerning the Secretary of the State's Recommendations Regarding the Circulation of Primary and Nominating Petitions and Distribution of Absentee Ballot Applications**
- **S.B. 461 – An Act Concerning Political Spending and State-Granted Corporate Powers**

- **S.B. 464 – An Act Studying Compensation of Election Workers During the Early Voting Periods Preceding and on the Day of Elections, Primaries, and Referenda**
- **H.B. 5001 – An Act Concerning Elections Administration and Related Matters**

Oppose

- **H.B. 5529 – An Act Concerning Poll Books for the Checking of Electors at Elections, Primaries, and Referenda**

Dear Co-Chairs Flexer and Blumenthal; Vice Chairs Honig, Morrin Bello, and Osborne; Ranking Members Sampson and Mastrofrancesco; and distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on several bills.

Support

S.B. 395 – An Act Studying Efforts to Increase Voter Participation and Authorizing Municipal Pilot Programs to Promote Such Efforts: *Support*

Encouraging voter participation and strengthening civic engagement are central to a healthy democracy. For that reason, I support S.B. 395. **Section 1** of the bill establishes a task force to study strategies for increasing voter participation in Connecticut, including the aspirational goal of achieving 100% voter participation by January 1, 2030, while also examining how civic engagement can be strengthened more broadly and what resources municipalities would need to administer elections at higher participation levels.

Section 2 authorizes municipalities to establish pilot programs to promote voter participation through outreach, education, and civic engagement efforts. As Secretary of

the State, one of my priorities has been promoting the idea that democracy works best when people understand it, trust it, and choose to participate in it.

Connecticut already demonstrates strong civic engagement, but participation can be higher. In the 2024 presidential election, roughly 1.9 million Connecticut voters cast ballots, representing about 76% of registered voters. In the 2025 municipal elections, by contrast, 820,703 voters participated statewide, resulting in about 36% turnout. These numbers show that while many residents are engaged, a significant number of eligible voters are not participating in elections that shape their communities. Studying ways to increase participation and allowing municipalities to pilot new approaches to outreach and civic engagement may help identify strategies that encourage more Connecticut residents to take part in the democratic process.

S.B. 463 – An Act Concerning Security of Election Administration Processes, Election Sites, Election Workers and Electors and H.B. 5533 – An Act Concerning Protection of Election Administration Processes, Elections Sites, Election Workers and Electors: ***Support***

Protecting voters, election workers, and election infrastructure is essential to maintaining public confidence in our elections. For that reason, I support both S.B. 463 and H.B. 5533.

Across the country, election officials and election workers have faced increased threats, harassment, and attempts to disrupt election administration. While Connecticut has fortunately avoided many of the most serious incidents seen elsewhere, we should not wait until similar problems occur here before we take steps to prevent them.

These bills strengthen those protections by:

- Establishing clear boundaries around election sites and addressing conduct that could intimidate voters

- Creating penalties for the possession of weapons near election sites while preserving exceptions for lawful firearm possession
- Expanding existing protections for election workers to include assistant municipal clerks, who play an important role in election administration in many municipalities
- Reinforcing the integrity of election administration processes by establishing penalties for tampering with voting tabulators, addressing interference with absentee ballot drop boxes and ballots, providing for coordination with the Office of the Attorney General when legal requests for election materials arise, and ensuring the state has a clear mechanism to respond if interference occurs in the selection of presidential electors or members of Congress.

Taken together, these provisions strengthen protections for voters, election workers, and the administration of elections in Connecticut

H.B. 5530 – An Act Concerning a Study of Absentee Ballot Access in Unconsolidated Cities and Boroughs Within a Town: *Support*

I support H.B. 5530, which establishes a task force to study absentee ballot access for voters who live in unconsolidated cities and boroughs within a town and are voting in elections conducted by those jurisdictions.

Connecticut's current absentee ballot request processes do not always align with the structure of elections conducted by boroughs or unconsolidated municipalities. As a result, voters in those jurisdictions must submit separate absentee ballot requests for elections that take place on the same day and in the same voting location. For example, the City of Groton operates within the Town of Groton as an unconsolidated municipality that conducts its own elections. Connecticut also has nine borough governments that operate within towns, and similar structural issues may arise in those jurisdictions.

Because these municipalities operate within — but separately from — the towns in which they are located, integrating their elections into the state's existing absentee ballot application system raises legal, technical, and administrative questions that should be carefully examined. A task force study is an appropriate way to evaluate those questions and determine whether a workable solution can be developed.

H.B. 5531 – An Act Concerning Faithful Presidential Electors: *Support*

I support H.B. 5531, which strengthens Connecticut's procedures to ensure that presidential electors cast their votes consistent with the candidates chosen by Connecticut voters. When voters participate in a presidential election, they do so with the understanding that the electors pledged to a candidate will reflect the will of those voters when the Electoral College meets. The bill also addresses situations in which a vacancy among presidential electors may occur so that the process remains orderly and predictable.

Taken together, these provisions strengthen the clarity and reliability of Connecticut's presidential elector process and help ensure that the votes of Connecticut residents are accurately reflected when the Electoral College meets.

Support with Changes

S.B. 394 – An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Risk-Limited Audits Work Group: *Support with changes*

Please see our testimony for H.B. 5001, which includes the same language about risk-limited audits as S.B. 394.

S.B. 459 – An Act Concerning the Secretary of the State's Recommendations Regarding the Circulation of Primary and Nominating Petitions and Distribution of Absentee Ballot Applications: *Support with changes*

I support the intent of S.B. 459, which strengthens safeguards around key parts of the election process by limiting who may circulate petitions and distribute absentee ballot applications. My office worked on the language for this bill, which prohibits the circulation of primary petitions, or the distribution of absentee ballot applications, by any person convicted of a crime under Title 9 of the general statutes during their period of probation or parole, and until 12 years have passed following their release from confinement.

These provisions reflect an important principle: Individuals who have been convicted of violating Connecticut election law should not immediately return to roles that place them in positions of trust within the election process. That said, I urge the committee to revise the portions of the bill requiring election officials to order nationwide criminal background checks on petition circulators and individuals distributing absentee ballot applications. As written, these provisions would be extremely difficult to implement.

Under Connecticut's current petition process, circulators are not registered or vetted in advance by election officials, and registrars of voters and town clerks generally do not know who will be circulating petitions ahead of time. In practice, individuals often obtain petition pages or absentee ballot applications from a registrar's office or town clerk's office, and begin circulating them immediately. Because the timeframes for circulating these materials are short, any background check requirement would need to be effectively instantaneous to be workable. In addition, requiring background checks after petitions have already been circulated could result in petition pages being rejected, even though

voters signed them in good faith, effectively nullifying those voters' participation in the petition process.

Local election officials have also raised concerns about the cost and administrative burden of conducting such checks. I recommend that the background check provisions be removed from the bill so the core reforms can move forward, or that legislators establish a clear and practical mechanism for conducting such checks.

S.B. 461 – An Act Concerning Political Spending and State-Granted Corporate Powers: ***Support with changes***

As written, the bill includes provisions that would require the Secretary of the State's Office to dissolve certain entities under specified circumstances. At this time, we do not believe the dissolution requirements themselves would be overly burdensome. However, the procedure outlined in the bill appears to require our office to decide, before we act on an order issued by the State Elections Enforcement Commission, whether that order is on hold because it is being appealed. Without the clarity of knowing whether an order is final or paused because of an appeal, our office could be put in the difficult position of trying to determine the status of the order. To avoid this situation, we believe the statute should make clear that the Secretary of the State acts once a final order is issued by the Commission. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the committee to suggest alternative language.

S.B. 464 – An Act Studying Compensation of Election Workers During the Early Voting Periods Preceding and on the Day of Elections, Primaries, and Referenda: *Support with changes*

I support the intent of S.B. 464, which proposes studying compensation for election workers. The roles of registrars of voters, town clerks, moderators, and the many election workers who staff early voting locations and Election Day polling places have expanded significantly over the past several years. They play an essential role in ensuring elections are conducted professionally, securely, and in accordance with the law. Because the Secretary of the State's office is responsible for statewide election administration and works closely with local election officials in all 169 municipalities and election offices around the country, the office should be formally included in the study group. Including the Secretary of the State's Office will help ensure the study benefits from statewide election administration experience and the practical realities faced by local officials.

H.B. 5001 – An Act Concerning Elections Administration and Related Matters: *Support with changes*

Rather than walk through every section of this extensive bill, I want to focus on a few areas that will need revisions to best serve voters and the election officials who will ultimately be responsible for implementing these changes. My goal is always the same: elections that are secure, understandable, and trusted not just in theory, but in practice.

Absentee Voting

Sections 1 through 6 expand eligibility for absentee voting by removing the statutory list of reasons required currently to vote by absentee ballot. However, my office cannot support some of the procedural changes as written.

Expanding absentee voting eligibility without fully examining the administrative systems needed to support that expansion raises significant concerns. If Connecticut is going to implement universal access to absentee voting, the state systems that support absentee voting should be modernized so that the process remains secure, transparent, and manageable for local election officials. For example:

- Connecticut currently does not provide voters with an opportunity to cure errors in returned absentee ballots. If a ballot is rejected because a voter forgot to sign the inner envelope, that voter has no opportunity to remedy the problem. If absentee voting expands significantly without establishing a curing process, many voters could find their ballots rejected with no recourse. Under our proposal, election officials would be required to make reasonable efforts to contact voters whose ballots contain correctable errors, so that those voters have an opportunity to cure the ballot before the close of polls on Election Day. Further, our proposal repeals CGS § 9-159o, which would become obsolete with the passage of this bill.
- Connecticut does not yet have a comprehensive absentee ballot tracking system that allows voters to follow their ballot through the full process from issuance to counting. Many states that have expanded absentee voting have adopted such systems because transparency is critical to voter confidence. Our office recommends integrating the Centralized Voter Registration System with the United States Postal Service tracking tools so voters can follow their absentee ballots through the process. Including this as a statutory provision will help ensure that Connecticut voters who choose to vote by absentee ballot have access to a transparent tracking system that allows them to follow their ballot through the process, strengthening both voter confidence and the integrity of the absentee voting system.

- Currently, Connecticut law requires absentee ballot envelopes to remain sealed until Election Day morning. If absentee voting expands significantly, local election officials will need the ability to begin processing absentee ballot envelopes earlier, as well as need a simpler envelope structure. Our office recommends allowing earlier processing of absentee ballots and transitioning to a single-envelope system to reduce processing time and administrative complexity.
- A growing number of states allow some or all voters to join a permanent absentee ballot list. Our office recommends establishing a permanent absentee ballot list and would be happy to work with the legislature to develop a program that operates effectively for both voters and election officials.
- The bill also does not address concerns related to absentee ballot application circulators. Expanding absentee voting while leaving the circulator system unchanged — particularly if unsolicited absentee ballot applications may be mailed without clear requirements governing circulator conduct — risks increasing voter confusion and creating opportunities for bad actors to misrepresent their role in the absentee voting process. Eliminating circulators would strengthen election integrity by reducing the risk of fraudulent or unwanted absentee ballot applications and by preventing voter confusion, harassment, or pressure directed at electors.
- It is also important that the absentee voting policy be considered in concert with Connecticut's early voting system. Any expansion of absentee voting should consider how the two systems interact, so that voters have clear options and local election officials can administer both processes effectively. For example, most municipalities utilize their town hall for early voting, and in-person absentee voting can also be conducted at the town clerk's office, within the town hall, during the same time period. Maintaining two separate offices for concurrent identical tasks is an inefficient use of resources. It is more efficient to designate a single location for

election activities within the same building during the period of time leading up to the contest.

Without addressing structural issues like curing procedures, ballot tracking, voter education, administrative procedures, and capacity in advance, the state risks creating confusion for voters and unnecessary strain on local election officials.

While we understand the public's interest in adoption based on passage of the 2024 ballot referendum, we respectfully suggest a middle ground that provides security and efficiency without stalling voter access:

- Year 1 – to include ballot curing, conversion to one envelope, ballot tracking, and step one of aligning absentee ballot procedures with early voting.
- Year 2 – to include the removal of non-governmental circulators, establishment of a permanent absentee ballot list, and further alignment with early voting.

Further, the greatest tool Connecticut has to instill public trust in the integrity and security of our elections is voter education, which is why we asked the Legislature to add $2.5 million to the Secretary of the State's budget for a Statewide Voter Information Campaign. When voters understand the rules, deadlines, and safeguards governing early voting, absentee ballots, and Election Day procedures, the likelihood of misinformation, coercion, and fraud are significantly reduced.

Accessibility Review

Section 9 directs the Secretary of the State to review existing procedures allowing registrars of voters to examine voter registration applications outside of their offices and to report to the Legislature on ways to improve accessibility for voters with disabilities. Our office has provided suggested language to the Committee, designed to ensure that

individuals with disabilities who cannot easily access a town hall or a registrars' office have the same opportunity to register in person as any voter has.

Minor Party Rules

Section 21 of the bill addresses the filing of party rules governing candidate nominations and the selection of delegates.

As written, subsection (b) does not fully address situations where a minor party does not have a local party organization in a particular municipality. In those cases, the statute should clarify that the state party rules filed with the Secretary of the State serve as the governing rules for that municipality. This clarification could prevent confusion later when candidate nominations are being reviewed for ballot access.

My office welcomes this opportunity to take a closer look at those procedures and provide recommendations to the legislature. Ensuring that voter registration remains accessible to all eligible voters is a goal we share.

Electronic Ballot Delivery

Sections 22 through 27 address electronic ballot delivery to a limited group of voters, including military voters, overseas voters, and certain voters with disabilities.

In many respects, these sections reflect processes that Connecticut already uses today. When traditional mail delivery is not practical, eligible voters in these categories may receive a blank ballot electronically so they can print and return it.

One technical issue should be addressed, however. Several provisions currently state that ballots "shall" be issued by electronic means, when it should state "may." In practice, ballots should be issued in the manner requested by the voter, whether by mail or

electronically. Revising the language so that municipal clerks may issue ballots electronically upon request would better reflect the intent of these statutes and preserve flexibility for election officials and voters.

In **Section 28**, the bill also creates a framework under which electronic return of ballots by that same limited group of voters could potentially be authorized in the future. Importantly, the bill sets an extremely high bar before any such system could be approved, reflecting the serious security and technological considerations associated with electronic ballot return. Specifically, the bill requires that before any system allowing electronic ballot return could be considered for adoption, the system must:

- Receive one or more independent security review from a laboratory accredited under the National Voluntary Laboratory Accreditation Program or a successor program overseen by the National Institute of Standards and Technology
- Meet the cybersecurity framework guidelines established by the National Institute of Standards and Technology or those of a successor federal agency or organization
- Be approved by the University of Connecticut or a successor state agency or organization

These requirements reflect the significant technological and security challenges associated with electronic ballot return and make clear that such a system could only be implemented if these rigorous standards can be satisfied.

Recanvass Procedures

Under current law, recanvasses are typically conducted using the same voting tabulators that were used during the election. **Section 31** of the bill clarifies that, when a recanvass is conducted either at the Secretary of the State's office or in a municipality, the moderator may request to use an additional tabulator or a high-speed tabulator provided by the Secretary of the State.

This change is intended to make recounts more efficient for local election officials and allows the Secretary's office to provide additional equipment when municipalities need it. In close elections where a large number of ballots must be reviewed, having access to additional or high-speed tabulators can significantly reduce the time required to complete a recanvass while maintaining the accuracy and transparency of the process.

Risk-Limiting Audits

In 2021, the legislature authorized a task force to investigate and test the possibility of instituting a system of post-election risk-limiting audits. The task force subsequently conducted a pilot program following the 2021 municipal elections and issued its report and recommendations to this committee in early 2022. This bill implements those recommendations and establishes a framework for risk-limiting audits in Connecticut.

Connecticut's current post-election audit procedure examines a fixed percentage of precincts regardless of the margin of victory in a particular contest. The subject-matter experts who studied this issue have recommended risk-limiting audits as a statistically grounded method of verifying election outcomes.

Risk-limiting audits are a type of post-election audit designed to statistically limit the risk of errors in reported election outcomes. They establish confidence in election results by examining a number of ballots determined by the margin of victory in a given contest in order to confirm the reported outcome to a defined level of confidence, known as the risk limit.

Section 32 establishes a framework for risk-limiting audits in Connecticut. The bill would adopt a system of ballot comparison audits, in which a Cast Vote Record is created, and individual ballots are randomly selected and compared to how they were recorded in that Cast Vote Record. The number of ballots reviewed depends on the margin of victory in the

particular election, ensuring that the outcome can be confirmed within a statistically significant risk limit of no more than five percent.

Risk-limiting audits are recognized as the gold standard in election administration. States including Colorado, Virginia, Georgia, Nevada, and Rhode Island have adopted full risk-limiting audit programs, while several other states, including California, Michigan, and Washington, provide optional programs to local jurisdictions. Implementing such a system in Connecticut would strengthen the accuracy verification process already in place and further reinforce voter confidence in the integrity of our elections.

Based on recommendations developed by the Risk-Limiting Audits Working Group and the frameworks established in earlier legislative proposals, this bill was contemplated in 2024 (S.B. 254) and 2025 (S.B. 1232) but did not make it to the House or Senate floor, despite enjoying the widespread bi-partisan support that still exists for it.

The fiscal impact of H.B. 5001 is expected to be similar to that identified for the comparable legislation considered in 2025. The initial implementation costs — estimated at approximately $1 million — could be supported through existing bond funding previously authorized for election infrastructure improvements, with ongoing operational costs estimated at approximately $400,000 annually in subsequent years. With that understanding, I urge the committee to move H.B. 5001 forward with the following changes:

- First, while **Section 32** requires the creation of ballot manifests for polling place ballots and centrally counted absentee ballots, additional provisions should be included requiring the creation of ballot manifests for early voting ballots and same-day registration ballots. These ballot categories should be incorporated to ensure that the audit framework captures all ballots cast in Connecticut elections.

- Second, the legislation should include a provision allowing the Secretary of the State to adopt regulations, if necessary, to implement and administer the risk-limiting audit process. Given the technical and evolving nature of election auditing methodologies, regulatory authority would provide needed flexibility to ensure the system operates effectively over time.
- Third, the bill provides that audit reports be transmitted to the University of Connecticut for analysis. For clarity, this reference should be updated to the University of Connecticut Center for Voting Technology Research, which is the entity that currently performs this work.
- Fourth, the effective date of **Section 44** should be upon passage, or July 1, 2026.

My office supports implementing a risk-limiting audit framework in Connecticut and looks forward to continuing to work with the Committee as you consider these issues. I appreciate the Committee's continued attention to this issue.

Oppose

H.B. 5529 – An Act Concerning Poll Books for the Checking of Electors at Elections, Primaries, and Referenda: *Oppose*

I respectfully oppose H.B. 5529 because it addresses a scenario that does not exist under current Connecticut law. The bill would require registrars of voters to notify certain committees whether electors will be checked manually on paper or electronically. However, Connecticut law requires that the official checklist used at polling places be paper-based, and electronic poll books are not authorized for use as the official checklist.

Because electronic poll books are not currently authorized for use as the official checklist, the notification requirement proposed in this bill would not serve a practical purpose.

Respectfully submitted,

Stephanie Thomas
Secretary of the State of Connecticut