

To: Connecticut Legislative Government Administration and Elections Committee members
From: Susan McDonald, 192 Ridgewood Avenue, Hamden
Date: February 19, 2021
Re: **Testimony for 2/22/21 public hearing in SUPPORT of H.J. No. 58 to allow No-Excuse Absentee Voting and H.J. No. 59 to allow for Early Voting**

My name is Susan McDonald. I am a resident of Hamden, where I am a registered voter. I write today to testify in support of the two proposed state constitutional amendments H.J. No. 58, to allow No-Excuse Absentee Voting, and H.J. No. 59, to allow for Early Voting.

I believe your Committee already knows that the temporary adoption in 2020 of these two provisions, in response to the challenges presented by the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in record-breaking voter participation in the Connecticut 2020 General Election, and that the majority of Connecticut residents support making these provisions permanent. Rather than repeat in detail the many persuasive arguments in favor of amending the state constitution to make both no-excuse absentee voting and early voting permanent provisions of Connecticut election law, I will use my testimony to share what I learned from my experience serving as an official poll observer in the state of Maine during the 2020 General Election.

The big lesson, for me and for Connecticut, is that, because Maine had already been making voting easily accessible to its residents for years rather than still requiring most voters to vote in person on Election Day, Maine's governor and secretary of state only needed to make a few minor adjustments to Maine's pre-existing practices in order to be able to conduct a highly successful, free, and fair election during a pandemic. This level of ongoing voting accessibility is the standard that Connecticut (and all other states) should meet. It is time for the legislature to act decisively to make Connecticut elections more accessible to all eligible voters.

As background, my husband and I were already in Maine, spending a few weeks at our vacation cabin, when "the world shut down" in March 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. We are in our mid-sixties and decided the safest thing for us to do under the circumstances was to stay put. Thus we lived in Maine for almost all of 2020. While in Maine, I volunteered to serve as an official poll watcher. To be approved to serve in this role I first had to be trained, learning everything there is to know about voter eligibility, voter registration requirements, and other details of how elections are governed and conducted in Maine. What I learned from my training and from my on-site observer assignments was eye-opening. It showed me just how out of step Connecticut's severe constitutional restrictions on absentee voting and early voting are by comparison. I am testifying today to help improve access to voting here in my home state.

As a poll observer, I observed 3 days of early voting, in 2 locations; 5 days of early absentee ballot processing, in 2 locations; and Election Day voting, vote tabulation, and vote totals reporting, in 1 location. In all situations, I was impressed by the election officials' knowledge, preparedness, efficiency, non-partisanship, consistency, fairness, and commitment to helping all eligible voters submit valid ballots. For example, in the town where I observed absentee ballot processing on Monday, November 2, I learned from the town clerk that she had spent the

weekend driving to the homes of the handful of voters whose absentee ballot submissions could not be accepted as submitted and who by the previous Friday had not yet been reached by e-mail or telephone to “cure” their submissions, so that they would be able to cure the ballots in her presence and have their ballots accepted by the Election Day deadline. She had literally gone the extra mile(s) to ensure every one of these voters’ ballots would be counted.

The following are specific permanent provisions of election law in Maine:

- No-excuse absentee voting:
 - absentee ballots may be requested beginning 3 months before Election Day, until 5 p.m. on the Thursday before Election Day;
 - requests may be made to one’s municipal clerk by mail, by telephone, or in person, or by using the Secretary of State’s on-line absentee ballot request form;
 - completed absentee ballots may be returned to the clerk by mail, in person, or using secured official ballot drop boxes;
 - to be counted, voted absentee ballots must be received by the municipal clerk by 8:00 p.m. on Election Day.
- Early voting, which is officially referred to as “absentee voting in person”:
 - absentee voting in person is available at the clerk's office as soon as absentee ballots are available
 - absentee ballots are made available at least 30 days before Election Day;
 - completing an application is not required for those who vote in person at the clerk's office;
 - the deadline for absentee voting in the presence of the clerk is the Thursday before Election Day.
- Same-day voter registration on Election Day:
 - new voters can register to vote any time before or on Election Day;
 - registered voters who have moved within the state can update their voter registration to reflect their new address any time before or on Election Day.
- Early processing of absentee ballots:
 - absentee ballot submissions are screened when received by the clerk and either marked as accepted or identified as not acceptable because of a submission error and thus in need of curing; in the latter case the clerk has an obligation to promptly attempt to contact the voter to notify them of how, when, and where to cure the submission;
 - there is a period of several days prior to Election Day when town clerks may open accepted absentee ballot submissions and machine-process the ballots (but not access the machine-tally); normally just the 4 days immediately before Election Day, this period was temporarily extended to 7 days in 2020 because of the increased absentee ballot volume due to the pandemic;
 - all absentee ballots must be processed and tallied by 8 p.m. on Election Day; the absentee ballot tallies are then included in the total vote tallies reported after the close of voting on Election Day.

Please vote in favor of H.J. No. 58 and H.J. No. 59 and encourage your colleagues to do so, too.