

Government Administration and Elections Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-6578

Title: AN ACT CONCERNING PARTICIPATION IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS.

Vote Date: 4/5/2021

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 3/10/2021

File No.: 578

***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:

The Government Administration and Elections Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

Upon passage, this bill would restore electoral privileges to convicted felons on parole, except those convicted of elected related felonies. Convicted felons on parole would no longer be required to pay certain fines in order to restore their status as an eligible voter in Connecticut. Additionally, this bill would codify and expand the voter registration procedures that currently exist at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Lastly, this bill seeks to eliminate the position of a registrar-appointed challenger that may be present at any given polling place at the time of a primary or election.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Denise W. Merrill, Secretary of the State of Connecticut: Secretary Merrill believes that this bill will make it easier for Connecticut residents to participate in democracy and choose their representatives. In particular, Secretary Merrill cites Section 1 of the bill, which would restore voting rights to individuals who are on parole. Currently, Connecticut law allows individuals on probation to exercise their right to vote. Secretary Merrill believes this alleviates any confusion, and at the same time, helps formerly incarcerated individuals reintegrate themselves into their communities. Secretary Merrill's testimony expressed support for the further codification, streamlining and expansion of Connecticut's automatic voter registration. Lastly, Secretary Merrill's testimony identified the challenger designation at polling places on Election Day. She described this designation as antiquated and no longer compatible with Connecticut's modern election infrastructure. Sections 4, 5, 6 and 7 would eliminate the challenger designation.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Cheri Quickmire, Executive Director, Common Cause Connecticut: Common Cause Connecticut believes that all eligible citizens should be registered to vote unless they decline. Expansion of automatic voter registration in Connecticut should expand to the Department of Social Services, HUSKY, Access Health CT, state colleges & universities, and other agencies and programs in the state. Common Cause believes that automatic voter registration will save taxpayer money, improve efficiency, enhance security of our elections and ultimately result in more accuracy within the voter rolls. Additionally, Common Cause emphasized the need to restore voting rights to parolees. By denying parolees the right to vote, the state perpetuates systemic racism, undermines the reintegration of parolees and diminishes the electoral power of communities where parolees reside.

Dominique Johnson: Ms. Johnson's testimony cited Secure Democracy's recent poll, which found that nearly 77% Connecticut voters support efforts to expand automatic voter registration. By transitioning to electronic registration methods, Ms. Johnson stated that municipalities have saved an average of \$3.54 in labor cost for every registration. Ms. Johnson contends that automatic voter registration will enhance the security and integrity of our elections, and reduce the workload for municipal employees by automatically eliminating duplicate registrations and outdated addresses. In terms of extending suffrage to people on parole, Ms. Johnson believes that Connecticut has the most strict criminal disenfranchisement laws in the Northeast. Ms. Johnson emphasized the need for Connecticut to join the 20 other states that already allow people on parole to vote.

Daniel Livingston, State Employees Bargaining Agent Coalition (SEBAC): SEBAC testified that automatic voter registration is imperative in terms of increasing voter participation. In terms of the current bill, SEBAC applauds the provisions in the bill that expand automatic voter registration beyond the Department of Motor Vehicles. SEBAC believes that confining automatic voter registration only to the Department of Motor Vehicles negatively impacts people who might not have the means to own a car or the ability to drive one. SEBAC also highlighted the need to address system racial inequities in our state's criminal justice system, starting with the restoration of voting rights to people on parole.

Kelly McConney Moore, Interim Senior Policy Counsel, American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT): The ACLU-CT views all of the provisions in this bill as necessary for improving access to voting in Connecticut, removing unnecessary barriers, and ultimately strengthening our democracy. In terms of restoring voting rights to people on parole, the ACLU-CT made note of the fact that felony disenfranchisement disproportionately impacts Black Americans. The ACLU-CT contends that felony disenfranchisement is a racist legacy from the Jim Crow era that needs to be removed immediately. The ACLU-CT applauds the provisions in the bill that would remove the requirement that all formerly incarcerated individuals pay all fines before the restoration of voting rights. They believe that this amounts to a form of voter suppression. As it relates to automatic voter registration, ACLU-CT believes that the integration of electronic systems for registration would help ensure that vulnerable groups are able to register to vote without having to physically visit an office in person to register. Lastly, the ACLU-CT identified the challenger position as unnecessary and subject to abuse. Since Connecticut's election administration system already has measures to verify identities and voter eligibility, the ACLU-CT believes that this position is no longer needed.

Sal Luciano, President, Connecticut AFL-CIO: Connecticut AFL-CIO expressed support for restoring voting rights to people on parole. Connecticut's current denial of voting rights to people on parole impacts nearly 3,500 people. Connecticut AFL-CIO contends that criminal disenfranchisement disproportionately impacts vulnerable communities, citing the fact that 1 out of 16 black voters is denied the right to vote because of a felony conviction, compared to 1 out of 59 non-black voters. Connecticut AFL-CIO labeled the current voter registration laws as antiquated. Connecticut AFL-CIO stated that automatic voter registration has wide support in Connecticut and should be expanded beyond just the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Corrine Bolding: Ms. Bolding is a volunteer with CONNPIRG's New Voters Project, a campaign that sought to register youth voters and turn out the youth vote in the 2020 election. She believes that implementing automatic voter registration at various state agencies would simplify the registration process tremendously. Ms. Bolding contends that automatic voter registration would reduce costs, decrease any opportunity for fraud, and ultimately make voting more accessible.

Leyte L. Jefferson and Jaccorbeau M. Terrone: Jefferson and Terrone described themselves as a disabled married couple. Expanding automatic voter registration to include state agencies beyond the Department of Motor Vehicles would make it much easier for elderly and disabled residents who struggle in terms of mobility. Jefferson and Terrone stated that movement outside of the house can often be painful and tiresome. They believe that accommodations should be made to meet the needs of disabled and elderly individuals who wish to participate in democracy. In regards to restoring voting rights to parolees, Jefferson and Terrone emphasized the need to address this system which perpetuates inequalities similar to that seen in a caste system. If an individual has served their full legal sentence, Jefferson and Terrone see no reason for the denial of someone's right to vote.

Regina Griffin: Ms. Griffin expressed support for the bill's provisions that would make it easier for Connecticut citizens to register and vote. She suggested that the bill include language to expand automatic voter registration to state agencies beyond the Department of Motor Vehicles. As it relates to restoring the voting rights of people on parole, Ms. Griffin emphasized that this would help with reintegration into the community. Ms. Griffin cited studies that show a correlation between community integration and a lower probability of recidivism.

Erin O. Crosby, Director of Women's Empowerment and Racial Justice, YWCA

Greenwich: YWCA Greenwich applauded the bill's provisions to codify automatic voter registration at the Department of Motor Vehicles. However, they believe that automatic voter registration must be extended to include other state agencies. YWCA Greenwich contends that Connecticut would have around 245,000 new registrations as a result of the provisions in this bill. Additionally, YWCA Greenwich believes that restoring the right to vote to people on parole is extremely important. Despite the fact that only 12% of Connecticut's population is Black, approximately 42.7% of Connecticut's prisoners are Black. Incarceration disproportionately impacts communities of color and poor people. By restoring voting rights to people on parole, YWCA Greenwich believes that the state will recognize the debt that these individuals have paid, honor their dignity and acknowledge the injustices of our criminal justice system towards people of color and those in poverty.

American Immigration Lawyers, Connecticut Chapter (CT AILA): CT AILA ultimately supports the goals set forth in the bill, however, they believe that revisions must be made to protect noncitizens from any erroneous registration errors. When a noncitizen attempts to register to vote, they can be subject to financial penalties, become ineligible for visas or permanent residency, go to prison and even be deported. That being said, CT AILA believes that language must be incorporated to protect noncitizens from any innocent mistakes that a state agency or noncitizen could have made. CT AILA recommends that the citizenship attestation requirement be preserved and language be included to prohibit any state agency tasked with voter registration from electronically processing or transmitting a registration of a person who fails to certify their citizenship at the time of registration. The testimony submitted by CT AILA contained a series of other recommendations that would protect noncitizens from the penalties they could face as a result of erroneous registration and voting.

Gloria Brown: Ms. Brown's testimony highlighted the stringent nature of Connecticut's criminal disenfranchisement laws. In her testimony, she discussed an individual by the name of Lenny. Lenny had served 25 years in prison, and upon his release, he became employed, received two promotions, became engaged, and recently he bought his own house. By all accounts, Lenny appears to have successfully reintegrated into his community, paying Connecticut income tax and property taxes. However, Lenny cannot vote. Ms. Brown used Lenny's story to highlight the fact that there are many people like Lenny who deserve to have their right to vote reinstated.

Eva Bermudez Zimmerman: Ms. Bermudez Zimmerman testified in support of codifying and expanding voter registration. Not only would this change reduce costs, increase voter participation, and improve the security of our elections, but it would also remove inaccuracies from the voter rolls. As an organizer who has access to the voter lists, Ms. Bermudez Zimmerman recalled an instance where an individual said that he received 10 calls asking for his wife, even though she had died several years ago. Ms. Bermudez Zimmerman stated that updating the voter rolls would mean that voter outreach would be more accurate and less likely to result in painful reminders to people who lost a loved one.

The following organizations submitted testimony in support of SB 5:

Aaron Goode, Founder, New Haven Votes Coalition
Alderman Darryl Brackeen Jr., Chair, Generation Change CT
American Immigration Lawyers, Connecticut Chapter (CT AILA)
Ann Gadwah, Advocacy and Outreach Organizer, Sierra Club Connecticut
Arthur Liman Center for Public Interest Law, Yale Law School
Black and Brown in Action
Bridgeport Generation Now Votes
Carl Chisem, President, Connecticut Employees Union Independent CEUI
Cheri Quickmire, Executive Director, Common Cause Connecticut
Civil Justice Clinic, Quinnipiac University School of Law
Daniel Livingston, State Employees Bargaining Agent Coalition (SEBAC)
Eliza Sweren-Becker, Counsel, Voting Rights & Elections Program, Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law
Erin Crosby, Director of Women's Empowerment and Racial Justice, YWCA Greenwich
Janee Woods Weber, President, Politica CT
John Erlingheuser, Director of Advocacy and Community Outreach, AARP Connecticut

John Murphy, United Auto Workers Local 376 and Connecticut Citizen Action Group
Jonathan Perlo, Co-founder and Steering Committee Member, Voter Choice Connecticut
Julia Z. Wilcox, Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy, Connecticut Community Nonprofit Alliance
Kelly McConney Moore, Interim Senior Policy Counsel, American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT)
Maureen Chalmers, President, Congress of CT Community Colleges
Michele Jacklin, Board Member, Common Cause Connecticut
Molly Norris, Field & Community Engagement Coordinator, Western CT Area Labor Federation
Paula Bacolini, Founder, Make Voting Easy CT
Rochelle Palache, Connecticut State Director, SEIU 32BJ
Sal Luciano, President, Connecticut AFL-CIO
Sarah Ganong, Campaigns Director, Connecticut Working Families
Stacey Zimmerman, Service Employees International Union Connecticut State Council (SEIU-CT)
Stephen Anderson, President, CSEA SEIU Local 2001
Stephen Wanczyk-Karp, LMSW, National Association of Social Workers, Connecticut Chapter
Steve Winter, New Haven Ward 21 Alderman and Steering Committee Member, Voter Choice CT
Tanya Rhodes Smith, Director, Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work, University of Connecticut
Tom Swan, Executive Director, Connecticut Citizen Action Group (CCAG)
Tracey Madden-Hennessey, Executive Director, YWCA New Britain
Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut
Yvonne Senturia, League of Women Voters of Connecticut

The Government Administration and Elections Committee received via email over 120 pieces of testimony in support of HB 6578. They cited reasons similar to those stated in the aforementioned testimonies. All copies of testimony are available on the Committee website under Testimony.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None expressed.

Reported by: Trevor Hoffman

Date: 4-5-21