

Government Administration and Elections Committee
JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-184

AN ACT EXTENDING THROUGH NOVEMBER 8, 2022, SEVERAL CHANGES REGARDING ELECTION ADMINISTRATION AS A RESULT OF COVID-19 AND

Title: CONCERNING ELIGIBILITY TO VOTE BY ABSENTEE BALLOT.

Vote Date: 3/9/2022

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 3/4/2022

File No.: 6

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Government Administration and Elections Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

To extend through November 8, 2022, several changes regarding election administration as a result of COVID-19, and to specify illness as grounds for claiming eligibility to vote by absentee ballot. SB 184 reinstates COVID-19 related provisions and extends them to the 2022 elections held through November 8, 2022 including state elections, primary elections, and referendums. Additionally, the bill authorizes voters to vote by absentee ballot if, during the hours of voting, they are unable to appear at their polling place because of illness other than a voter's own illness and if they are absent in the town of their voting residence during all hours of voting.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Denise Merrill, Secretary of the State:

Secretary Merrill supports SB 184. She states that voters should not have to choose between their health and their right to vote. Secretary Merrill notes that considering the Delta and Omicron variants of COVID-19, the unpredictability of another variant emerging and how fast it may spread, how severe it may be or when it may peak poses a health risk. Additionally, the Supreme Court decided in 2020 and opined in 2021 that the limited extension of absentee voting measures is constitutional and protect public health and suffrage rights during pandemics.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

John Erlingheuser, Associate State Director, AARP Connecticut:

Mr. Erlingheuser and AARP remain concerned about the health risks COVID-19 poses, especially to older adults with health conditions. Conforming absentee ballot voting statutes to the State Constitution would make the statute only as restrictive as the constitution, not more.

Ann Gadwah, Advocacy and Outreach Organizer, Sierra Club Connecticut:

Ms. Gadwah and the Sierra Club support the bill. Ms. Gadwah believes individuals that are still concerned about contracting COVID-19 should be able to vote by absentee ballot. Additionally, the ability to vote determines the future of Connecticut regarding not only health issues but environmental issues as well. Expanded absentee ballot voting allows more people to have a voice in how health and environmental issues are resolved.

Jonathan Perloe, Co-founder, Voter Choice Connecticut:

Mr. Perloe supports the bill because it allows people to protect their health during a COVID-19 surge. Mr. Perloe notes that risk of fraud regarding absentee ballot voting is baseless. He references a State Elections and Enforcement Commission report which found zero incidences of absentee ballot voter fraud during the 2020 general elections.

Kathleen Callahan, Chair of National Association of Social Workers, CT Chapter:

Ms. Callahan supports SB 184. Expanded absentee ballot voting is important due to uncertainties of health and the schedules of voters. She considers failure of allowing the use of COVID-19 as an excuse to vote by absentee ballot as a restriction on voting.

Jess Zaccagnino, Policy Counsel, American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut:

Ms. Zaccagnino and the ACLU support the bill. Ms. Zaccagnino finds the expansion of absentee ballot voting encouraging due to limited voting options that harm voters of color. She stats that the expansion decreases delays at the polls and protects the health of voters.

Yanidsi Velez, New England Regional Director, Hispanic Federation:

Ms. Velez and the Hispanic Federation support the bill. The Federation advocates for Latinos, people of color, single mothers, and for others that are historically underrepresented and face unique barriers to voting. Ms. Velez notes that barriers include employers not being required to provide time off on election day and longer wait times for in-person voting in urban areas, as well as a lack of bilingual poll workers and lack of transportation to polling locations. Absentee ballot voting seeks to remove such barriers.

Kathleen Flaherty, Executive Director, CT Legal Rights Project:

Ms. Flaherty supports the bill. She notes that the expansion of absentee ballot voting during the past two years has allowed for additional access to voting for individuals with disabilities who may not have qualified under pre-pandemic rules. Ms. Flaherty supports the extension of the COVID-19 provisions.

Ed Hawthorne, President, Connecticut AFL-CIO:

Mr. Hawthorne supports the bill and notes that the United States has one of the lowest voting rates in the developed world. He believes that SB 184 would protect the health of voters and hopes to replicate the 2020 historic turnout of voters during the 2022 election.

Patricia Rossi, Advocacy Vice President, League of Women Voters of Connecticut:

Ms. Rossi supports the bill due to the uncertainty of future COVID-19 variants and their levels of infection. She adds that rules for the 2022 general election must be determined now so that elections officials across the state can plan for a successful election.

The following individuals submitted testimony in support of SB-184. They cited reasons similar to those stated in the aforementioned testimonies:

Ann Speyer, Secretary, New Britain Area League of Women Voters
Bernard Thomas, Executive Director, Hartford Knights Youth Organization
Sarah Ganong, CT Working Families Organization
Cheri Quickmire, Executive Director, Common Cause CT
Travis Woodward, President, CSEA SEIU Local 2001
Universal Health Care Foundation
Service Employees International Union
Alan Zinser
Jane Zande
Elise Williamson
Susan Wilson
Jeremy Williams
Gayle Walter
Claire Walsh
Kathleen Voldstad
Roseann Ventimiglia
Alisa Trachtenberg

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Anne Manusky, President, CT Republican Assembly:

Ms. Manusky and the CT Republican Assembly oppose the bill. Ms. Manusky believes that the Connecticut Constitution should not be modified to expand the definition of sickness. She references 12 complaints submitted to the State Elections Enforcement Commission regarding absentee ballot application matters. Additionally, Ms. Manusky in her argument references the federal indictment of Michael DeFillipo of Bridgeport for tampering with absentee ballot applications.

Mary Atkinson:

Ms. Atkinson believes that mail in ballots are inherently conducive to fraud. She stated that she could have easily voted on behalf of her daughter during the 2020 elections. Ms. Atkinson

added that the purpose of absentee ballots is to enable illegitimate votes to counter or alter an election outcome.

Charles Baugh:

Mr. Baugh opposes the bill and argues voting should be done in person and verified with valid government issued identification. He believes that criteria for absentee ballot voting must return to pre-pandemic provisions and COVID-19 should no longer be an acceptable reason for absentee ballot voting.

Tyler Young:

Mr. Young opposes SB 184 because the change in eligibility is a blatant way for allowing the occurrence of fraud. He added that requiring photo identification to vote is not a deterrent.

Christy Wooldridge:

Ms. Wooldridge believes that expanding absentee ballot voting circumvents the Connecticut Constitution. He believes that the only original provisions in the constitution should remain as an eligible excuse for absentee voting.

The following individuals submitted testimony in opposition of SB-184. They cited reasons similar to those stated in the aforementioned testimonies"

Laura Krout
Jennifer Albert
Dawn Balda
James Bednarz
Lisa Blore
Mary Zlotnick
Zheyu Yang
Jacqueline Weiss
Linda Warren
Toni Violette
Michael Vagnini
Kristen Turkosz
Katrina Toce

Reported by: Val Mehmeti

Date: 3/9/2022