

Government Administration and Elections Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-1515

Title: AN ACT CONCERNING ELECTION ADMINISTRATION OVERSIGHT.

Vote Date: 3/26/2025

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 3/21/2025

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Government Administration and Elections Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

There has been a growing concern over ensuring the government is transparent and held accountable in the election process. There is a perceived gap in current election oversight frameworks to support municipalities with their elections. This bill would seek to establish a Municipal Election Accountability Board to support municipalities in the administration of their elections using a tiered system of assistance. This would allow for a targeted response for a municipality's need for assistance.

SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:

The substitute language makes technical changes to the board appointments, defines how a quorum is classified, Gives subpoena power to the board among other technical changes. This was done to provide clarity on the language and the specific powers that the board has.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Stephanie Thomas, Secretary of the State, Connecticut:

This bill establishes the Municipal Election Accountability Board that will consist of a 15-member bipartisan board that will meet monthly. The board will address a gap in the current election oversight framework of accountability and support for municipalities and their challenges in administering elections. With the emphasis on early intervention and support for municipal election officials, municipalities will be able to conduct their elections in a professional and accurate manner. The board will receive referrals regarding election

administration violations, investigate irregularities, hold review hearings, and determine if intervention is necessary. If issues are found, there is a four-Tiered system for dealing with the municipalities. They are as follows:

- Tier 1: Municipality receives training and best practice resources.
- Tier 2: Increased training, oversight, and compliance monitoring.
- Tier 3: Appointment of an election monitor with investigative authority.
- Tier 4: Complete administration by the Board of any election.

This bill takes a step toward achieving the goal of maintaining the public's confidence in the electoral system.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Ann Reed, Vice President for Advocacy, League of Women Voters Connecticut:

The League of Women Voters supports establishing a Municipal Election Accountability Board to address the gaps in the current election framework. Between the SotS and SEEC authority, there is a gray area that faces challenges in administering elections. The Board will provide early intervention and support for municipal officials.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Randy Collins, Associate Director of Public Policy and Advocacy, CCM:

Election integrity is one of the most important responsibilities of local government. We appreciate the intent of the bill but cannot support it as drafted. The bill creates a board similar to one that already exists to provide oversight to municipalities in financial distress. The four-tier system would mandate increased levels of training and may lead to the complete administration of elections by the board. The language is vague as to what constitutes a violation, and it does not specify how long a municipality maybe subjected to this oversight. Municipalities run thousands of elections and referendums without issue. Specific cases of impropriety or illegal actions should be handled on a case-by-case basis rather than creating a new oversight board.

Sue Larson, Registrar of Voters, South Windsor. ROVAC:

This bill was raised last year where we expressed our concerns and requested additional clarification. Our concerns were not addressed, and we still oppose the bill as written. Registrars have seen many changes in election laws in the past few years. We are concerned that this bill is another vehicle for campaigns, individuals, and others to bring up issues to SEEC not doing what they want. The committee will compose of 9 members that work with elections on a regular basis and that should include Town Clerks and Registrars. We are still looking for definitions of the tiered offenses. Our final concern is the legal expenses that may occur and if Registrars will have to hire their own attorneys.

The following testified that the Municipal Election Accountability Board should be comprised of voters and election law experts rather than elected officials. There is no transparent benefit to the voter in this bill.

Jess Zaccagnino, Policy Council, ACLU-CT

Callie Heilmann, Co-Director, Bridgeport Generation

GENERAL COMMENTS:

Samuel Gold, Executive Director, Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments:

The proposed bill does not mention the Regional Election Advisors and how they would work in concert with the proposed Municipal election Accountability Board. Will the new board be training municipal registrars in absentee ballot changes, implementing curbside voting, or translation of municipal voting materials? We ask that you revisit the act to allow participating COGs to receive funding for Regional Election Advisors.

Reported by: Pamela Bianca

Date: April 1, 2025