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Connecticut Needs to Modernize its Elections

By Denise Merrill

I write to dispute several statements made by Republican-American writers, and to unequivocally make a case for why Connecticut needs to modernize the way we administer elections.

A Jan. 30 "Brass Tacks" item claimed I, as secretary of the state, said unaffiliated voters had until Jan. 24 to affiliate with the Republican Party to vote in the April 24 presidential primary election. In fact, my office clearly stated Jan. 23 that voters enrolled in another party — such as Democrats, Independents, Greens or Constitution Party members — had until three months before the primary to switch parties to Republican if they wanted to vote for a Republican presidential candidate on April 24. That deadline, under state law, was Jan. 24. (Editor's note: A correction was published Jan. 31.)

I also clearly stated that unaffiliated voters — by far our state's largest voting bloc — could affiliate with the Republicans any time between now and April 23 in time to cast ballots in the Republican primary April 24. Any unaffiliated voters who want a say in a primary absolutely should affiliate with a party to vote in that primary. I always encourage unaffiliated voters to take that step because my goal is and will forever be to maximize voter participation.

More importantly, the implication that the timing of my announcement was somehow meant to discourage Republican primary turnout is untrue, irresponsible and insulting to the intelligence of voters in Connecticut. I take my responsibility as Connecticut's chief elections official very seriously, and I will make every effort to keep our state's voters informed about approaching election deadlines and opportunities to cast ballots.

The reforms I have brought forth in my first year in office passed with near unanimous bipartisan consensus in the legislature. Republicans such as Senate Minority Leader John McKinney publicly thanked me for taking responsibility for our elections by making sure every polling place in our state has enough ballots, and that emergency plans are in place if something goes wrong. House Minority Leader Larry Cafero agreed with me that voters need more non-precinct-place options to cast ballots, whether through early voting or more flexible absentee-ballot options. Our election system needs to modernize and be flexible to accommodate the increasing number of voters who

face long commutes and busier lives.

Every adult citizen in Connecticut has a constitutional right to vote. It is not a privilege that needs to be earned, as the Jan. 28 editorial "Easier to vote, harder to govern" seems to suggest. Remember, our American government derives its power from the consent of all of the governed, not merely the consent of those who have enough time or flexibility in their schedule to register before Election Day and get to their local school or church to cast a ballot in person.

The notion that I as a registered Democrat am just trying to inflate the number of votes for my party through a proposal such as Election Day registration is laughable. This is an idea that has been proposed and championed by Republicans and Democrats throughout our country with a clear result of increasing voter participation. I cannot imagine how anyone would think getting more eligible voters to exercise their right to vote would be a bad idea.

If Election Day registration were such a boon to Democrats, then why has it been adopted successfully in red states such as Montana, Wyoming, North Carolina, New Hampshire and Idaho? In Iowa, Republican leaders successfully pushed to enact the measure last year to boost turnout for the recently held Iowa presidential caucuses. In Maine, Election Day registration is so popular, when a new governor and legislature recently banned the practice, that law was repealed last year by nearly 60 percent of Maine voters.

The reforms Gov. Dannel P. Malloy and I have proposed are about modernization, efficiency, and cutting costs for municipalities. We already have strong safeguards over the security and integrity of our elections. And yes, when it comes to voting, we will always favor inclusion over exclusion.

Denise Merrill is Secretary of the State for Connecticut.