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We Can't Let Myths Block People from Voting

By Denise Merrill

Change is never easy, especially in the Land of Steady Habits. Yet those of us who administer elections can no longer continue to ignore the facts: Voting in Connecticut is too costly, rigid and complicated and not enough people are voting.

When one in three eligible voters in Connecticut does not even register to vote, I call that a crisis of low voter participation. In the last municipal election in 2011, we saw voter turnout in some towns as low as 5 to 10 percent of registered voters.

Call me naive, but as secretary of the state I refuse to give up on a third of our population and just accept the fact that they won't vote.

We need to do everything we can to make elections accessible to our citizens, who have a right to choose their government leaders.

Times and technology have changed in ways that allow us to include busy, mobile citizens who may also be late deciders and don't register to vote before Election Day. And we can make it possible — without spending any additional state dollars or compromising the security and integrity of elections — for eligible voters with a driver's license to register online from any computer or mobile device. This means we can easily reach those potential voters who prefer to use modern technology rather than fill out a registration card, send it in or take it in person to their town offices before the election.

Still, some who fear change have attempted to distort the public discourse to protect the status quo. I want to correct several misstatements I have heard and ensure the debate over modernizing elections in Connecticut is grounded in fact, not skewed by myths designed to stoke baseless fears.

Myth: Enacting Election Day registration will increase the risk of voter fraud.

The facts: Though the term "voter fraud" is thrown around with abandon, it is virtually nonexistent. In fact, a quick look back at the past 15 years in Connecticut shows only one single case where anyone was actually charged with trying to impersonate a voter or vote in more than one location on Election Day. Several states have had Election Day registration in place for decades without any pattern of increased fraud or abuse. The one thing that has increased in those states is voter turnout.

We have very strong election security in Connecticut. Every voter must provide multiple layers of identifying information when they register, which can be verified in numerous ways. Every voter must also sign under penalty of false statement that he or she is a U.S. citizen and that the information they have entered is true and accurate. I believe the reforms Gov. Dannel P. Malloy and I propose will make voter lists more accurate because the voter's information is entered directly into our centralized voter registration system on the spot, and the registrar of voters can check to see if the person is already registered in another municipality. Those registering online will enter their information themselves, cutting down on the chance that a misspelling or a typo will disenfranchise a voter.

Myth: Election Day registration does not require voters to present identification when going to cast a ballot.

The facts: This is a plainly false statement. Voters who register on Election Day in Connecticut will — in accordance with our existing voter identification laws — need to provide either a government-issued photo ID or a bank statement, utility bill, paycheck or bank check that shows their name and address.

One of the more outrageous statements I have heard: if someone can't bother to register a week or two before our elections, then they don't deserve to vote. Why should we lift a finger to include these people in our elections?

That question needs to be flipped on its head: Every single one of our approximately 2.5 million eligible voters in Connecticut has a right to vote. It is NOT a privilege that needs to be earned. People are busy. They procrastinate. Or they try to register on time and the system fails them due to human error. The question really is: Why shouldn't we do everything in our power to make the right to vote easy to use for every citizen entitled to cast a ballot?

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