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Let Voters Have a Say About Voting

By Denise Merrill

Lawmakers in Connecticut's General Assembly are considering a change to our state constitution that could have a great impact on your ability to cast a ballot in upcoming elections in a way that fits better into your life.

According to U.S. Census data, more than 1.2 million people in Connecticut commute to jobs outside the town they live in. The largest number of commuters in Connecticut -- not surprisingly -- live in Fairfield County.

The number of people commuting to work and back every day is increasing, as is the average commute time. More people are spending more time driving longer distances -- or taking public transportation -- to work.

How does this impact voting and elections? Right now, the options for casting a ballot in an election in Connecticut are very limited.

Written into our state's constitution is language that expressly states that a registered voter must vote in-person on Election Day at their polling place, except for a very narrow set of reasons.

Voters must attest under penalty of false statement that they are applying for an absentee ballot for one of these reasons. The constitutional language even prevents the General Assembly from adjusting how we vote to institute more flexible voting options.

For many who commute, making plans to get to their polling place on Election Day proves very cumbersome to near impossible.

Yet, their reason for not being able to vote in-person -- their commute -- does not fit into the sanctioned reasons codified for the use of an absentee ballot.

So the consequence -- unless voters want to sign a false statement -- is that many potential voters just don't bother to register or cast ballots.

In fact, census figures show us that one in three eligible voters in Connecticut does not even register to vote.

There are many reasons for this, but one thing is certain: elections in Connecticut need to more accessible, cheaper and more flexible.

We need to embrace the concept of what those of us in the election administration business call "non-precinct place voting" -- in other words, finding ways to cast a ballot that do not require a voter to go to their polling place on Election Day.

What does this look like? Some 35 other states have already opened up their voting process to include concepts like early voting, mail-in voting, and absentee ballots you don't need a reason to use.

These measures have the advantage of reducing the administrative costs of elections, providing voters with more flexible options to cast a ballot and reducing the foot traffic and the pressure on poll workers to handle large crowds on Election Day.

Last fall, Connecticut faced a devastating snow storm that knocked out electricity to nearly one million residents of our state. I took many calls from local elections officials and voters asking if some residents in their town who could not make it to the polls could use absentee ballots because their street was impassable or they were stuck in a shelter.

As our chief elections officer in Connecticut, I had to tell them no. It was heartbreaking.

In fact, a spouse caring for an ailing husband or wife cannot use an absentee ballot if they want to vote without leaving their spouse's bedside. That is wrong and needs to change.

Those of us who administer elections need to think of voters of Connecticut as our customers; we should serve them as well as we can. This might take a little more work on our end, but the end result is worth it -- maximizing voter participation and empowering our voters to take more ownership of their government is what we all should strive for.

House Joint Resolution 2 would put a Constitutional question on the ballot this fall removing the restrictions on absentee ballot voting. Although no change would happen immediately, ratification of this amendment by voters would empower our General Assembly to open up our voting process next year and make it more flexible and useable for the busy, mobile voters of Connecticut.

We need the support of 75 percent of the General Assembly to put this question on the ballot this fall.
Call your state legislator and tell them to let the voters have a say in how we vote.

Denise Merrill is Connecticut's Secretary of the State