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FIXING OUR ELECTIONS REQUIRES MAJOR CHANGE

By Denise W. Merrill

When it comes to elections in Connecticut, our mantra has been “no news is good news.” Meaning, when things go right, we focus on the results, the candidates, the issues, and why voters made the choices they did. We only focus on the mechanics of elections when something goes horribly wrong.

This is not just true of Connecticut. Think of the education America received about hanging chads, butterfly ballots, and vote-counting standards in the wake of the disputed 2000 presidential election in Florida.

The serious problems experienced by voters that day in Florida opened all of our eyes to systemic problems because we realized that without certain basic, national standards, what happened in Florida could happen in any state. Even though Connecticut didn't experience problems like Florida in 2000, we understood that Congressional action was needed to enact uniform standards for voting in the country. That was – to quote the recent editorial of this newspaper – ‘major surgery’ for the entire nation.

Connecticut faces a similar situation today. For two state elections in a row, Connecticut made national news due to serious inadequacies in local election preparations that led to voters being turned away from the polls on Election Day. It happened in Bridgeport in 2010 and it happened again in Hartford in 2014 when that city's registrars failed to produce and distribute voter lists to the polling places before Election Day. Issues have arisen in locations throughout the state in recent years, in large towns and small, suburban and urban. It's time to act.

Connecticut has a unique form of election management that dates back some 100 years: each town is required to have TWO registrars of voters, one nominated by each of the two major parties. Since they are selected to run in each of their towns, but not against each other, they are effectively assured of election and being seated.

Despite this odd selection process (NO other state has two registrars per town; no other state allows the two parties to select), local registrars are on the whole a diligent and hard working group who care a great deal about voters and democracy.

But there are no basic professional qualifications to be a registrar of voters – a position that is tightly regulated at the state and federal level, and a position that requires more and more technical expertise. We have numerous reports of registrars in communities all over the state who don't follow the law, refuse to adapt to modern technology, or even behave unprofessionally towards each other including verbal and physical altercations. It is increasingly difficult to manage the situation, and will only become worse as we try to implement needed new technologies. Since registrars are elected, towns can do little to resolve disputes or even require regular hours. Complaints about the election process can be filed with the State Election Enforcement commission, but they act only after the fact, and it can take years to resolve disputes.

My proposal before the General Assembly is simple – make each Registrar of Voters a single, professional municipal employee hired by the city or town to manage election administration. Establish minimum professional qualifications such as a college degree or some years of relevant experience. Let cities and towns choose the best person for the job, not just the most loyal political soldier. Mandate that registrars be certified, follow all state and federal laws, and complete yearly training provided by our office to keep up to date with the latest technology.

Our current mandate of registrars from opposing political parties in every town creates confusion and conflict, and has outlived its usefulness. Anyone who has ever managed a business or government service knows that having two people both in charge means neither is in charge.

Let the towns manage, let my office train and certify local officials, and find other ways to ensure that partisanship does not influence our elections. Can 49 other states really be wrong about this?

Contrary to the opinion of the Montville registrar of voters, I seek to strengthen – not “demolish” – our democratic system. My goal is to have the very best election administration in the country, one where voters will have faith that their right to vote is secure and elections are fair.

Denise W. Merrill is the Connecticut's Secretary of the State.