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GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE DISCUSSES MOTOR- VOTER REGISTRATION SYSTEM

HARTFORD: Connecticut Secretary of the State Denise Merrill was joined by scholars, good government groups and officials to push for a streamlined motor-voter registration system at the legislature. The groundbreaking proposal would make Connecticut a national leader by automatically registering people who transact with the Department of Motor Vehicles to vote.

Secretary Merrill said, "Democracy is who we are as a state and a nation. Yet our voter registration system is unnecessarily complicated and difficult for people to use. We have made it easier with Election Day and online voter registration but we can do more to bring our electoral system even further into the 21st century. A streamlined motor-voter system is, bar none, the most important action we can take to improve the functioning of democracy in our state."

The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 requires the DMV to give people the opportunity to register to vote when the agency carries out a transaction. The agency is also required to send the voter registration to the appropriate official at the local level. This proposal would streamline the process by automatically taking the customer's information and filling out an electronic voter registration form. The customer would be given an opportunity to decline to be registered and if that person chooses to proceed he or she will be asked to affirm identity, attest to citizenship, choose to affiliate with a party (or not) and sign. That information will then be electronically transmitted to an elections official, which is exactly how the existing online voter registration functions.

Similar types of programs—though different—are already in operation in Delaware and Oregon and in the process of being implemented in California.

The proposal could bring as many as 400,000 new voters onto the rolls in Connecticut. In addition, the savings on printing, postage and labor have saved hundreds of thousands of dollars per year in other jurisdictions and saved time in voter registration transactions at the DMV.

A number of advocates for democracy and good government submitted testimony in support of the bill. Portions of the testimony are included below.

Damon L. Daniels, Campaigns and Outreach Associate, Demos:

“This legislation takes meaningful strides to modernize voter registration for the way we live now, transforming voter registration from a barrier to a gateway to civic engagement.”

Jennifer L. Clark, Counsel, Democracy Program Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law:

“Automatic registration will improve the accuracy of the voter rolls: Paper forms require reading often illegible handwriting and performing tedious data entry, both of which introduce errors to the rolls. Automatic registration would eliminate that problem by transferring voter information electronically. Election officials have consistently reported to us that electronically transferred information leads to cleaner and more accurate rolls than a paper-based system.”

Gloria Bent, President League of Women Voters Connecticut:

“Automatic Voter registration through the DMV is being implemented in states across the country because it is more efficient, more secure, and more economical than many earlier methods. A study done by the Social Sciences Research Council indicated that one-third of election administration budgets across the board go to the costs associated with paper driven voter registration. States that have taken the time and made the initial investment in implementing Automatic Voter Registration through the DMV have experienced significant long-term savings.”

Bilal Dabir Sekou, Ph.D., Chair, Common Cause in Connecticut:

“Automatic voter registration will be more efficient for voters and election administrators, and will make voter lists more accurate. It will also allow organizations and campaigns to, rather than spend resources and time on voter registration, focus on educating voters and getting them to the voting booth.”