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**Secretary of the State of Connecticut**

## **Connecticut Voters on Early Voting and Expanding Access to Absentee Ballots to All Voters Without An Excuse**

As the General Assembly prepares to debate several election administration reforms designed to expand access to the ballot box and encourage voter participation, a recent public opinion poll of Connecticut voters underscores voters' support for allowing voters to conveniently cast their ballots by the method of their choice. In both this poll and in the 2020 Election, voters clearly communicated their desire to have multiple alternatives to voting in-person on Election Day.

### **Poll Information**

**The public opinion poll shows clear voter support for expanded access to voting options beyond in-person voting in a polling place on Election Day, and other voting reforms such as secure absentee ballot drop boxes, automatic voter registration, and secure on-line absentee ballot applications.**

Survey USA conducted an on-line survey of 808 registered Connecticut voters between January 11 and January 17 2021 for the Secure Democracy. The pool of respondents was weighted to US Census targets for gender, age, race, and home ownership. The Margin of Error of this poll is +/- 4.3%.

Conducted after the 2020 election was complete and the results were certified, the poll explored Connecticut registered voters' interest in potential reforms to election administration.

The overarching result from the poll is that Connecticut voters, regardless of political affiliation, age, race, income, or ideology want expanded access to the ballot box to make their voices heard.

### **Background and the 2020 Election**

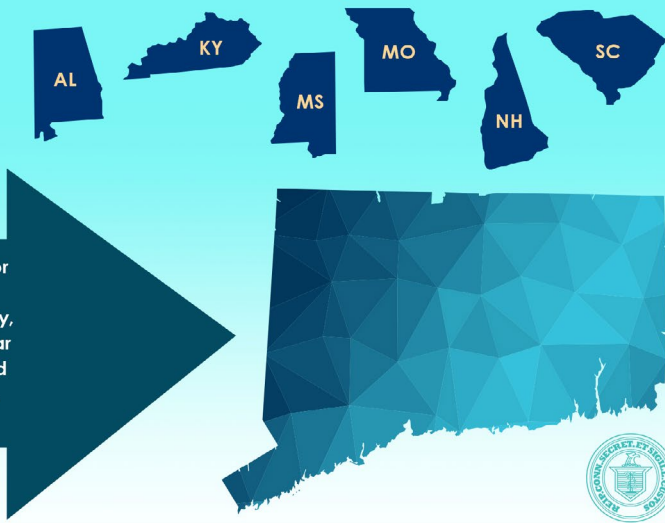
Connecticut is one of only seven states (along with Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, and South Carolina) that does not allow their voters to cast their ballots prior to Election Day without an excuse, is one of sixteen states that require an excuse in order for a voter to receive an absentee ballot, and has among the most restrictive excuse statutes in the country (Connecticut neither allows voters over a certain age or voters whose work shift encompasses all the hours of voting to qualify to receive an absentee ballot; eight of the sixteen states allow voters over a certain age to receive an absentee ballot and nine of the sixteen allow voters whose work shift encompasses all the hours of voting to qualify to receive an absentee ballot). In Connecticut, the prohibitions against both Early Voting and expanded access to absentee ballots without an excuse are enshrined in the State Constitution, making these reforms more difficult to implement than they have been in other states.

The restrictive nature of Connecticut's constitution and statutes has led to a relatively low rate of votes cast by absentee ballot. In a typical election year only roughly 6-8% of ballots are absentee ballots and the rest are cast in-person in a polling place on Election Day. In 2016, roughly 127,000 of the close to 1.7 million votes cast were absentee ballots, a rate of only 7.5%.

## Connecticut

1 of only 7 States to require voters to vote in-person on Election Day unless they have an excuse.

Only Excuses: Absence from the city or town of which they are inhabitants or because of sickness, physical disability, the tenets of their religion forbid secular activity, active service in the US Armed Forces, or a poll worker. (Conn. Const., art. 6, § 7; Conn. Gen. Stat. § 9-135)



The COVID-19 pandemic upended Connecticut's system of election administration and laid bare the inflexibility of our election laws. Facing a virus that passes by direct, person-to-person contact, rendering polling places potentially dangerous for voters and poll workers alike, Secretary of the State Denise Merrill worked with the Office of the Governor and the legislative leadership to implement an emergency system in which voters would be able to use "COVID-19" as a valid excuse to receive an

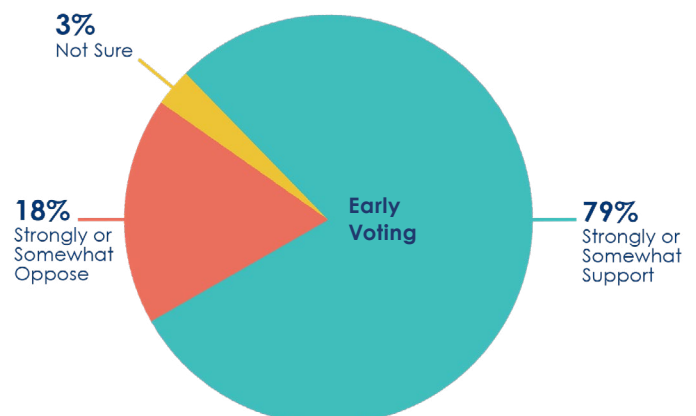
absentee ballot in 2020. Voters enthusiastically embraced this opportunity – of the more than 1.8 million votes cast, almost 700,000 were absentee ballots. Slightly more than 35% of the total votes cast were cast by absentee ballot.

Voters also embraced another new (to Connecticut) innovation that was temporarily available because of COVID-19 – the cut's absentee ballots had always been delivered in-person in local Town Clerks' offices or by mail. In 2020, Town Clerks' offices were largely closed or limited to appointments and well-publicized issues with the U.S. Postal Service combined with tight timelines in Connecticut law made using the mail an unattractive option. Secretary Merrill used federal CARES Act funding specifically

appropriated by Congress to purchase secure absentee ballot drop boxes and to distribute at least one and as many as four to each of Connecticut's 169 towns. Anecdotally, reports from Town Clerks across the state indicated that the majority of absentee ballots were delivered via the secure drop boxes for the 2020 general election.

## Ensuring Access to Early Voting

The poll found widespread support for allowing voters to choose to vote in-person early, prior to Election Day – with 79% of respondents supporting Early Voting. This support was consistent across gender (79% of males and 78% of females), race (79% of white voters, 81% of black voters, and 78% of Hispanic voters), and age (84% of voters 18-34, 78% of voters 35-49, 72% of voters 50-64, and 84% of voters 65 and up).



8 of the 16 States allow voters over a certain age to receive an Absentee Ballot.

9 of the 16 States allow voters whose work shift encompasses all the hours of voting to qualify to receive an Absentee Ballot.

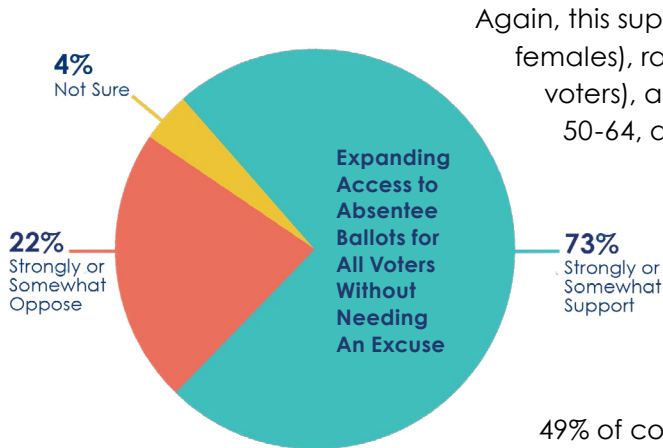
Only CT, AR, MA, MO, and NY do not provide an excuse for voters over a certain age or for voters whose work shift is during all the hours of voting.

Despite a highly polarized electorate in general, Early Voting is embraced by a majority of voters regardless of political party. 69% of Republicans, 86% of Democrats, 79% of unaffiliated voters support allowing early, in-person voting.

Neither ideology nor support for a presidential candidate in 2020 impacted support for Early Voting, with 66% of conservatives, 84% of moderates, 89% of liberals, 68% of Trump voters, and 88% of Biden voters in support.

## Expanding Access to Absentee Ballots for All Voters Without Needing An Excuse

As with Early Voting, Connecticut voters broadly support allowing voters to vote by absentee ballot without needing an excuse or to vote in-person in a polling place on Election Day. 73% of Connecticut voters support giving all voters the option to vote by absentee ballot while keeping polling places open for voters who choose to vote in-person in a polling place on Election Day.



Again, this support was consistent across gender (69% of males and 78% of females), race (70% of white voters, 81% of black voters, and 82% of Hispanic voters), and age (79% of voters 18-34, 71% of voters 35-49, 68% of voters 50-64, and 75% of voters 65 and up).

Unsurprisingly, considering that the accessibility of absentee ballots was a prominent campaign issue in 2020, and after, there is a larger gap in support across partisan, ideological, and presidential support lines. Despite that, expanded access to absentee ballots is still supported by 48% of Republicans (compared to 75% of unaffiliated voters and 89% of Democrats), 49% of conservatives (compared to 78% of moderates and 96% of liberals), and 44% of Trump voters (compared to 92% of Biden voters).

## Current Status of Early Voting and Expanded Access to Absentee ballots

The Connecticut General Assembly passed a constitutional amendment that would allow Early Voting in 2019 with a simple majority, so that amendment needs to pass again in order to be on the 2022 ballot for the voters to decide. The constitutional amendment that would expand access to Absentee ballots for all voters without an excuse will be voted on for the first time this year. If it were to pass both the House and the Senate with a 75% super majority, it would go on the 2022 ballot for the voters decide, and if it passed with a simple majority it would need to pass again in 2023 or 2024 before going on the 2024 ballot for the voters to decide.

## Making Registering and Voting More Convenient for All Voters

Connecticut voters also expressed clear support for removing obstructions to voters registering to vote and casting their ballots. A wide array of election administration reforms that would make registering and voting more convenient for Connecticut voters garnered strong support in the opinion poll.

Connecticut voters strongly support secure ballot drop boxes, a convenient, contactless way for voters to deliver their absentee ballots themselves so they do not have to rely on the postal service. 79% of Connecticut voters support providing secure ballot drop boxes for voters to drop off their absentee ballots, including 82% of voters aged 18-34, 84% of voters over age 65, 58% of Republicans, 80% of unaffiliated voters, and 84% of Democrats, and both voters who live in cities (80%) and voters who live in rural areas (77%).

Currently, Connecticut voters must request an absentee ballot from their Town Clerk in writing with an original signature. 66% of Connecticut voters support allowing voters to request an absentee ballot through a secure website, with 76% of voters aged 18-34, 67% of unaffiliated voters, and 71% of moderate voters in favor.

Under current Connecticut law, not only are Connecticut voters required to have an excuse in order to vote by absentee ballot, but they also have no way to fix any mistakes that would invalidate that ballot (for example, failing to sign the inner envelope). 79% of voters support allowing local election officials to notify voters of disqualifying mistakes and giving them the opportunity to fix those mistakes, including 86% of voters aged 18-34, 84% of voters aged 65 and up, 70% of Republicans, and 79% of unaffiliated voters.

77% of Connecticut voters support making voter registration easier through Automatic Voter Registration at the Connecticut DMV and other state agencies. This support is consistent across party lines (64% of Republicans, 76% of unaffiliated voters, and 88% of Democrats), ideology (66% of conservatives, 70% of moderates, and 93% of liberals), and all demographic groups (notably 83% of voters under 50 and 84% of both black voters and Hispanic voters).

Finally, 66% of voters support allowing voters on parole to regain their right to vote, just as voters on probation do. Once again, this support cuts across party (52% of Republicans, 61% of unaffiliated voters, and 78% of Democrats) and ideological (53% of conservatives, 69% of moderates, and 83% of liberals) lines, as well as demographic groups (notably 77% of voters under 50, 90% of black voters, and 67% of Hispanic voters).

## Conclusion

Voters from across the political spectrum, from every age bracket, and from all demographic groups agree – they want the choice to vote in-person before Election Day, by absentee ballot without needing an excuse, or in-person in a polling place on Election Day. Voters also are in strong support of common-sense election reforms that would make registering to vote and casting a ballot more convenient for every voter.



Using federal funds from the CARES Act, Connecticut Secretary of the State Denise Merrill purchased secure Absentee ballot drop boxes, allowing voters a safe, secure, and convenient way to deliver their Absentee ballots themselves without having to rely on the post office. Each town was given at least one secure drop box, and larger towns had as many as four and, anecdotally, the majority of Absentee ballots were delivered via the secure drop boxes rather than through the mail. The legislature passed a statute allowing these drop boxes to be used on a temporary basis in 2022, but the legislature would need to act to make them permanent.