

Connecticut Needs Early Voting Options

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We had a very smooth Election Day on Nov. 6, which was a mini-miracle since our state suffered serious damage and power outages as a result of Storm Sandy just a week before the election. I am grateful to our registrars of voters and town clerks who worked tirelessly under challenging conditions — for the second year in a row — to make sure our state's more than 2 million active, registered voters could get to polls and cast ballots.

We had a very healthy voter turnout of 74 percent of registered voters last November — that means nearly 1.6 million Connecticut voters cast ballots on Election Day. But we can and must do better.

The one consistent complaint we heard was that lines at the polls were just too long — in some cases it took up to an hour or 90 minutes of waiting in line to cast a ballot. Although these wait times were too long, they were not nearly as long as the waits of four to five hours that were being reported in states such as Florida, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Colorado.

In some cases, towns cut the number of polling places significantly, which can represent substantial municipal cost savings. But with a high-turnout election, fewer polling places meant much larger crowds of voters per precinct — especially between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. on Election Day.

My takeaway from our last election: If long lines are the problem, then our lawmakers can and should take one simple step in the current legislative session toward modernizing our elections — pass a constitutional amendment, proposed by Gov. Dannel P. Malloy and me, that would open the door — finally — to early voting in Connecticut.

In Florida, more than 8 million citizens voted in the 2012 election, with a full 30 percent casting their ballots before Election Day. Ohio saw similar percentages. In fact, nationwide it is estimated that more than 32 million American voters cast their ballots early before Election Day — nearly 25 percent of the entire electorate. More than 30 states allow citizens to cast ballots early through regional early voting centers or no-excuse absentee ballots that voters can obtain without having to state a reason. All over this country, it seems, in red and blue states, voters have the opportunity to vote early — but not in Connecticut.

Here in the Land of Steady Habits, we still have language written into our constitution that requires citizens to vote in their polling place on Election Day, except for specific situations when one may obtain an absentee ballot — illness, physical disability or injury, status as a poll worker, active duty military service, absence from the voting district on Election Day, or religious tenets forbidding secular activity on Election Day.

This language is archaic, overly restrictive, and does not even permit our lawmakers to adjust our election laws and make them more progressive as the majority of states have done. And this outdated language also contributes to Election Day bottlenecks that can frustrate voters just trying to cast a ballot. It is long past time for a change.

We need change for another reason. In 2011 and 2012, we saw major storms just before Election Day. Severe weather made many roads impassable, and people could not get to their polling places. They were stuck in their homes or displaced into shelters. But because they were not out of town, they were not legally entitled to use an absentee ballot, and faced the choice of real hardship in order to cast a ballot, or being forced to sit out an election and therefore be disenfranchised from their right to vote. First responders, National Guard personnel and utility workers faced similar hurdles.

This is wrong. Connecticut needs to catch up to the rest of the states where elections accommodate voters' busy, hectic and unpredictable lives by either opening up multiple days of voting before Election Day, or making our absentee ballots more flexible for voters to use — or both.

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