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SECRETARY OF THE STATE
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GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE HOLDS HEARING ON EARLY VOTING

HARTFORD: Connecticut Secretary of the State Denise Merrill urged lawmakers to allow Connecticut to join 38 other jurisdictions that permit voters to cast a ballot early. She argued that early voting would give eligible people more opportunities to vote and provide relief to local towns on Election Day.

Secretary Merrill said, "Connecticut voters are being deprived of a valuable convenience. With so many other states allowing qualified voters to cast a ballot before Election Day, voters are asking, 'Why not us?' I believe it must be the work of my office and our honorable lawmakers to make it easier for eligible citizens to cast a vote. This proposal will accomplish that."

There are a number of proposals before the committee that would provide voters with an opportunity to cast a ballot before Election Day. One is a resolution for a constitutional amendment that would remove language in the state constitution that limits voting to one day.

Another bill would amend General Statutes Sec. 9-135, which restricts absentee ballots to voters who will be absent from the district during "all the hours of voting." By removing the words, "all the hours of voting" certain allowances could be made for voters who work long hours on Election Day or who know they will be out of the district for part of the day.

Secretary Merrill said, "We know people are already utilizing absentee ballots to cast votes in order to avoid long lines on Election Day. Our restrictive law is making liars out of honest citizens who just want to vote."

A third resolution supports removing language from the state constitution that could present a barrier to would-be absentee voters. This resolution calls for Connecticut to remove language that limits absentee voting to certain reasons.

Constitutional amendments require either:

- i. a joint resolution passed by the legislature with a three-quarters majority in each chamber before going on the ballot for a popular vote for ratification in the next statewide election, which is now due to happen in 2018. Or:
- ii. a resolution passed by simple majority by two different legislatures, which would see it placed on the ballot, at the earliest, by 2020.

A number of advocates for democracy submitted testimony in support of early voting. Below is what they have to say about Connecticut's proposal:

Jennifer L. Clark, Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law, "As for benefits, officials repeatedly told us that early voting reduced stress on the voting system on Election Day, alleviating administrative burdens and reducing voter frustration. Election officials also frequently cited shorter lines on Election Day after the implementation of early voting. Improved poll worker and other staff performance is another advantage of early voting, as an extended voting period allows workers to gain experience before Election Day. Relatedly, early voting also provides more opportunity to discover and correct problems with the voter rolls, the machines, or other election systems. Finally, election officials reported time and again that voters just really like early voting: voter satisfaction is shown to rise when voters are given increased flexibility and more convenience."

Jennifer Tolentino, Director of Policy and Civic Tech, Rock the Vote, "I encourage Connecticut to take a strong pro-voting stance and move forward with implementing a policy of early voting that will give young voters the flexibility they need to cast a ballot. Our democracy is strongest when all eligible voters are empowered and able to participate, and early voting is an effective way ensure more eligible voters are able to make their voices heard."

David McGuire, executive director, American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut, "Early voting would strengthen our democracy and our state. By creating more equal access to the ballot box, early voting gives more people a chance to make their voices heard. The legislature should embrace this chance to decrease congestion at the polls on Election Day, and improve the chances of vulnerable people to cast their ballots."

Ingrid Alvarez, Connecticut State Director, Hispanic Federation, "Our state, currently holds no specific law requiring employers to give an individual time off to vote. This greatly impacts the ability of individuals to participate in elections. On Election Day, we saw how many of our voters experienced long lines and wait times in some towns and cities. If waiting on line threatens someone's ability to cast a ballot, we run the risk of denying people their most fundamental American right."

Yvonne Senturia, Election Law Specialist, League of Women Voters of Connecticut, “The League believes that every citizen should be protected in the right to vote and therefore encourage efforts to maximize voter participation and early voting. We strongly support resolutions to amend the state constitution, which is necessary to vest the General Assembly with the authority to create an early voting system.”

Carole Young-Kleinfeld, Wilton Registrar of Voters, “One of the most frequent questions our office received before Election Day this past November was ‘When and where is early voting for the Presidential Election?’ Many newcomers to our town are incredulous that a forward-thinking state like Connecticut still restricts access to voting before Election Day. Unlike other states, Connecticut prohibits in-person early voting and absentee voting except in limited circumstances. When commuters fail to predict traffic or railroad delays accurately or when workers risk being late to work because of waiting lines at the polls, these prohibitions cause stress, inconvenience, and even disenfranchisement.”