

Government Administration and Elections Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-7228

AN ACT CONCERNING VARIOUS REFORMS TO THE ADMINISTRATION OF

Title: ELECTIONS IN THIS STATE.

Vote Date: 3/26/2025

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 3/21/2025

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Government Administration and Elections Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

This bill would address a number of issues that have been vocalized regarding the administration of elections in Connecticut, particularly regarding the procedures around absentee ballot processing, primary petitioning, and recanvassing. In order to alleviate some of the Election Day workload on registrars of voters and town clerks, this bill allows town clerks to start sorting and pre-processing absentee ballots earlier, allows people to pull their absentee ballots once this pre-processing begins, authorizes town clerks to deliver certain absentee ballots to registrars of voters earlier, and establishes procedures to process absentee ballots the day before an election, primary, or referendum. For similar reasons, the bill also allows absentee ballots to be processed ten days before an election, primary, or referendum at a central location designated in writing; it requires the Secretary of the State to approve or disapprove location two days after certification is received; and it requires absentee counters to arrive at the location at 8am on the day of counting. Certain measures of the bill look to increase transparency and accountability in election processes as well: the bill requires registrars to contact voters whose absentee ballots are rejected for a failure to sign the inner envelope; requires a space for the date next to signatures on primary petitions and places the authority on SOTS to administer these petitions; requires registrars to display a poster explaining how to look up one's voting district during early voting; and requires all tabulators to be recanvassed in the event of a discrepancy, not just those in the district in which the discrepancy occurred. The bill also aims to increase a moderator's ability to maintain order during a recanvass by increasing their authority to remove individuals from recanvasses. In order to ease the administrative burden on registrars in small towns during primaries, the bill allows registrars in municipalities with less than 35,000 people to reduce the number of polling places during a primary. To ensure the functionality of election systems

and safeguard against Election Day failure, it requires SOTS to test the Election Management System and demonstrate it to the Registrars of Voters thirty days prior to each election, and it requires SOTS to establish an electronic poll book no later than January 1, 2027. Finally, to financially support the administration of early voting, this bill appropriates \$1,350,000 to SOTS.

SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:

Per recommendations from the Secretary of the State, the substitute language removes the provision allowing registrars in small municipalities to reduce the number of polling places in a primary. It also removes the section of the bill that sets a deadline for the Secretary of the State to establish an electronic poll book, as the Secretary opposed removing the authority to amend and update that list.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Office of the Secretary of the State, Secretary of the State, Stephanie Thomas: The Secretary of the State offered comments supporting certain measures in this bill, opposing others, and proposing suggestions to others. Sec. Thomas expressed her support for the provisions in this bill establishing chain of custody procedures for tracking ballots delivered near election day, allowing absentee ballot counters to begin counting ballots earlier in the day, requiring a date as well as a signature on primary petition forms, recanvassing all voting districts in a municipality in the case of a discrepancy, and increasing a moderator's power to remove individuals from a recanvass. She explained her office's opposition to certain provisions in the bill, stating that the office does not have the capacity to approve of central absentee ballot counting locations in the timeframe laid out in the bill, administer primary petitions, or test the Election Management System in the fashion described in the bill; the office does not have the appropriate records to create posters explaining how to look up one's voting district for every municipality; the language requiring the Secretary of the State to publish an e-pollbook does not allow the Secretary to adapt such a record of poll books; and the provision allowing registrars in towns with less than 35,000 people to reduce the number of polling locations in a primary risks voter confusion. Finally, she suggested changes to a few sections of the bill: she noted that fourteen days may not be sufficient time to pre-process absentee ballots, having registrars inform voters by mail that their absentee ballots are rejected within four days of that rejection could raise complications, the date by which a voter can pull their absentee ballot should line up with the date by which pre-processing of ballots begins, and money should be appropriated to municipalities as well as to the Secretary of the State for the administration of early voting.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Callie Heilman, Director, Bridgeport Generation Now: Ms. Heilman expressed her support for pre-processing absentee ballots, notifying cvoters that their absentee ballots have been rejected, and appropriating money to the Secretary of the State for the administration of early voting.

Meg Doyle, Member, Bridgeport Generation Now: Mr. Doyle expressed her support for this bill and other bills before this committee.

Patricia Holloway, DWA Indivisible: Ms. Holloway expressed her support for this bill, especially for the appropriation of funds to the Secretary of the State for the administration of early voting.

Claire Walsh, DWA Indivisible: Ms. Walsh expressed her support for this bill and her concerns about the lack of funding for early voting and other election reforms. She asserted that it is the legislature's responsibility to carry out the reforms voted on by the voters of Connecticut, and as such they must pass this bill and provide funding to the Secretary of the State

Carol Rizzolo, Safe Vote CT: Ms. Rizzolo expressed her support for the provisions in this bill that would allow for the pre-processing of absentee ballots, require the notification of voters whose absentee ballots have been rejected, and appropriate money to the Secretary of the State for early voting.

Jess Zaccagnino, Policy Counsel, ACLU-Connecticut: Ms. Zaccagnino explained the Connecticut ACLU's support for this bill, especially for the measures allowing for the processing of absentee ballots prior to election day, allowing those whose absentee ballots have been rejected to vote in-person on election day, and appropriating money to the Secretary of the State for early voting.

Nina Gero: Ms. Gero expressed her support for this bill and her appreciation that it respects local registrars while still creating statewide standards for election administration.

Mary Ryan: Ms. Ryan expressed her support for this bill, stating that it would make voting more efficient and allow people to correct their absentee ballots in a timely manner.

Allison Sanchirico: Ms. Sanchirico expressed her support for this bill, noting that strengthening voting processes strengthens democracy.

Trevor McChristian: As a perennial election worker who specializes in voting by mail, Mr. McChristian expressed his strong support for this bill.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Linda Dalessio: Ms. Dalessio expressed her disappointment that the Secretary of the state has done nothing to address the lack of certification records and audit records of elections and election equipment.

GENERAL COMMENTS:

Samuel Gold, Executive Director, River Council of Governments: Mr. Gold noted that this bill fails to mention how Regional Election Advisors would train registrars of voters given the changes proposed in the bill. He also provided an update on the performance of the Regional Election Advisor program, pointing out that despite the success of the program the COGs have received no funding for the position.

Peter Gostin, Deputy Treasurer, Registrars of Voters Association of Connecticut: Mr. Gostin expressed the concerns of ROVAC on three different sections of this bill. First, he

noted that the measure allowing absentee ballots to be processed prior to the day of an election conflicts with current law that allows a voter to take back their absentee ballot by 10:00am the day of the election. Similarly, he pointed out that mandating absentee ballots to be counted starting at 8am on the day of an election also conflicts with the law. Lastly, he explained that due to discrepancies in available means of contact for voters whose absentee ballots get rejected, the provision requiring registrars to notify a voter when their absentee ballot gets rejected could prove inconsistent or discriminatory. He noted that it may be prudent to postpone discussion on this bill until after laws are creating establishing provisions for no excuse absentee ballot voting.

Lisa Kops, Member, Registrars of Voters Association of Connecticut Legislative Committee

Ms. Kops explained some of the concerns that the ROVAC Legislative Committee has with this bill. In regard to the notification of voters that their absentee ballots have been rejected, she pointed out that most absentee voters vote as such because they cannot go to the polls for whatever reason, so notifying them that they can still vote on election day would be moot. Additionally, she noted that the absentee ballot envelopes have very clear instructions on how to fill out the ballot. She also expressed her support for the provision requiring registrars to display a poster on how to determine one's voting district and stated that it would be advantageous for the registrars to work with the Secretary of the State on designing a poster.

Patricia Spruance, President, Connecticut Town Clerks Association: Ms. Truance explained the CT Town Clerks Association's opinions on certain provisions in this bill. She noted the importance of electronic poll books and of allowing town clerks to open and deliver absentee ballots earlier to streamlining election procedures. She expressed concerns regarding the chain of custody procedure for absentee ballots laid out in this bill and explained the existing security measures regarding absentee ballots. She also requested that the committee consider allowing voters to obtain an additional absentee ballot if their first one has been rejected as opposed to allowing them to vote in-person, as oftentimes a voter requesting an absentee ballot cannot vote in person on election day.

Reported by: Sam Sims

Date: 3/31/2025