

Government Administration and Elections Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-7242

Title: AN ACT STUDYING AN INCREASE IN VOTER PARTICIPATION.

Vote Date: 3/27/2025

Vote Action: JOINT FAVORABLE Substitute

PH Date: 3/24/2025

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Government Administration and Elections Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

There have been growing concerns about the low voter turnout rates in municipal and state elections. Although Connecticut is above average in voter turnout for the presidential election, there is a big disparity in voter turnout for municipal elections. The bill would seek to establish a task force to study how to increase voter turnout and civic engagement especially among underrepresented groups.

SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:

The substitute language adds a section that would allow municipalities the ability to implement their own pilot programs to increase voter turnout. This was added to give municipalities the option, if they so choose, to take initiative and pilot some of these ideas.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Stephanie Thomas, Secretary of the State, Office of the Secretary of the State

Secretary Thomas supports the bill. She notes that 26 countries around the world engage in universal voting, which requires voting as a civic duty, and believes that enhancing voter turnout in our state is crucial. She notes the taskforce can be used to develop creative ways to encourage participation and turnout while highlighting the importance of civic responsibility. It also can look towards municipalities to see what ideas they may want to pilot.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Beverly Allen

Ms. Allen supports the bill.

Fernando Betancourt, Executive Director, San Juan Center, Inc.

Mr. Betancourt supports the bill, highlighting the disparity in low voter turnout among populations where marginalized groups, specifically Latinos, make up a significant portion of the population. He cites Hartford as an example, noting that only 24% of eligible voters cast a ballot in the 2023 municipal elections. He argues that there are barriers to the ballot box that contribute to these numbers and a lack of interest in civic life such as language barriers, misinformation, and limited outreach. He supports the bill because it can help address and identify these barriers along with others helping to close the participation gap. He emphasizes the impact that a 90% voter participation rate in cities such as Hartford and other across the state have on policies and leadership.

Representative Josh Elliott, Connecticut General Assembly

Representative Elliott supports the bill. He notes that in CT, voter turnout continues to fall short, identifying a 67.1% turnout in the 2024 presidential election, and lower rates in municipal elections. He believes the task force is a great step to improve turnout like in states such as Maine and Colorado, and advocates for universal voting and other measures that come from this task force to ensure eligible voters can participate in elections.

Richard Frieder, Coordinator, Hartford Votes-Hartford Vota Coalition

Mr. Frieder supports the bill, noting that Connecticut ranks 15th among states in terms of voter turnout and notes some elections at the municipal level have turnouts as low as 10%. He encourages the task force so that Connecticut can look at states across the country that have been able to increase voter turnout, as well as countries around the world and apply what they did to the state.

Sarah Ganong, State Director, Connecticut working Families Party and Working Families Power

Ms. Ganong supports the bill, noting that the task force could make Connecticut the leader in getting to 100% participating in its elections and overall universal participation. She notes several policy opportunities that could be examined under this task force, some of which are already applied in other states. These include, but are not limited to, pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds, expanding mail voting, and extending voter registration to all state agencies beyond the DMV. She notes particular interest in the task force looking at other countries where voting is a required civic duty.

Aaron Goode, Coordinator, New Haven Votes Coalition

Mr. Goode supports the bill. He notes historically low turnout in all elections in New Haven and other medium to large-sized cities compared to the suburbs, and how this gap in growing

wider. He points out that low-turnout election is not demographically representative of the voters. He supports the task force and proposes subjects to be investigated. These include, but are not limited to, ranked choice voting and the alignment of municipal and state elections in even-numbered years. He emphasizes the importance of civic engagement and increasing it, especially regarding minority parties.

Ed Hawthorne, President, Connecticut AFL-CIO

Mr. Hawthorne supports the bill, highlighting the low turnout rates in CT elections. He believes the task force will allow for promising policies to increase turnout rates similar to other states and countries around the world, including pre-registration and mail-in ballots to all voters. He cites research from the Harvard Kennedy School that suggests reaching 90% voter turnout in elections can lead to more than 400,000 voters, making our democracy much more representative.

Evelyn Mantilla, 100% Democracy

Ms. Mantilla supports the bill, highlighting her lived experience as a way to describe how voter representation affects communities. She highlights the 2023 municipal elections results, where the overall turnout was 33.29%, and how this is even lower among our cities. She believes that working to increase to voter turnout of over 90% will lead to meaningful change and legislation related to economic opportunity, healthcare access, and education equity. She emphasizes the barriers that underrepresented communities have faced that have led to lower turnouts, and how this task force can address that.

Werner Oyanadel, Latino and Puerto Rican Policy Director, Connecticut Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity, and Opportunity (CWCSEO)

Mr. Oyanadel supports the bill, as it aligns well with CWCSEO's mission of increasing family civics and civic engagement while removing barriers to voting. He notes that turnout, even in municipal elections, can be as low as 10 to 15 percent. He cites a study from Harvard Kennedy School that suggests policies to achieve a 90% voter turnout in CT can lead to an increase of approximately 430,000 voters statewide, including an increase in younger voters by 40%. He highlights countries such as Uruguay and Chile have maintained a steady increase in high voter participation rates through methods such as penalties for voting, though the agency is against these specific policies and urges the taskforce to find other ways. He cites Puerto Rico as another example, which has policies that make Election Day a public holiday. Though Connecticut has made great strides in improving turnout, he believes more can be done to dramatically improve turnout, which benefits family civic, financial, career, and education outcomes. The CWCSEO requests that the legislation be changed to include the CWCSEO in the taskforce and expand the scope of the taskforce to include identifying and evaluating barriers to voter participation.

Miles Rapoport, Executive Director, 100% Democracy: An Initiative for Universal Voting

Mr. Rapoport supports the bill. He highlights deep concerns with the historically low turnout and argues that a more representative electorate will reduce polarization, respond to the needs to the electorate better, and improve civic culture. He believes the taskforce will allow

the state to be a leader in civic participation and will provide several reforms and practices for Connecticut to pursue.

Ann Reed, Vice President for Advocacy, League of Women Voters of Connecticut

Ms. Reed supports the bill, highlighting the need for Connecticut to have voting processes expand voting options for all residents. She believes these efforts will help electors better understand the impact of choosing to vote or not and the outcomes either choice will lead to.

Carol Scully, Director of Advocacy, The Arc of Connecticut, Inc.

Ms. Scully supports the bill. She cites several studies and reports by Rutgers University that found voter turnout has been rising within the disability community and that there are more eligible voters with disabilities than voters who are Hispanic or Black. She identifies, though, that there is a gap between those who are disabled and those who are not, and that if people with disabilities votes at the same rate as those without disabilities, there would be about 2 million more voters across the country. She also cites the Election Assistance Commission, which finds that those with disabilities have less access to online voting and voter registration materials, echoing the need for increasing access to the vote for the disability community.

Chris Senecal, Senior Public Policy Officer, Hartford Foundation

Mr. Senecal supports the bill, highlighting the November 2023 municipal elections in Hartford where less than 15 percent of eligible voters cast ballot. He cited "mistrust of the political system, lack of voter knowledge, and residents feeling their vote did not matter" as reasons why individuals did not vote. The organization supports the bill and asks that the taskforce either be expanded to include members of nonpartisan, nonprofit organizations dedicated to the issue or invite local nonprofits that are active in these issues, citing Hartford Votes-Hartford Vota Coalition and the grant they recently received to increase voter participation in the 2024 election. He supports the tasks of the taskforce, while also requesting that the work of community-based nonprofits who have a history of engaging underrepresented and vulnerable groups be reviewed.

Stacey Zimmerman

Ms. Zimmerman supports the bill, noting that Connecticut ranks 15th among states in terms of voter turnout and lags behind other countries. She is encouraged by the bill's intent to look at what Connecticut can do to improve participation. Though the CT turnout rate in the 2024 election was slightly above the national average, she acknowledges we can do more. She believes the way to fortify our institution and our republic is to have an extremely engaged citizenry.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

One anonymous individual submitted testimony in opposition to the bill.

Reported by: Patrick Riley

Date: 3/31/2025

