

Government Administration and Elections Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-1516

AN ACT CONCERNING THE SECRETARY OF THE STATE'S
RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO VOTING AND ELECTIONS IN THIS

Title: STATE.

Vote Date: 3/26/2025

Vote Action: Joint Favorable

PH Date: 3/21/2025

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Government Administration and Elections Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

This bill creates and streamlines the election administration process and strengthens safeguards to ensure that elections are safe. In lieu of the recent election fraud scandal that occurred in Bridgeport, Connecticut, the legislation aims to assuage fears and concerns about the accuracy and fairness of elections while at the same time protecting the right of the citizen's right to vote without fear of harassment or pressure. This legislation also wishes to address technical changes that would provide clarification to current statutes governing election related laws.

These recommendations come at the behest of the Secretary of the State who has a hand in ensuring the fairness of elections in an impartial manner.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Stephan Thomas, Secretary of the State, Office of the Secretary of the State

Secretary Thomas supports the bill and its various provisions. She believes the requirement of all towns to follow similar processes for correcting election return errors help to clarify current procedures and ensure transparency and consistency. The requirement of streamlining election concerns to the Secretary of the State will make addressing these issues more effective. She argues that the allowance of the Office of the Secretary of the State to review ballots to ensure accuracy will allow ballot issues to be addressed proactively when there is still time to make a change, minimizing the risk of errors. The alignment of

absentee ballot procedures for special elections with other elections, she notes, will ensure consistency in the law with the practice of returning absentee ballots during special elections. The enhancement of the Election Monitor program will allow the office, she argues, to properly inform voters, reduce confusion, and restore confidence in elections. Restricting access to voter contact information in certain circumstances is best for data protection and securing elections while not totaling banning access for legitimate reasons. Lastly, she touches on the section allowing the Secretary of the State to go to court on behalf of nameless victims within 90 days of an election or primary, which she says would help to ensure that elections laws are followed and that the rights of voters are protected.

External Affairs Division, State of Connecticut Judicial Branch

The Connecticut Judicial Branch provided comments on Section 2(c) of the bill, pointing out that there is not language to require the court to notify the Secretary of the State of the outcome of a case. They reason that because violations are unable to be determined until a hearing is held, and if a violation not known before a hearing, they wouldn't be able to provide notification of a hearing date.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Jocelyn Ault, PT Partners

Ms. Ault supports the bill, noting personal experiences with voters who have been harassed and manipulated by political actors, and touches on the recent actions in Bridgeport that disrupted trust and faith in elections. She believes that this bill is a good start but believes there needs to be additional safeguards. For one, she feels that there should be monitors in Bridgeport to help ensure continued oversight of fraud and intimidation. She also believes the bill must prevent those convicted-related crimes from serving as political operatives to restore trust. She also believes the bill must prevent political operatives from having control over absentee ballot applications and must only allow the Secretary of the State and Town Clerks to handle them. She closes by saying that everyone should be able to obtain an absentee ballot without harassment, coercion and fraud, and that grand attempts must be made to bring back faith in elections while preventing fraud, no matter the scale.

Gemeem Davis, Co-Director, Bridgeport Generation Now

Mr. Davis supports the bill and believes it is a great step forward but feels strongly that an additional provision to remove operatives and campaigns from circulating absentee ballot application should be added. He feels strongly that only the Secretary of the State and the Town Clerks should be handling the distribution and circulation of absentee ballots and that operatives have been exploiting the circulator loophole. He believes that even with universal voting, this loophole will not help prevent these operatives from attempting to harvest ballots.

Meg Doyle, Member, Bridgeport Generation Now

Ms. Doyle appreciated the intent of the bill but believes it should go further to remove political operatives from the process of absentee ballot applications all together. She believes failed action on this may chalk up to politicians not condoning fraud but want to restrict information that may benefit themselves in the long run. She argues that the events in Bridgeport will

allow this behavior to continue if the loophole is not closed if campaigns and their operatives are not explicitly banned from handling absentee ballot applications.

Callie Heilmann, Co-Director, Bridgeport Generation Now

Ms. Heilmann is supportive of the bill but feels strongly that the removal of political and partisan operatives from the absentee process must happen. She feels that the individuals involved in the Bridgeport election scandal were not properly told the laws and that only banning those who have been convicted of elections from circulating absentee ballot applications is not enough to curb this behavior. She believes a lack of action puts undue burdens on voters to report these instances of fraud. She notes the initial ban in the bill "Cannot be a policy replacement" for permanently removing partisan individuals from the absentee ballot process and feels only the Secretary of State and Town Clerks should have access to this process.

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

Ms. Reed supports the bill, reiterating the League's belief in "effective and transparent administration of elections" and how the bill aligns with this goal. She says, the bill overall will streamline election processes and make important changes that the agency supports. She especially cites the enhancement of the Election Monitor program, which she argues is really needed in Bridgeport.

Dylan Sammut and Kate Spain, Members, Bridgeport Generation Now

Mr. Sammut and Ms. Spain are supportive of the bill but believes that political operatives will still have access to absentee ballot applications. They stress the importance of voters having confidence in the election systems, and that the quality of life in cities like Bridgeport must be improve with proper leadership. They appreciate the election monitor program enhancement banning candidates from being in the car for curbside voting and banning those convicted of election crimes from circulating applications. They emphasize that the circulating loophole for operatives is being exploited by political officials in Bridgeport and should be addressed to restore confidence in elections. They close by saying that absentee ballots should be dealt with between voters and election officials only and the legislature should be doing everything it can to protect voters and the manners in which they vote, especially for the most vulnerable voters.

Patricia Spruance, President, Connecticut Town Clerks Association

Ms. Spruance is supportive of the bill. She comments on Section 15, arguing that while the CTCA appreciates the oversight they have concerns that this level of oversight will lead to missed deadlines for issuing absentee ballots. Regarding Section 16-20, she points out that the Town Clerk sets the ballot styles to create absentee, early vote, same-day registration and poll ballots. They recommend that the Town Clerk and ballot printers submit ballot proofs to the Secretary of the State to eliminate a layer for the approval process.

Jess Zaccagnino, Policy Counsel, American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut

Ms. Zaccagnino supports the bill, emphasizing the right to vote and the importance of ensuring that the right to vote is expanding to as many individuals as possible. She acknowledges and supports the numerous technical changes to the bill. However, she expresses concerns with Sections 9-13. While she recognizes that a safeguard should be put in place to protect the corruption of elections, she believes that the collateral consequences that result from a single sentence on a criminal record can turn any sentence into a life sentence, and thus states that the agency opposes bans for people with a criminal record. They recommend that a balancing test, such as in Public Act 22-88, to consider the "evidence of rehabilitation and the amount of time since the conviction."

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Linda Dalessio

Ms. Dalessio opposes the bill, noting that the election management system has no certification record of equipment and no audit records, and believes that the law is being violated and the state is not doing enough to address what she calls "unlawful and invalid" elections.

Jeffrey Daniels, Co-Chair, Legislative Committee, CT Council on Freedom of Information

Mr. Daniels is opposed to Section 23(a)(2) of the law, believing that it casts secrecy over who has access to election records. He believes it is not transparent in the election process and may lead to inaccuracies. More broadly, the concerns from the bill arise from the First Amendment, a law that forces the state to restrain dissemination of information, lack of definitions in the bill, and questions over the prohibited use of advertising and marketing. He believes this would prevent access to information that would "enhance the election process". He cites the Supreme Court doctrine that deems restraint over voter registration information is unconstitutional. He notes that being able to have these records public was why the investigations into the events in Bridgeport were able to happen in the first place.

Samuel Gold, Executive Director, Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments

Mr. Gold opposes the bill, largely because there is no mention of curbside voting and translation of voting material implementation. He believes these provisions should be included in the bill and that they be engaged while major changes to the election process are taking shape.

Colleen Murphy, Executive Director and General Counsel, Connecticut Freedom of Information Commission

Ms. Murphy is in opposition to Section 23(a)(2) of the bill, citing Title 9 of the general statutes which mandates public access to voter registration record. She notes that journalists obtained voter records to report the instances of absentee ballot requests by voters who never filled out applications. She argues that this public access to data ensures that election officials

consistently update and maintain voter data, which adds confidence in elections and reduces concerns. She notes that removing specific uses for the public information will set a slippery slope to removal of more purposes. She also argues that there is no definition for commercial purpose, and instead provides examples that raise serious concerns, including constitutional concerns, especially regarding prohibiting the reproduction of information in several displays on the internet, which the Supreme Court deemed that the First Amendment prevent restraint of information on public domain. Lastly, she notes that giving the Secretary of State the power to decide who is allowed to access public records will lead to abuse.

Reported by: Patrick Riley

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