

Testimony on Draft LCO #3576
From Emily Hunt (Greenwich, CT)

Dear Distinguished Members of the GAE Committee: I am writing to ask you to pass LCO #3576 and permit voters to vote by absentee ballot during the entire pandemic.

Quite frankly, no-excuse absentee voting and vote-at-home (vote-by-mail) should be standard practices anyway. While not the subject of this session in particular, early voting should be adopted as a standard practice as well. Each of the above methods has proven to improve the voter experience, boost voter participation, and, as a result, make elected bodies more representative and responsive - yet none of the above have been adopted in Connecticut.

As the first state to enact a literacy test requirement to vote in 1855, we have a dark history of exclusion from which we have still not emerged, and it's high time that we did.

No-excuse absentee voting has been projected to increase voter participation by about 3 percent over time.¹ And 3 percent is no small figure. In a state with 3.565 million people, instituting that method alone would generate 106,950 additional votes. **Early voting** has been projected to increase participation by about 2 to 4 percent.² This would generate 71,300-142,600 additional votes.

The power of inclusion is astounding.

Colorado is a **vote-at-home (vote-by-mail)** state that gives voters a variety of different opportunities to cast their ballot. They are *automatically* mailed a ballot, so they can:

- Return their ballot in the mail.
- Drop off their ballot in one of many 24-hour drop boxes located across each county.

¹ Jan E. Leighley and Jonathan Nagler, "The Effects of Non-Precinct Voting Reforms on Turnout, 1972-2008" (Philadelphia: The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2009), available at <https://www.nonprofitvote.org/documents/2011/03/pew-effect-of-non-precinct-voting-reforms.pdf/>.

² Paul Gronke and others, "Convenience Voting," *Annual Review for Political Science* 11 (19) (2008): 437-455, available at http://earlyvoting.net/files/2012/05/Gronke2008-Convenience_Voting.pdf.

- Drop off their ballot OR vote in person at a county vote center - eligible voters can also register at the same time as voting.
- Drop off their ballot OR vote in person at a mobile vote center.

It is important to note that the in-person options listed above come with the opportunity to vote early. Colorado vote centers are open Monday through Saturday, for 15 days during general elections and 8 days in primary and off-year elections³. As with other early voting-based practices, this is a cost-effective method for reducing wait times and the burden on polling place officials, and it also creates a more flexible environment in which people can vote at the time that works best for them.

Colorado's model resulted in a 2-5% increase in voter participation⁴ and, notably, a 9% increase in voter participation by those between the ages of 18-34.⁵ And in the city of Denver, overall participation increased by 17.2 percent compared with the 1999 local elections - and the 19 precincts with the highest Latino populations saw a 55.5 percent increase in participation.⁶

Colorado is not classified as having no-excuse absentee voting or early voting, but that is only because the system that they have in place makes it so that those methods are not even necessary. The ability to vote ahead of time (in person and by mail) is automatically granted to every voter.

An additional benefit that this system grants to Coloradans is that they will not be forced to make a choice between protecting their health and exercising their right to vote in the midst of a devastating pandemic. This point was never even up for debate - the need to make such a tradeoff is not even in the realm of possibility.

³ Danielle Root and Liz Kennedy, "Increasing Voter Participation in America: Policies to Drive Participation and Make Voting More Convenient" (July 2018).

⁴ Menger, Stein, and Vonnahme, "Turnout Effects from Vote by Mail Elections"; Bipartisan Policy Center, "The Colorado General Election 2014." See also Pantheon Analytics, "Colorado 2014: Comparisons of Predicted and Actual Turnout"; Edelman and Glastris, "Letting people vote at home increases voter turnout. Here's proof."; United States Elections Project, "2010 November General Election Turnout Rates"; United States Elections Project, "2014 November General Election Turnout Rates."

⁵ Phil Keisling, "'Vote at home' elections."

⁶ Common Cause, "Latino Voters Do Vote By Mail—But Only if We Let Them" (2007), available at <http://research.policyarchive.org/4517.pdf>.

Five states – Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington – conduct all-mail elections. As of April 2020, 40 states (plus the District of Columbia) permitted no-excuse early voting in some form.⁷ This means that 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted voting practices with the potential to increase turnout and improve representation in regular times, as well as protect individuals from harm during the pandemic that rages around us right now.

Connecticut is not one of those states.

This must change. There are so many barriers to voting - barriers that disproportionately affect minorities, young people, low-income Americans, and, now, the populations most vulnerable to COVID-19. While the above methods won't dismantle long-standing and deeply-rooted exclusionary structures, they would certainly be a step in the right direction.

Traditional symbolic trappings should not prevent us from moving forward and making the changes necessary to ensure that voting is accessible to each and every voter in Connecticut - especially at a time when accessibility could literally mean the difference between life and death. Every individual deserves to be heard, and I implore you to not only pass LCO #3576 but also move to adopt pro-voter policy reforms and institute no-excuse absentee voting, vote-at-home (vote-by-mail), and early voting on a permanent basis.

Thank you for your time,

Emily Hunt (Greenwich, CT)

⁷ *National Conference of State Legislatures*, "State Laws Governing Early Voting," August 2, 2019