



**Testimony in Support of S.15**  
**VPIRG Executive Director Paul Burns**  
**April 21, 2021**

Madam Chair and Members of the House Government Operations Committee, for the record, my name is Paul Burns, and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG). VPIRG is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, public interest advocacy organization with approximately 50,000 members and supporters across the state of Vermont.

As many of you know, VPIRG has been a leader on environmental issues, consumer protection, and government reform for nearly 50 years. Though this is my first time appearing before your committee this year, in my 20 years with VPIRG I've testified before this Committee dozens of times.

Today I am here to offer VPIRG's very strong support for S.15, to make permanent the policy of mailing all active, registered voters a ballot in general elections. This policy of mailing ballots to all voters was implemented as a one-time emergency measure as the pandemic took hold last year.

There can be no doubt that the policy was a huge success in 2020. It contributed to Vermont's shattering of the previous voter participation record, with almost 45,000 more votes cast last year than in any previous Vermont election. Participation was up in all areas of the state. Three out of every four votes were cast early, mostly by mail. Furthermore, voting from home was found to be safe, simple, secure, and overwhelmingly popular.

A statewide poll conducted in February of this year by the independent firm Lincoln Park Strategies on behalf of VPIRG and another nonprofit organization, RepresentUs, found that 68 percent of Vermont voters want to make the mailed ballots policy permanent, while just 29 percent oppose it.

At VPIRG, we invited our members to share with us their impressions of voting by mail after last fall's election. We were amazed by the responses. Many of course, were appreciative of the chance to cast their ballot safely, without risking their health or the health of others, including poll workers. But one of the most common benefits we heard about had to do with the fact that voters felt better informed by being able to do research at home as they filled out their ballot at the kitchen table.

As you have all heard, voters in other parts of the country are not so fortunate. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, some 361 bills aimed at making it harder to vote were introduced in at least 47 states in just the first three months of this year. The notorious new law adopted in Georgia (which, among other things, makes it a crime to give food and water to a voter standing in line at the polls) is so shocking that President Joe Biden referred to it as “an atrocity” and likened it to “Jim Crow for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”

These voter suppression bills are seen by many as a direct response to the historic voter turnout across the country last year. But I’m happy to say that Vermont has the opportunity to chart a very different course by becoming the most inclusive and voter-friendly state in the nation.

Now, more than ever, it is critical that Vermont stand up for democracy, and not retreat from policies that maximize participation. That is why we are calling for universally mailed ballots to be made a permanent feature of Vermont elections going forward.

If enacted, S.15 would ensure that all Vermont voters receive a ballot in the mail for general elections. It would also preserve in-person voting for those who need or prefer that. It would provide multiple options for voters to return their ballots, including the U.S. Postal Service, drop boxes, polling places, and election offices. And it would require pre-paid postage on the return envelopes and allow for pre-canvassing of ballots ahead of Election Day.

The legislation would also minimize the number of defective ballots by including a curing process. This process would allow voters to fix (a.k.a “cure”) small mistakes so that otherwise-valid ballots could be counted. A common example of a curable defect is where the voter neglects to sign the inner security envelope when returning a ballot. In the 2020 general election, with no curing process in place, nearly 1,500 voters were disenfranchised because their ballots were found to be defective.

Adding this curing process is an issue of equity. Without it, many Vermonters lack any reasonable means of discovering that there is a problem with their submitted ballot. Their right to vote successfully must not be compromised just because they don’t have a computer or smart phone, or reliable access to the Internet.

The good news is that requiring clerks to inform voters of a fixable defect in their ballot would not be a significant burden on them. In fact, we requested from the Secretary of State’s Office a detailed breakdown of the number of defective ballots in the 2020 general election as reported by each municipality. This is what we found:

#### **2020 Defective Ballots by the Numbers:**

- 98 municipalities have no defective ballots reported.
- 122 municipalities reported between one and twelve defective ballots.
- 26 municipalities reported more than a dozen defective ballots.
  - Of those 26, just 11 municipalities reported more than two dozen defective ballots.
    - Of those 11, just 4 municipalities reported 50 or more: Barre Town: 55; Brattleboro: 83; South Burlington: 95; Burlington: 133.

In addition to the curing provision itself, S.15 requires that ballots be opened shortly after they are sent in so voters can be notified if there's a problem. Here is more information on what the 18 states with curing policies have in place now:

<https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-15-states-that-permit-voters-to-correct-signature-discrepancies.aspx>

S.15 also contains important provisions that will increase access among groups who have historically been left out of the democratic process. By January 2022, the Secretary of State will consult with municipalities and interested stakeholders on the best practices for increasing language access to voting for non-English-speaking Vermonters. By January 2023, the Secretary of State will submit a voting access report, identifying ways in which mailed ballots could be used in municipal and primary elections, and the potential benefits of universally mailed ballots on historically disenfranchised groups.

We recognize that there is still more to be done to maximize voter participation. For instance, in order to allow people with disabilities full and independent access to our democratic process, Vermont should take steps to make it possible for these individuals to receive, complete, and return their ballots electronically. Additional effort must also be made to make sure that people with disabilities who choose to vote in person at the polling place have the assistance and technology they may need to do so successfully.

Finally, just a note about the coalition of organizations supporting this legislation. VPIRG has been working with a broad range of organizations and businesses with members and customers around the state. You will hear testimony from some, but not all of these many groups. However, we all stand ready to assist in getting the word out and educating citizens about all their voting options – whether in-person on Election Day or as an early voter completing a ballot at home and dropping it in the mail or in a convenient drop box.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of S.15. This law will be an effective and popular means of encouraging participation in our democracy. Together with other bills now pending in your Committee, including S.51 banning corporate contributions, and H.448, which has the proposed charter change for ranked choice voting in Burlington, you have the power to make Vermont the most voter-friendly state in the nation.