



Testimony - Senate Government Operations 1.28.2021

Campaign for Vermont has long supported measures to increase access to and participation in voting. The ability to cast a vote in support of your ideals is the cornerstone of American Democracy. In the November election, nearly 380k people cast a ballot in Vermont. Most of these (by nearly 3-1 margin) were absentee votes. While absentee voting has been increasingly more popular in recent years, but these numbers are nearly twice what we would have expected in a normal year.

Given the relative success of the November election under emergency mail-in voting measures it is tempting to make this process permanent. We support doing so but, as Secretary Condos pointed out last week, there are process improvements that need to happen.

Here are a few that we are aware of as of today:

1. Town clerks need more resources to process mail-in ballots. This processing is much more time-intensive than typical in-person voting. We can alleviate some of this by allowing clerks to start processing a couple weeks prior to election day, but we believe additional equipment or staffing is necessary.
2. It is no secret that Vermont's voter checklist is inflated. We have been overly conservative with removing people from the checklist, and this made sense when getting back on the checklist required a lengthy registration process. Today, thanks to the work of this Committee, we have same-day voter registration. One unanticipated benefit of this is that it may afford us more freedom to remove inactive voters from our voter checklist to keep the lists more current while still allowing someone to vote if we remove them from the checklist in error. Many town clerks reported hundreds of returned ballots in their towns. We have the tools to solve this issue.
3. While exceedingly rare, many town clerks did find examples of voter fraud in the November election and reported them to the Secretary of State's office. We need to pursue these, not because we believe this is a widespread issue, but because we need to discourage others from doing the same. Our democracy depends on the public having faith in the results of our elections and if we are aware of attempts to subvert the process of free and fair elections, we owe it to Vermonters to address those instances. In the same way that we take Russia's attempt at election meddling seriously, we need to take domestic attempts seriously as well. Town clerks are the gatekeepers of

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Vermont elections and they may very well be the best positioned to uphold election integrity.

4. Better education around how to fill out absentee ballots given the very high rate of defective ballots, particularly in the August primary. This raises questions in our minds around how we carry out primaries or if we should attempt to implement universal mail-in voting for primary elections given the propensity to confuse voters. We may inadvertently disenfranchise more voters than we actually help.
5. Signature verification has been a catch-phrase for conservative election advocates. We do not believe this is necessary, but it is something we should investigate. Again, not because we believe it is a meaningful fraud-prevention mechanism, but because it lends more confidence to our elections process. We need voters to be confident in the results of our elections.

There are likely more things than we have covered here, but these are the items that immediately jump out to us as worth addressing going forward.

In summary, we do support moving towards universal mail-in voting in Vermont elections, particularly general elections. With some adjustments this can be a successful program that allows more Vermonters to access our voting process.

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