

OPINION

Give automatic voter registration another chance: Op-Ed

By Cheri Quickmire and Carol Reimers | June 24, 2019 | Updated: June 24, 2019
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A voter marks his ballot while voting in Elk Grove, Calif.
Photo: Associated Press

There were just hours left in session. A common-sense bill that would have modernized government, expanded the right to vote and improved our elections had already sailed through the House a week earlier. But, with just hours remaining in the legislative session, it awaited action in the Senate.

A majority of Democrats were ready to pass it, but as the clock ticked, the bill wasn't called.

Automatic Voter Registration — already passed in 20 states around the country and Washington, D.C., with Republican and Democratic support — would be doomed in the regular session in Connecticut.

What happened?

In the waning hours of session, Republicans in the Senate held it up, threatening a filibuster that would hold up all other legislative business. With leverage on the last day of session, Republicans in the state used the capital they had to kill a good-government reform.

Even though automatic voter registration would have expanded voting rights. And even though it would have meant modernizing our elections, mitigating those long lines at the polls we see every election.

But while the bill was shelved and common-sense reform was halted, we still have a chance to make things right.

As Governor Lamont and legislative leaders plan to call a special session to address transportation infrastructure, they should use this opportunity to pass automatic voter registration, as well. Here's why.

The benefits of automatic voter registration — or AVR — are innumerable. Across the country, states that have implemented the reform have seen more voters, modernized elections, shorter election-day lines and more accurate voter rolls.

That's because instead of an inefficient and costly paper registration system, under AVR, eligible voters are automatically registered to vote when they do business with state agencies. The fact is, when you go to an agency like the DMV, for example, you're already supplying the information needed to register to vote — name, age, address and so on. And AVR allows you to do business with the state and register to vote in a single interaction.

AVR brings the process together — it's more efficient for taxpayers and our government.

That matters because AVR would whittle away at the long lines we so often see

every election day. That's because, with an automatic system, election workers can spend less time focusing on manual data entry, and more time running elections smoothly. We know that's critically important because, as a recent study showed, on Election Day in 2018, at the peak voting time of 3:30 p.m., residents in New Haven had to wait nearly seven hours to vote, and those who showed up at 10 a.m. didn't fare much better, having to wait close to three hours.

With automatic voter registration, the lines would have been far shorter, and the process far simpler. The urgency to pass AVR is real.

And at a time of fiscal restraint and what seem like annual budgetary shortfalls, AVR offers state and local governments long-term cost-savings. Because local elections staff aren't manually updating registrations one at a time, localities across the country that have AVR systems have saved an average of roughly \$3.54 in labor costs per registration by moving from a paper to an electronic registration method.

All of it culminates in more accurate and secure elections data, ultimately moving our state into the future.

But more than anything, it's the right thing to do. The opposite of voter suppression is voter expansion, and to avoid passing it is to hamper residents' ability to exercise their fundamental democratic rights. Modernizing elections and making democracy more accessible shouldn't be a partisan issue — it is, at its core, a common-sense one.

And just as voting rights are being rolled back in states across the nation, AVR would register hundreds of thousands of new voters in Connecticut in the first year alone. That would send a message that our state has moved on from its past and believes in leading on good government reforms in the future.

Governor Lamont — residents are counting on you. We know you support increasing voter access, modernizing elections and making our government more efficient. The elections package that Republicans unfortunately held hostage lays out a path to achieving all three, and more.

By including AVR in this special session, we have an opportunity to make our democracy stronger and more vibrant than ever. We just need to step up and seize it.

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