



September 13, 2022

Rep. Stephanie Thomas  
PO Box 314  
Wilton, Connecticut 06897

Dear Representative Thomas,

It has come to our attention that you may be pursuing the opportunity to assume the role of Connecticut's next Secretary of the State. Thank you for taking a step to advance your role in ensuring all people in Connecticut have an equitable opportunity to vote!

The ACLU of Connecticut Rise PAC is a political action committee with the purpose of building the necessary relationships, public awareness, public narratives, and pressure felt by politicians in order to build the political power of people directly impacted by civil rights and liberties issues. At our core, is a foundational belief that we cannot have a thriving Connecticut until our state actively promotes and invests in racial justice. The ACLU of Connecticut Rise PAC is a new tool that will enable people directly impacted by civil rights and civil liberties issues to hold currently and would-be elected officials accountable to promises made on the campaign trail.

We invite you to complete our *ACLU of Connecticut Rise PAC Secretary of the State Commitment Survey*. As a public position, the Secretary of the State is critical for setting the tenor and tone of what it means for residents of Connecticut to equitable experience and participate in the fundamental right to vote. As such, the public has a right to know your views on various topics referenced within the commitment survey.

All of the identified Secretary of the State candidates have received a request to complete this *ACLU of Connecticut Rise PAC Secretary of the State Commitment Survey*. Please provide your full response by October 7, 2022.

Our commitment survey consists of 10 Yes/No questions, each with the opportunity to provide a 250-word comment. Where neither "Yes" nor "No" is selected, the response will be recorded as "Did Not Respond." We also a request that you submit a brief 1 paragraph biography with your responses to this commitment survey. Each candidate's response will be posted on our website.

Please direct any questions to Claudine Constant, ACLU of Connecticut Rise PAC Secretary at [cconstant@acluct.org](mailto:cconstant@acluct.org) or 860-471-8477.

Sincerely,

Claudine Constant  
ACLU Rise PAC Secretary

*Paid for by the ACLU of Connecticut Rise PAC. This message was made independent of any candidate or political party. Additional information regarding the ACLU of Connecticut Rise PAC can be found on the SEEC website. Top contributors: American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut, Inc; American Civil Liberties Union, Inc.*



**ACLU of Connecticut Rise PAC**  
**Secretary of the State Candidate Commitment Survey**

*Accessibility of Registration and Voting*

1. Will you support modernizing Connecticut’s automatic voter registration system by adopting a more expansive back-end opt-out system like the Oregon model<sup>1</sup> that automatically registers Connecticut residents to vote with the option to opt-out and protections for people who are undocumented or ineligible to vote? Please give a clear “yes” or “no” to the question and any explanation to support your response.

Yes. I need to do research to understand the pros and cons of the Oregon model, but I do support modernizing voter registration efforts that prevents erroneous registration of ineligible voters. The proper systems and safeguards to screen for anomalies need to be carefully considered and implemented in any automatic registration program to ensure reliability as well as instill voter confidence in the integrity of our election systems. Immediate implementation of registration systems should be held off until well tested and proven effective.

2. Assuming voters approve of the constitutional amendment to permit early voting, will you commit to supporting early voting implementation legislation that starts in-person early voting at least 30 days before Connecticut elections with guaranteed weekend voting days?<sup>2</sup> Please give a clear “yes” or “no” to the question and any explanation to support your response.

Yes for a shorter period, but not 30 days. As a co-sponsor and vocal advocate of the early voting amendment, I am obviously a supporter. However, there is a lot to be considered in terms of the timeframe due to potential strain on municipal budgets and logistic concerns in the absence of county government. The longer the early voting cycle, the larger the cost for poll workers, security, and equipment. There needs to be a reasonable balance between expanding voting opportunities and participation with the budget to pay for it. Early voting has the potential to help reduce the cost needed

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<sup>1</sup> Motor Voter Act of 2015, H.B. 2177, 78<sup>th</sup> Oregon Legislative Assembly (2015).

<sup>2</sup> *Early Voting*, BALLOTEDIA (accessed Sept. 6, 2022), [https://ballotpedia.org/Early\\_voting](https://ballotpedia.org/Early_voting); *Early In-Person Voting*, NAT’L CONF. ST. LEGISLATURES (Aug. 30, 2022), <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/early-voting-in-state-elections.aspx>.



on Election Day itself by spreading out resources over a longer period instead of a more concentrated effort on a single day under the current system. But there is a lot of work that needs to be done to ensure our municipalities are set up for success, not failure.

3. Across the nation and in Connecticut, people in low-income areas are less likely to register to vote in comparison to the national average. Because of historic and continuing racism in housing policy and access, Black and Latinx residents who are low-income in Connecticut are more likely to live in public housing than white people.<sup>3</sup> New Haven has successfully adopted a motor-voter style automatic voter registration policy that provides tenants the opportunity to register to vote at each new lease-up or recertification. Will you support legislation that addresses the disproportionate under-registration of low-income people by requiring housing authorities to provide voter registration applications to prospective tenants? Please give a clear “yes” or “no” to the question and any explanation to support your response.

Yes. As the introducer of an Automatic Voter Registration bill last year, my version was more expansive than what was ultimately passed during the 2021 session. I support all ideas to increase voter registration to include all eligible voters. Any automatic system will need to require collection of the same information that is required to register to vote, to minimize risk of ineligible residents being registered, and tie-in with the registration system on the back end.

4. Year after year, election management in Connecticut result in long lines, particularly in urban areas where Connecticut’s voters of color are most concentrated. he availability of secure ballot drop boxes is a means to expand options for voting and in turn decrease voter wait times. States that regularly vote by mail, like Washington, have used ballot drop boxes with great success, both in terms of use and security.<sup>4</sup> Would you support legislation making the use of secure ballot drop boxes

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Potential Voters Map*, CT DATA COLLABORATIVE (last accessed Sept. 6, 2022), <https://www.ctdata.org/potential-voters>; *CT Opportunity Map*, CONN. HOUSING FINANCE AUTHORITY (last accessed Sept. 6, 2022), <https://www.chfa.org/about-us/ct-opportunity-map/>; Mary Buchanan & Mark Abraham, *Rising Neighborhood Income Inequality in Connecticut*, CONN. DATA HAVEN (June 6, 2013), <https://www.ctdatahaven.org/reports/rising-neighborhood-income-inequality-connecticut>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ballot Drop Box Usage by Year*, WASH. SECRETARY OF STATE, <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/research/ballot-drop-box-usage-by-year.aspx>; Melissa Santos, *Security and Ballot Drop Boxes: How it Works in WA*, CROSSCUT (Aug. 19, 2020), <https://crosscut.com/politics/2020/08/security-and-ballot-drop-boxes-how-it-works-wa>.

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permanent<sup>5</sup>? Please give a clear “yes” or “no” to the question and any explanation to support your response.

Yes. I believe that the ballot drop boxes were and continue to be a great idea. If permanent, I believe that there is more to do to ensure that they are safe, accessible, and secure for all voters. Surveillance cameras, a zone of protection from intimidation around boxes, and accessibility for people with disabilities are all concerns that need to be addressed and standards set.

### Voting and the Criminal Legal System

5. Every person that is 18 years of age or older in Connecticut should have a Constitutional right to vote, including people who are incarcerated. Will you support legislation which, like Vermont and Maine, extends voting rights to all people who are incarcerated in our state by 2024? Please give a clear “yes” or “no” to the question and any explanation to support your response.

No, I do not see this being adopted by 2024 although I believe it is a laudable longer-term goal. Our entire United States criminal justice system needs to be rethought, especially how rehabilitation is to be defined. Most of the incarcerated population will see their sentences end and return to their hometowns. By extended the right to vote to them during the time of incarceration, it strengthens a bond of normalcy and good citizenship. My immediate goal if elected Secretary of the State is to ensure that all incarcerated people who have not lost their right to vote under law, are provided with the opportunity to vote and offered the opportunity to register. It is not top-of-mind for Department of Corrections staff and there are many barriers to navigating the absentee ballot process while incarcerated.

6. In Connecticut, approximately 30 percent of people detained pretrial or who are incarcerated for misdemeanors retain their right to vote.<sup>6</sup> People who are incarcerated and have the right to vote often cannot because our state has no standardized process for incarcerated people to exercise this fundamental right. This results in an onerous administrative processes that can require extensive back-and-forth mailing, which discourages voting. Will you support legislation that

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<sup>5</sup> *Ballot Drop Box*, U.S. ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMMISSION (last accessed Sept. 8, 2022), [https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/electionofficials/vbm/Ballot\\_Drop\\_Box.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/electionofficials/vbm/Ballot_Drop_Box.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> See Sam Kuhn et al., *Improving Access to Voting in Connecticut Jails and Prisons*, CONN. SENTENCING COMM’N (May 2022), <https://ctsentencingcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Improving-Access-to-Voting-in-CT-Jails-Prisons.pdf>.



standardizes the absentee voting process for people who are incarcerated and increases voter registration outreach to Department of Correction facilities? Please give a clear “yes” or “no” to the question and any explanation to support your response.

Yes. My immediate goal if elected Secretary of the State is to ensure that all incarcerated people who have not lost their right to vote under law, are provided with the opportunity to vote and offered the opportunity to register. It is not top-of-mind for Department of Corrections staff and there are currently too many barriers to navigating the absentee ballot process while incarcerated. The process should not be any more onerous than for those serving in the military or living overseas.

### Modernization of Voting and Improving Voter Confidence

7. Connecticut is one of fifteen states that do not permit no-excuse absentee voting.<sup>7</sup> Will you support a constitutional amendment to permit no-excuse absentee voting? Please give a clear “yes” or “no” to the question and any explanation to support your response.

Yes. I was a co-sponsor of the Resolution passed during the 2021 session.

8. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, many states including Connecticut adopted forms of online ballot tracking. Currently, Connecticut permits voters to track their ballot by entering their information in the state voter lookup system; voters are not proactively notified during the process and must instead take it upon themselves to search for their ballot status. Nine states, including Rhode Island, have implemented advanced ballot tracking systems, such as BallotTrax, which has resulted in 78 percent average voter turnout compared to the national average of 55 percent.<sup>8</sup> Will you support the modernization of Connecticut’s online ballot tracking by adopting an

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<sup>7</sup> See Table 1: States with No-Excuse Absentee Voting, NAT’L CONF. STATE LEGISLATURES (July 12, 2022), <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-1-states-with-no-excuse-absentee-voting.aspx>; Table 2: Excuses to Vote Absentee, NAT’L CONF. STATE LEGISLATURES (July 12, 2022), <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-2-excuses-to-vote-absentee.aspx>.

<sup>8</sup> See *BallotTrax Releases National Data on the Impact of Mail-In Voting on the 2020 Presidential Election*, BALLOTTRAX (Nov. 5, 2020), available at <https://ballottrax.com/ballottrax-releases-national-data-on-impact-of-mail-in-voting/>; Dave Beaudoin, *44 States Allow Voters to Check the Status of Their Ballot Online*, BALLOTPEDIA NEWS (Oct. 28, 2020), <https://news.ballotpedia.org/2020/10/28/44-states-allow-voters-to-check-the-status-of-their-ballot-online/>.



automated system such as BallotTrax? Please give a clear “yes” or “no” to the question and any explanation to support your response.

Yes. I am not aware of BallotTrax specifically, but believe that we need a strong tracking system for election workers and voters alike.

9. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Connecticut experimented with no-excuse absentee voting through a combination of executive orders and emergency legislation during the 2020 presidential primary election and the general election. By all measures, this was an enormous success: approximately 35 percent of voters voted by absentee ballot—about four times more than the typical absentee voting rate. At the same time, the Secretary of the State’s office halved its typical absentee ballot rejection rate.<sup>9</sup> This experiment proved that expanding voting options is both widely popular with voters and extremely successful administratively. Will you support the automatic mailing of absentee ballot applications for every election? Please give a clear “yes” or “no” to the question and any explanation to support your response.

Yes, as long as the costs don’t outstrip the benefits and it is coupled with robust voter education. A law passed in 2021 allows eligible voters with a driver’s license to now apply online. It is new and since the earliest Connecticut could adopt no-excuse absentee voting is 2026, we have time to see how the capacity to request a ballot online increases or decreases participation and time to do a comprehensive study of the system that is right and works in concert with all of our other policies (e.g. in person early voting).

### Rooting Out Racism in Voting

10. In 2022, the legislature considered the Connecticut Voting Rights Act (SB 471),<sup>10</sup> which was an attempt to codify and expand on provisions of the federal Voting Rights Act in order to eliminate the persistent structural electoral processes in the state that continue to prevent people, especially Black and Latinx people, from voting. Connecticut’s history as the most regressive voting rights state in New England,

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<sup>9</sup> Press Release, Secretary of the State of Connecticut, Historic Number of Votes Cast by Absentee Ballot in the 2020 Election (Dec. 3, 2020), <https://portal.ct.gov/SOTS/Press-Releases/2020-Press-Releases/Historic-Number-of-Votes-Cast-by-Absentee-Ballot-in-the-2020-Election>.

<sup>10</sup> Connecticut Voting Rights Act, S.B. 471 (2022), <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2022/FC/PDF/2022SB-00471-R000454-FC.PDF>.



sometimes ranked fourth worst in the nation,<sup>11</sup> demonstrates the need for continued skepticism of any belief that voting rights are uniquely strong in this state. Will you support efforts to codify and expand elements of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in state law? Please give a clear “yes” or “no” to the question and any explanation to support your response.

- a. Will you support legislation that holds local governments with histories of voter discrimination accountable by requiring municipalities to demonstrate that changes to their voting policies will not result in disenfranchisement before the change may occur? **Yes.**
- b. Will you support legislation that would grant the State Elections Enforcement Commission and people harmed by voter intimidation, deception, or obstruction a civil right of action in courts to hold those that interfere with our right to vote accountable? **Yes.**
- c. In order to evaluate whether municipalities are in compliance with Connecticut Voting Rights Act standards, the state must modernize its ability to collect and evaluate disaggregated data on population and voter demographics, such as race and languages spoken at the municipal level, as well as records of the municipality’s relevant electoral practices while also preserving the privacy of voters. Will you support legislation to create a central hub for disaggregated election data and demographic information within the Office of the Secretary of the State? **Yes.**
- d. Although the federal Voting Rights Act codified language-related assistance in voting, the bar to trigger coverage is high and results in inadequate language assistance for substantial populations . Will you support legislation that would require a municipality to provide language-related assistance in voting at a lower minimum threshold than current federal Voting Rights Act standards?<sup>12</sup> **Yes.**

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<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Bill Theobald, *The Six Toughest States for Voting During the Pandemic*, FULCRUM (Apr. 29, 2020), <https://thefulcrum.us/voting/voting-during-coronavirus>; Russell Berman, *The Blue States That Make It Hardest to Vote*, ATLANTIC (Apr. 15, 2021), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/04/democrats-voting-rights-contradiction/618599/>.

<sup>12</sup> See *S.B. 471 OFA Fiscal Note*, CONN. OFFICE OF FISCAL ANALYSIS (2022), available at <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2022/FN/PDF/2022SB-00471-R000454-FN.PDF>.