

Testimony on H 7071—An Act Relating to Elections -- Mail Ballots

Common Cause Rhode Island opposes H 7071 that would shorten Rhode Island’s early voting period from the current 20 days prior to Election Day, to 14 days. We believe that voters should have choices for when and how they cast their ballots and early voting should be expanded, not contracted.

Rhode Island’s early voting system evolved out of the use of emergency mail ballots. Almost a decade ago several communities, including Westerly and Central Falls, began to brand emergency mail ballots as early voting. In 2020 the General Assembly changed the process for casting an emergency mail ballot, which previously mirrored the process of casting a regular mail ballot, to one that mirrors the process for voting on Election Day. The new process immediately proved popular for voters, made it easier to administer, and helped take pressure off of polling places on Election Day.

In 2022 the General Assembly renamed the emergency mail ballot process “early voting” as part of the Let RI Vote Act. That year the new system proved its value when a programming error led to the state’s accessible voting equipment showing incorrect choices on the Spanish-language ballot in four communities. That problem was quickly discovered in the first days of the early voting period and corrected before the vast majority of voters voted.

Not only does early voting lower the volume of voters on Election Day, and give election administrators a chance to troubleshoot problems, it provides voters the opportunity to cast their ballot at a time that is convenient for them. No longer do they have to worry that a life event, if it were to occur on Election Day, might cost them the opportunity to cast their ballot.

Currently, 46 states offer some form of in-person early voting. The average number of days of early voting offered is 20 days--exactly what Rhode Island currently requires.¹ Of the 46 states that offer in-person early voting, 21 states require at least one weekend day of early voting, with many more allowing for weekend voting.

Rhode Island should be looking to expand early voting to weekends, not reducing the number of days of early voting. This is particularly true before a presidential election when turnout is much higher than midterm elections.

Common Cause urges you to reject H 7071.

¹ See: <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/early-in-person-voting>