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The Honorable Members of the House Committee on State Government and Elections
82 Smith St.
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Support of House Bill 7662

Dear Chairman Shanley and Members of the House Committee on State Government and Elections,

As the Election Administrator for the City of Newport and on behalf of Chairwoman Sharon Connors of the Newport Canvassing Authority, I am writing to encourage you to **support** passage of **House Bill 7662**, which was introduced on behalf of the Secretary of State. This bill would allow unaffiliated voters to vote in party primaries, without becoming automatically affiliated with that party. We also support the Senate version of this legislation, **S-2418**, but recommend it adds the additional clarifications included in the House bill.

This bill solves multiple issues in modern election administration in the state of Rhode Island by modernizing an out-of-date process that no longer works in the best interests of the voters. It is strongly supported by a **unanimous** vote of the Rhode Island Town and City Clerks' Association, and has been supported by the state Board of Elections. **H-7662** allows voters who are already unaffiliated - the vast majority of which, per voter history records, also prefer to remain unaffiliated - to vote in the primary of their choice, just as they can under current law, but without the need to fill out a disaffiliation form following the primary. In essence, unaffiliated voters automatically would remain unaffiliated after voting in a primary.

Local election officials expend hundreds of hours following every election cycle processing tens of thousands of disaffiliation forms filled out at precinct polling locations. This is an enormous waste of time and resources, as the vast majority of those voters were unaffiliated going into primary and they wish to remain so afterwards. We are consuming huge amounts of public time and energy to, in effect, shuffle papers around desks. Each form also involves mailings to the voters confirming their disaffiliation when we process it - another unnecessary expense.

But there's another problem, which is growing due to the increased use of mail ballots and early voting. Unaffiliated voters who apply to vote by mail in a primary or vote during the early voting periods, are not provided a disaffiliation form. They must proactively seek out the longer registration form to update their party affiliation. Failing to do so, many voters remain automatically affiliated with the party from the primary post-election, and when they attempt to vote in a different primary during the next election, our office staff or poll workers must inform them that they are not eligible. This broken process often results in confrontational and understandably irritated phone calls from voters to our office personnel when voters realize, too late, that they have lost their ability to vote in the primary of their choice.

When this happens on election day itself, there is a third issue. Disgruntled voters often choose to vote a provisional ballot, hoping that it will be counted for the party of their choice instead of the one they are registered with. Post-election, exhausted office staff must spend valuable time adjudicating the disposition of provisional ballots. The majority of provisional ballots in a primary are for voters who claim to be registered with one party, but in fact are registered with another. In this circumstance, their provisional ballot would be disqualified and they are effectively disenfranchised that election. As election officials, we have seen this occur hundreds, if not thousands of times. We receive many angry and concerned phone calls and in-person visits from voters about this issue each election.

Unaffiliated voters should not be losing their right to vote over what amounts to mundane paperwork. By remaining unaffiliated after voting in a primary, a significant portion, if not the majority, of the above-referenced problems will be reduced or eliminated entirely. According to Rhode Island Secretary of State statistics, **a near majority of the state's voters - 47%, or over 338,000 - choose to remain unaffiliated.** Passage would ensure these voters are not disenfranchised needlessly for simply forgetting to disaffiliate, and save local election officials countless hours of time and precious resources during busy election seasons.

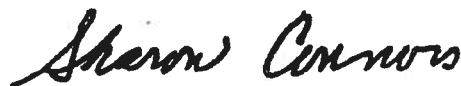
We strongly urge the General Assembly to consider passing this key reform, and thank the sponsors for introducing it with both the voters and the efficacy of the elections process in mind. It is long overdue, and will improve the process tremendously if enacted. The time is more critical now than ever to do that, with two statewide primaries and a busy presidential election season ahead of us in 2024. The House version of this bill, as mentioned, includes several clarifications to the administrative process to help better implement this change, which we hope the Senate will consider adding to its version of the legislation.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this important legislation.

Respectfully submitted,



Hugh Moren
Election Administrator



Sharon Connors
Chair, Newport Canvassing Authority