

Rhode Island*Holding Power Accountable***Testimony on H 5517--An Act Relating to Elections--Voting Districts and Officials--Polling Place Cap**Position: Support

Common Cause Rhode Island supports H 5517 which, among other things, increases the maximum number of registered voters per polling place.

In 2010 and 2011 Common Cause Rhode Island vehemently opposed efforts to raise the polling place cap from 1,900 voters to 4,000 voters. The General Assembly increased the cap to 3,000 voters in 2012. Our opposition was based on the fact that the Assembly had done little to allow voters to vote early, whether in person or by mail. In fact, Rhode Island had one of the highest rates of Election Day voting, at more than 95%.

Since 2012 the General Assembly has made voting more accessible by offering access to early voting and voting by mail to all Rhode Islanders. As a result far fewer voters are casting their ballot at their polling place on Election Day. What was once more than 95% of voters now is closer to 55% who vote at their polling place on Election Day. As a result election administrators need to shift some resources to early voting and mail balloting.

We believe that H 5517 presents a reasonable compromise for providing relief for cities and towns without unduly burdening voters. It would raise the precinct cap to 3,500 voters, which is still below the 4,000 that was proposed back in 2010-11.

It is worth noting that in 2023 the General Assembly enacted § 17-11-1(b) establishing uniform standards for polling place locations which provides significant protections and oversight for where polling places may be located. That significantly mitigates concerns about increasing an increase in the number of registered voters per polling place.

We urge the Committee to give strong consideration to this bill. As elections continue to evolve in Rhode Island, our laws need to keep pace.