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## **Voting In Connecticut, Then And Now**

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Americans weren't always as blasé about voting as they are today. To choose one's leaders was a precious thing when kings and queens ruled the world by divine right.

Election Day was a holiday in colonial New England. There were parades, feasts, celebratory sermons and booming cannons. In Connecticut, citizens and their families often traveled great distances to vote. Their patriotic duty done, they would gather and gorge themselves on Election Cake, a state tradition since at least 1771.

Today, the nation that pioneered modern democracy has fallen behind its former oppressor. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that in 2016 just 64 percent of the voting-age population was registered to vote, compared with 91 percent in the United Kingdom, according to the Pew Research Center. That same year, more than 2 out of 5 registered voters sat out the presidential election.

### **Connecticut Beats National Average**

Connecticut easily bests that national average — turnout was nearly 77 percent in 2016 — and it is trying to do better. Citizens can now register at the state Department of Motor Vehicles, and more than 200,000 new voters have been added to the rolls in the two years since this was implemented. That figure represents a hefty increase more common in the run-up to presidential elections than next month's midterms.

“In regards to increasing voter registration, we're so good by now I'm wondering how much more we can do,” said Denise Merrill, Connecticut's secretary of the state, whose office oversees elections. “The voter registration at the DMV has made a huge difference ... now it's time to look at motivational aspects of getting people to vote.”

Roughly 2.1 million Connecticut citizens are registered to vote, or about three-quarters of the state's voting-age population.

### **Making Voting Convenient**

To foster higher electoral participation, states like Connecticut have been trying to make voting more convenient. In addition to DMV and online voter registration, citizens here can now register and vote on Election Day itself. Most states — 34 and the District of Columbia — offer early voting. Three others go even further with “All Mail Voting.” A ballot is mailed to every registered voter, who can do their civic duty by post or in person.

Connecticut, however, does not have early voting because Election Day procedures are written into the state's constitution, which specifies not only the single day when people can vote but also the excuses needed to obtain an absentee ballot (such as being out of town on Election Day). In 2014, a proposed constitutional amendment to allow early voting — and to eliminate the excuse requirement for absentee ballots — was narrowly defeated by Connecticut voters. Its supporters blamed the wording on the ballot for its demise.

Since then proposals to allow early voting on as many as five days (but minus the change for absentee ballots) have not cleared the first hurdle, the Connecticut General Assembly. But Merrill said she “probably” will try again in the next legislative session. Among the objections to early voting is that it would cost towns money to implement.

Merrill added: “I am very interested in a proposal to allow 16-year-olds to pre-register to vote. I am a big proponent of young people getting as much practice in citizenship as possible at as young an age as possible.” She said her office is also “looking at ways we can be at every naturalization ceremony, that we do something within the curriculum that is used to instruct people applying for citizenship.”

For all the focus on early voting, studies have shown that it doesn't have a measurable impact at the polls. Vermont implemented it more than a decade ago, along with “no excuse” absentee ballots (26 other states have this provision), but according to Will Senning, that state's director of elections, “It doesn't seem to drive overall turnout.” Even so, more people are using the early option every year, he said. “It makes it more convenient, and that's important.”

## **Lack Of Knowledge Lowers Turnout**

Luther Weeks of Glastonbury, who runs two websites devoted to electoral issues, believes turnout isn't a function of convenience but rather of voter knowledge, or lack thereof.

“The reason people don't vote, by and large, is because they have no idea about the candidates,” he said. “They know whose is running for president and maybe U.S. senator, but when it comes to the local election, many voters don't have any knowledge of the candidates.”

And it follows that participation in midterm elections pales compared with that in presidential years. In 2014, the most recent midterm election, just 55.6 percent of registered voters in Connecticut went to the polls.

Weeks is also skeptical on how effective DMV voter registration will be: “You may be getting more people on the rolls who may not be all that interested in voting.”

One procedure that studies have shown does increase citizen participation is All Mail Voting, but Jane Eyes, in charge of advocacy for the Connecticut League of Women Voters, doesn't give that much of a chance here:

“If you look at the cast of characters in this whole debate, there would be lots of objections to that. Connecticut can’t get off the dime on a lot of things. Not even being able to push [early voting] through is amazing.”