Hartford Courant
7/13/2020

Flood of absentee ballots expected

Election officials concerned about possible delays in reporting results; Republicans see potential for fraud

Ballot drop boxes have been installed outside West Hartford Town Hall. (Brad Horrigan/Hartford Courant )

By Christopher Keating

HARTFORD — Expecting the most absentee ballots in state history, local election officials are preparing for a long night on the Aug. 11 primary election and anticipate potential delays in reporting race results.

Prompted by fears of the spread of the coronavirus, Gov. Ned Lamont signed an executive order that allowed the state to send 1.2 million absentee ballot applications to every active registered Democrat and Republican across the state for the primary. Lamont and Secretary of the State Denise Merrill, the state’s chief elections official, both say that they want voters, particularly the elderly, to be able to vote without concerns about traveling to their local polling place and catching the virus.

Gabe Rosenberg, a spokesman for Merrill, said there is “no question” that the absentee ballots filed will be the most in state history because the mailing of the applications is unprecedented.

“I don’t think it will be close” to past elections, he said.

The primary will serve as an important test as officials are expected to again expand absentee ballot access for the presidential election in November.

Based on statistics over the past 26 years, about 7% of the votes cast statewide are by absentee ballot in Connecticut. This year, that number is expected to jump far higher.

In Simsbury, Democratic Registrar of Voters Karen E. Cortes said the town has already received 2,000 completed ballots that have been sent back to town hall, and she expects the town to reach the recent record of 3,000 absentees that were cast in the 2008 presidential election between Barack Obama and John McCain — the highest number in the past 12 years in Simsbury.

Cortes hopes the state legislature will change the law in an upcoming special session to help speed up the process of counting absentee ballots. For example, she wants to start counting the ballots earlier so election results are not delayed past midnight as they sometimes have been in the past.

“We can’t even slit open the envelopes until after 10 a.m. on Election Day,” Cortes said. “Think of the time involved in just opening 3,000 envelopes. And then taking the ballots out and opening the inner envelopes. I think with the current set of statutes it’s going to be a very difficult task to accomplish.”

In the 2008 election, Cortes said she was still working at town hall at 2:30 a.m. When asked if she thinks she could be there again at 2:30 a.m. for the August primary, she responded, “Absolutely.”
Rosenberg said Merrill is considering issuing an administrative order that would allow the absentee envelopes to be opened before 10 a.m. on Election Day, but no final decisions would be made until after seeing what changes might be made during the special session by the legislature.

At the moment, Cortes said she believes she is “in good shape” with 65 paid workers hired for the night. Workers will be dispatched to four polling locations in Simsbury in the traditional fashion, but Cortes said, “I think the vast majority will be voting absentee.”

Concerns about manpower, voter fraud

While some town officials think they can handle the large deluge of ballots, others are not so sure. State Republican Party Chairman J.R. Romano said he has concerns that registrars and town clerks will be overwhelmed.

“There’s no question that this is going to be a manpower issue for a lot of local towns with some of the numbers they’re projecting by people who will vote by absentee,” he said. “It’s going to cost more money and manpower. It’s going to put a burden on communities. ... This is going to be a long night.”

Romano is also concerned about potential voter fraud, saying residents who have died are still on the voter rolls.

“We have evidence of people who received absentee ballot applications who have been deceased for more than a decade,” Romano said, adding that the ballots are supposed to be sent only to active voters. “We found an example of a voter in Enfield who had voted — it was a clerical error — and he had been dead since 2012, and someone accidentally checked his name off. ... Who is checking the signatures? Who is checking all of this paperwork that is coming back?”

He predicted there will be problems in races with tight results.

“We end up in court, it seems, every election,” Romano said.

But Merrill and others have noted that instances of absentee ballot fraud are exceedingly rare. There have been 1.5 million absentee ballots cast in Connecticut in the past 30 years and fewer than 20 convictions for absentee ballot fraud, officials said.

Rosenberg said of the 1.2 million absentee ballot applications that were mailed for the primary about 100,000 were returned as undeliverable because the voters had changed their addresses or had died. Connecticut’s undeliverable rate of about 8% is a little more than half the national average of 15% for election mail, he said.

And while Romano and others have expressed concerns about increased costs for towns to hire extra election workers, Rosenberg said the state has been allotted $5.4 million in federal money for COVID-related election expenses, including paying for additional workers and paying for the mailing of the applications.

Betsy Gara, executive director of the 110-member Council of Small Towns, said some costs towns face won’t be covered.

“Federal funding is only available for the [absentee] applications, not the ballots or the additional costs of tracking the increased number of ballots or counting the increased number of ballots,” she said.
New this year are special ballot boxes that have been bolted to the ground in front of many town halls where voters can drop off their absentee ballot rather than mailing it in. About 120 boxes have been shipped so far around the state, and the 10 largest communities will have two boxes each. Other states have been using similar boxes for decades.

Senate Republican leader Len Fasano said he is concerned about the security of the boxes. He said they should be placed inside town halls, rather than kept outside.

“If someone were to throw some chemical in there or something to destroy the ballots, I don’t know how you deal with that issue,” Fasano said. “If you have a lot of absentee ballots out there, somebody could get a lot and stuff the ballot box, so I have some concerns.”

Rosenberg, though, said the ballot boxes are as secure as any U.S. mailbox, where important documents and checks are dropped on a regular basis. He said most town halls have video surveillance cameras that would capture anyone seeking to disrupt the election.

“Destroying ballots is a Class C felony in Connecticut, but it’s also a federal crime to destroy ballots in a federal election year,” Rosenberg said. “And because Connecticut law treats those as mailboxes, it would also be mail fraud. If someone pours bleach down there, they’re going to go to federal prison for a long time.”

Lamont said he believes the state and towns will be ready on Aug. 11.

“All I know is the absentee ballots are all carefully ID’d, so we know exactly who they come from, and that’s easy to quantify,” he said. “Every other state — or half the other states — are doing it, and they’re doing it successfully. ... I think there will be an enormous difference [with turnout in November]. So this is a bit of a test run for us to get it right. We’ll get it right.”

Christopher Keating can be reached at ckeating@courant.com.