



BARRINGTON RHODE ISLAND

Office of the Town Clerk
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March 15, 2025

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

RE: Support for H-5517 (Voter Precinct Cap Increase)

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

I am writing in strong support of H-5517, which would help to conduct our elections process more efficiently by modifying language related to the voter precinct cap.

This bill is supported by the RI Town and City Clerks' Association, RI Board of Elections, RI League of Cities and Towns, and Secretary of State Gregg M. Amore, among other organizations.

In past sessions, we note that Common Cause RI the RI Commission for Human Rights, and numerous local boards of canvassers, have all testified in favor of this legislation. Similar bills to increase the cap to 3,500 have twice passed the House of Representatives, including unanimous passage by the House in 2023 (70-0), which we note and sincerely appreciate.

The legislation increases the maximum number of registered voters that can be assigned to a precinct from not substantially more than 3,000 to 3,500. This change is long overdue, as due to the advent of early voting in 2020, and increased use of mail ballots since 2016, one-third of voters no longer use precinct polls on Election Day.

What does this mean? In a typical 50% turnout election, 1,500 out of a theoretical maximum 3,000 registered voters will vote – but of those, only 1,000 are voting at the polling place on Election Day, at a maximum-sized polling location designed to handle up to 3,000 registered voters. This means poll workers, voting machines, and other critical but finite resources are being significantly underutilized at great expense. Election administrators need these essential resources to support other election operations, including mail ballot processing and early voting, because that's where a significant share of voters are choosing to cast their ballot.

In 2023, the General Assembly added a series of new protections for the establishment of polling places in state law, that had never before existed. These new uniform standards for polling places now include: (1) Accessibility of the polling place to historically disenfranchised communities, including cultural groups, ethnic groups, and minority groups; (2) Proximity of polling places to dense concentrations of voters; (3) Accessibility of polling places by public transportation; (4) Ensuring equitable distribution of polling places in the city or town; and (5) Maximizing voter participation, including through the use of community centers and public gathering places as polling places.

Increasing the cap from 3,000 to 3,500, with these uniform standards for polling place selection now already codified, is good for voters and increases the efficiency of election administration – which has become increasingly complex. It allows state and local election officials to allocate our finite resources where they are needed most, to best serve voters, which is why this legislation has enjoyed widespread support from state and municipal election administrators, good government groups, and local boards of canvassers across Rhode Island. One key factor to note is that increasing the cap only affects a small number of polling places – it would not result in any kind of widespread polling location closures, because the numbers demonstrably would prevent that from occurring. Existing law also prevents closing any poll located in a low-income or elderly residential development. The only impact is on existing, large polling places that are near to the existing cap, and in danger of exceeding it as more voters register. If an existing poll exceeds the cap, it will be required to be split up into two precincts.

This means that voters – accustomed to going to their usual poll – would have to go to a new, further away, and less ideal poll, which also has to be staffed and supplied at significant cost of resources for election offices. In Barrington alone, several polls are approaching the current cap and are in danger of needing to be split in two, yet there is no operational need or rationale to do so, aside from the state cap number law being artificially low.

This bill adds yet another new layer of protection by requiring a unanimous vote of the local board and approval from the State Board of Elections if, during the normal rise and fall in voter registrations in an election year, a polling place exceeds the cap number. This provision is only intended to prevent an existing poll from needing to be split into two polling places unnecessarily, which would be to the detriment of the voters, and tie up significant resources including poll workers and finite voting equipment for no good operational reason.

With each election that has passed since redistricting in 2022, Rhode Island's election officials have proven that our polling locations around the state can handle more voters than they are currently serving; lines have not been reported as an issue, and wait times have either been reasonable – or even non-existent – in even some of the highest turnout elections in Rhode Island the last several years. The data and the facts are clear, and they support this important efficiency in elections administration that local election offices can use to better serve the voters.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions regarding these two bills, please do not hesitate to contact Nick Lima, Elections Committee Chair for the Rhode Island Town and City Clerks' Association at 401-780-3128, or via email at nlima@cranstonri.gov.

Local election officials strongly support this legislation, and we are hopeful the cap increase can pass in order to prevent the unnecessary splitting up of some existing polling places in upcoming general elections.

Very truly yours,

Meredith J. DeSisto, CMC
Barrington Town Clerk

Cc: Nick Lima, Elections Committee Chair for RTCCA