



Issue: Absentee Ballots

Team Members: Niels Heilmann, Adhlere Coffy

Provide an overview of this issue, including background information and history.

Absentee ballots, used properly, serve an important role in ensuring all citizens' voices are heard and votes counted. Specifically, absentee ballots enfranchise those who would otherwise face hardship in getting to the polls. According to CT.gov, the following are reasons to vote by absentee ballot, **if they are unable to appear** at their polling place on the day of election / primary 1) active service in the U.S. armed forces; 2) absence from town during all the hours of voting; 3) illness; 4) physical disability; 5) his or her religion forbids secular activity on that day; 6) his or her required performance of duties as a primary, referendum, or election official at a polling place other than his or her own during all the hours on that day.

If any of these six reasons apply to you, you might need to vote by absentee ballot! In order to do this, you must fill out an application for an absentee ballot. Absentee Ballot Applications are publicly available on the Town Clerk's page on the City Website at www.bridgeportct.gov.

Once your application is received and accepted by the Town Clerk, your absentee ballot will be mailed to you. The Town Clerk mails out absentee ballots on a rolling basis starting three weeks ahead of any election.

You, the voter, then must complete your ballot at home and mail it back into the Town Clerk.

There are strict rules governing the issuance, observation and return of absentee ballots. Information for candidates and party / campaign workers is found here:
http://www.sots.ct.gov/sots/LIB/sots/ElectionServices/Misc/ABchartwarningREV9_051.pdf

These rules are in place to eliminate undue influence on the vote by those implementing the absentee balloting. This is especially important because the elderly and disabled are vulnerable to improper influence.

Without the sacred privacy of the ballot box, absentee ballots are vulnerable to manipulation.

Potential common absentee ballot misuses include:

- Observed voting or *perceived observed voting*. Residents may feel pressure to vote for the party, candidate, etc that is present in the room. They may fear retribution for voting against an eventual winner. Importantly, if there is not high transparency that the couriers handling the ballots will not see the vote, this fear may still exist even if direct observation does not happen.
- Campaigns sending absentee ballots to voters who did not request them by application.
- Bribery. This can be outright (cash) or subtle (creating a feeling of obligation by providing free pizza)
- Other?

What is the current state of this issue in Bridgeport and/or CT? How is it relevant to our community? Think about ways it aligns with BPTGN's mission, vision, and core values where possible.

Two things seem sure for a Bridgeport election. We will vote on a Tuesday or Thursday and one or more parties will have a grievance about the use of absentee ballots. Bridgeport has a long history of accusations, and far more importantly, admissions of guilt with regard to the misuse of absentee ballots. There is both hard evidence and soft evidence of absentee ballot misuse in Bridgeport.

Hard evidence: a history of fines and convictions:

A CT Post article lists 14 violations that resulted in fines or suspensions from 1988 to 2004, a six year span:

<http://www.ctpost.com/news/article/Absentee-ballot-fraud-has-long-history-in-2231916.php>

DTC was fined this year \$2,680 for using an operative to obtain absentee ballot applications illegally:

<http://www.ctpost.com/local/article/Bridgeport-Democratic-Town-Committee-must-pay-11294699.php>

Soft evidence: our numbers are skewed toward absentee ballots as a % of votes

NEED TO COMPLETE THIS RESEARCH-

- We have seen in many articles that the % of votes that are absentee are above those of comparable cities but we'd like hard data
- Accusations in the past have included the fact that many buildings have 19 absentee ballot requests, where 20+ would trigger outside supervision. Again, we'd like hard data to confirm.

It should be noted that there are current officials in the Bridgeport political system that have been both accused of, and punished for prior infractions on absentee balloting.

It should be noted that the Democratic Party in the State of Connecticut may have an incentive to continue the current practice. Since Bridgeport has a massive skew of registered Democrats vs other parties, improper absentee balloting in Bridgeport may help Dems state-wide.

What are ways people can engage in this issue and/or actions people can take?

There are various potential ways to make our elections more transparent around absentee ballots. They vary from law changes to local grassroots efforts:

- *Local educational efforts.* There are several locations in Bridgeport that receive a heavy concentration of absentee ballots. Citizens are not likely to know the rules governing absentee ballots. This causes confusion that can be preyed upon. Educational efforts could be focused on the areas of high absentee ballot concentration, ie elderly / assisted living facilities. Form could range from posting the rules of absentee ballots, to lecture / seminar on what's allowed or not.
- *Outside observation.* Given the history of hard evidence of absentee ballot issues in Bridgeport, we could call for an outside party to monitor the use of absentee ballots in our elections
 - ACLU
 - League of women voters
 - FBI

- Other fair election groups
 - State of CT SOTS or SEEC
- *Rule changes at the state level*
 - Initiatives to level the playing field and take the power out of the hands of political operatives, with maximum enfranchisement including
 - Allowing early voting. See <https://www.vote.org/early-voting-calendar/>
 - Allowing “convenience” or “no excuse” absentee balloting.
 - Initiatives to further increase supervision without disenfranchising voters