

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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### **An Act Further Regulating Election Practices**

Poll workers! What a boring subject. That is what I thought a few weeks ago when the legislature passed a bill on that topic, but circumstances in the Longmeadow primary election last month made the law an important new development. This is what happened in the town of Longmeadow, and here is how the new law might help.

As we all have heard by now, town election officials could not certify the vote count on election night, and they went home before the job was completed. The lateness of the count was critical to all of Western Massachusetts because the town's election results, when finally reported, changed the outcome in two close regional races.

The experience provides the most extreme example as it demonstrates an ongoing problem for elections throughout the state. Although there are many underlying causes for the mishap, one of those reasons may be the shortage of election officials.

Election officials, townspeople whose town employment consists of working only on the few election days each year, are becoming harder to find. The same demographic pattern that placed more women in the workplace has removed them from the set of available (very) part time workers.

What has the legislature done about this?

We passed a law to make it easier to hire election workers. Previous law required poll workers to be town residents, registered voters and members of a political party. That might not sound like a restrictive set of qualifications, but they have now been eased.

Non-residents, students and unenrolled voters are now invited in. High school students who are 16 or 17 years old may now work limited hours at the polls, even though they are too young to be voters themselves. Non-resident citizens who live in Massachusetts can work. And unenrolled voters can participate, so long as two thirds of workers are Republicans and Democrats, represented equally.

Concerning non-residents, the law simply recognizes another reality of modern times. Town workers may not live in town, but they can be good workers. Now we can assign such employees to election work so long as they live and vote in Massachusetts. And although party membership is a traditional requirement, the increasing number of unenrolled voters makes their inclusion a sensible change.

Do not worry that election days will empty out the high school. If a town chooses to solicit student participation, it faces significant limits on the number and hours they can work. I hope we will give it a try. Many of the today's teenagers are interested in politics, and the participation in elections can serve as an incentive to retain and increase that interest.

Gov. Romney signed the law on September 19<sup>th</sup>, just a day before last month's primary election. Unlike most new laws, it is effective immediately because "it is hereby declared to be an emergency law, necessary for the immediate preservation of the public convenience."

The first step to solving a problem is recognizing that a problem exists. The legislature has recognized a general lack of people willing to work on municipal election days. And we have offered a solution. If a town's election workers are in very short supply, the law can be activated immediately. Otherwise, it offers a safety valve for future personnel shortages. We will now watch to see how effectively our proposal meets the needs.