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Affiliate and Participate: Don't Miss the August 8th Primary

Susan Bysiewicz

On August 8th, voters will have the opportunity to choose candidates for Governor, United States Senate, United States Congress, and the General Assembly.

Unfortunately, our state's largest block of voters – nearly 900,000 registered voters who are unaffiliated – will not be able to vote in the primary. Party rules prohibit unaffiliated voters from voting in Democratic or Republican primaries, meaning forty-four percent of our nearly two million active voters are left out of a critical piece of the electoral process.

The good news is these voters still have a chance to decide who will represent them. Any unaffiliated voter has until Monday, August 7th, at 12 p.m. to register as a Democrat or Republican and vote. There are fifteen different races scheduled on August 8th, including Democratic primaries for Governor and U.S. Senate, a Republican primary in the 1st Congressional District, and twelve primaries in General Assembly Districts throughout the state.

As Connecticut's chief elections official, I will spend the next three weeks encouraging every possible unaffiliated voter and unregistered citizen to register and take part in the August primary vote. We are calling it our "Affiliate and Participate" campaign.

I will also keep working with Town Clerks, Registrars of Voters, the League of Women Voters, and as many other civic groups as possible to encourage people to register to vote for the November election.

Democracy begins in the voting booth. In a society based on the will of the people, no right is as fundamental or precious as choosing who our leaders will be and who will best address the issues most important to our future

United States soldiers are fighting right now in Iraq and Afghanistan to protect the burgeoning freedoms in these countries, and they have made progress in bringing our American ideals to these parts of the world. Free elections have been held in both countries for the first time in decades thanks to those brave men and women who serve. Women, too, can now vote and run for office in both countries.

We owe it to the 300,000 military veterans living in Connecticut, the ones who have put their lives on the line to defend freedom at home and abroad, to take our elections seriously and to vote. We owe it to the 900 Connecticut men and women serving in the War on Terror right now. We owe to the memory of the 2,500 men and women who have

died fighting in this war, and to the thirty from Connecticut who have lost their lives in service of their country.

The efforts of these brave men and women to bring freedom to Iraq and Afghanistan show the importance of the individual vote, and that there is no such thing as a wasted or meaningless vote. The value of this freedom was made clear by a group of Iraqi women who visited me in my State Capitol office just two months ago, women who finally voted freely and even ran for office in their home country in February 2005. The looks on their faces alone spoke volumes of what it meant to at last have a say, to at last have a voice of their own.

We can help to honor these women and the millions of others in Iraq and Afghanistan who now celebrate the right to vote by participating in the state primaries and the General Election. If people know they will be away on vacation for the August 8th primary, they can ask their local registrar for an absentee ballot as early as today. Our democracy is a model for the rest of the world and should not be taken for granted.

Voter turnout at the polls for recent primaries has been less than inspiring, with only the 1998 four-way Democratic race for U.S. Congress in the First District generating a turnout larger than 30 percent (34.5 percent, to be exact). The two parties have held a total of eight primaries for Governor, U.S. Senate, U.S. Congress, and statewide office since 1994, and all have drawn only between 17 and 25 percent of the voters.

We have got to do better than that.

We owe it to ourselves to participate on August 8th. The best way to strengthen our democracy at home and abroad is to vote.

Susan Bysiewicz is the Secretary of the State of Connecticut.