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## **Let voters fill vacant Senate seats**

By Susan Bysiewicz

PICTURE this: An aspiring, inspiring young U.S. senator is elected president and in doing so breaks a centuries-old racial barrier. As he resigns his seat to become leader of the free world, the governor of his state, having the power to appoint his replacement with no confirmation process, is caught on tape by federal agents, allegedly soliciting bribes from those who may want the job.

The governor is impeached for his transgressions. But before he's kicked out of office, he appoints a new senator. Just weeks later, that new senator faces calls to resign after admitting he failed to disclose that, while lobbying for the Senate appointment, he was trying to raise money for the corrupt governor.

The scandal surrounding Illinois U.S. Sen. Roland Burris and former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich reads like a good plot for a novel. But, this is not fiction. It is not a joke. It is, unfortunately, a disturbing illustration of why Connecticut should enact a law mandating any U.S. Senate vacancy be filled by a special election.

A seat in the U.S. Senate is a public trust, not a door prize to be handed out to the highest bidder. When a Senate seat becomes vacant, the decision on a replacement should be in the hands of the people, not in the hands of a single politician who might succumb to political pressure or their own greed.

Sadly, the Burris appointment is not the first time a governor has acted improperly while filling a Senate vacancy.

In Alaska, Sen. Frank Murkowski was elected governor in 2002, then appointed his daughter Lisa to fill his vacated seat in Washington. State lawmakers were so incensed by this obvious nepotism that they enacted a law mandating special elections to fill Senate vacancies.

The Massachusetts legislature did the same thing in 2004, overriding a veto by the governor then, Mitt Romney. Romney had pledged to appoint a conservative Republican to fill the Senate seat of Democrat John Kerry if Kerry were elected president that year.

There have been plenty of other political games played with Senate

replacements, including nine governors who appointed themselves to fill the vacancy.

Enough is enough. Already at the federal level, a constitutional amendment is moving through Congress that would mandate special elections to fill U.S. Senate vacancies. While I support this effort, Connecticut should pass a similar law now. Five states have taken this step and we should be next. After all, U.S. House vacancies in Connecticut are filled by special elections. Why should the Senate be different?

In fact, prior to 1947, Connecticut law required special elections to fill Senate vacancies. Though there was no legislative reference as to why this was changed, some historians speculate it was done for political reasons. The change was made during a brief period when Republican Gov. James McConaughy worked with a General Assembly controlled by his party.

A bill in front of the General Assembly this session would provide for a special election to take place 150 days after a U.S. Senate vacancy occurs. That would give both Republicans and Democrats plenty of time to hold nominating conventions or primaries to choose their candidates. More importantly, it would ensure that the critical decision on who represents us in the U.S. Senate is left in the hands of the voters, where it belongs.

Unfortunately, I already have seen what can happen in Connecticut when a governor acts corruptly and makes decisions to benefit political friends after receiving illegal gifts such as a hot tub. Why wait for the next scandal before we realize that choosing a U.S. senator is too important a task to be left to one person who might not act in our best interests? This is not about politics. This is about a long overdue and necessary reform to our election laws. Connecticut voters have the right to choose who represents them in the U.S. Senate.

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