



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF MAINE

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TO: The Honorable John Atwood, Chair
Members of the Commission to Study the Conduct of Elections in Maine

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Good afternoon. My name is Sarah Walton. I am a resident of Augusta, and I am a current director and former president of the League of Women Voters of Maine. The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages the informed and active participation of citizens in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

Protecting the right of every citizen to vote and encouraging citizens to exercise the right to vote are keys to our democracy and central to the mission of the League of Women Voters. Voting is a means for people to choose their leaders and to hold their leaders accountable for their policies and their conduct in office. In this country, we've had a long and variable history of whom we have permitted to vote and how many hurdles we've placed in their way. Over two centuries, we have made hard-fought progress toward universal suffrage, from the elimination of property qualifications for white men, through the abolition of suffrage qualifications based on race, to granting women the right to vote, and outlawing poll taxes and literacy tests.

Finally, in 1971, the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, allowing more young adults to participate in the democratic process and to have a stronger voice in shaping the governmental policies that affect them. Breaking down of barriers to voter participation has been one of the great successes in the evolution of American democracy. Maine has long been a leader in allowing all of our citizens to vote – something of which we all have a right to be proud.

The issue that I wish to address today on behalf of the League of Women Voters of Maine is the importance of encouraging – not discouraging – the exercise of the voting rights of all citizens 18 years and older who have established residency in the municipality where they wish to vote. In particular, students have a constitutional right to register and vote in the place they truly consider to be “home” — whether that's their parents' house, their own apartment, or their dorm room.ⁱ

The meaning of “establishing residency” for purposes of voting needs to be more clearly understood and communicated. Courts have made clear that residency in a municipality for purposes of voting may be established by people living in temporary housing, including adult

students. It doesn't matter whether they will live there for two months, two years or twenty. The U.S. Supreme Court held in 1979 in the *Symm* case that adult students should receive the same presumption of residency as other citizens in the municipality.

It's not only the law, it's what's right. We have a shared responsibility in an inclusive democracy to build a culture of civic engagement starting with first-time voters. Whether they are from Maine or from away – whether they will stay in Maine or move – we have a patriotic obligation to encourage young people to vote and to take an interest in civic life while they are in our state, as we hope our sister states will do for young people who may be future residents of Maine.

And voting is habit-forming: when young people learn the voting process and vote for the first time, they are more likely to do so again when they are older. If an individual has been motivated to get to the polls once, they are more likely to return. So, getting young people to vote early is key to raising a new generation of voters.ⁱⁱ

Our job should be to make sure that the first voting experience is a welcoming one and that first-time voters will be excited and interested to do it again the next time.

Maine should not diminish these established rights; we should encourage them. On behalf of the League of Women Voters of Maine, I urge that you support efforts to encourage -- not discourage -- the exercise of the constitutionally-recognized right to vote by adult students and others who may be in temporary housing.

Thank you.

ⁱ See also the Brennan Center for Justice, <http://www.brennancenter.org/content/election2012>

ⁱⁱ For more on student voting, see the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, <http://www.civicyouth.org/>