



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF MAINE

PO Box 863
Augusta, ME 04332-0863

(207) 622-0256
lwvme@gwi.net

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

Date: October 4, 2012

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission, my name is Valerie Marsh. I am a resident of Pittsfield, and I am a volunteer board member of the League of Women Voters of Maine. Thank you for the ongoing opportunity to share the views of the League as your public hearings continue around the state.

I have read testimony, memos, and news accounts regarding the information you have received to date. Despite the likelihood of your hearing, yet again, information that has previously been offered, I appreciate the opportunity to share my strongly held beliefs. The very repetition of concerns is telling in itself. While some among us today, including myself, may reiterate points previously shared, good government listens to its citizens, and for that, we at the League applaud your own commitment of time and patience. Thank you.

As you know, the League has worked tirelessly for equal access to the polls since our inception more than 90 years ago in the fight to give women the vote. Voting is, at the most elemental level, an American right, duty and responsibility. LBJ once say, "The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men." One might add, women, too.

It is those differences among us that trouble me greatly with regard to measures that would result in restricted voting. Voter ID requirements disproportionately affect those who are different – the poor, the disabled, the elderly. I worked with the homeless for 16 years, and I know firsthand how difficult it is to acquire documents necessary to obtain a photo ID. It takes money, it can involve transportation, and it takes time.

I have heard and read opinions of exasperation among people who believe everyone does or should have an ID as a matter of course— examples have been cited that include the need for identification at banks, to travel, to make purchases, and more. But those assertions do not take into account the differences among us. My experience is that the culture associated with extreme poverty typically does not include using banks, driving cars, traveling abroad, using credit cards or checks, etc. It may be difficult for those of us with means to imagine a world

without ID, but it surely exists for the poorest among us. And yet, it should not impede their right to vote -- or nullify their voices.

The League of Women Voters opposes laws that diminish access to the polls because:

- They threaten the voting rights of far too many eligible voters.
- The cost is prohibitive.
- There is no evidence to substantiate the need for such drastic measures.

It is the last point that concerns me most. I do not understand why Maine has pursued efforts to correct a problem that does not exist and that would result in the suppression of votes.

In 2007, the McCormick Tribune Foundation, in partnership with the Center for the Study of The American Electorate at American University, convened a conference to examine the root causes of civic disengagement. The conference was developed in response to a 30 year decline in the United States regarding citizen participation in civic life. Their premise was simple: a legitimate democracy depends on the consent of the governed, and its health depends on civic involvement. Within that framework, voting is a minimum threshold for participation in a democratic society. The outcome of the conference was a report that found, among 172 world democracies, that the United States ranked 139th specifically in voter participation. *

Despite our poor global ranking, the League believes that the United States is still the greatest country in the world. Further, we are proud that Maine has been identified as a leader in voter participation. Imagine what our global ranking might be if other states followed our example.

Please, let us not carve a new path that would disenfranchise so many citizens. Without a meaningful vote, there can be no equality before the law, no equal access, and no equal opportunity. And the more voting rates decline, the more politics become dominated by those with special interests, leaving representational democracy behind.

Thank you for your time and attention.

*McCormick Tribune Foundation. 2007. *Civic Disengagement in Our Democracy*. Chicago: McCormick Tribune Foundation.