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

FROM: Jill Ward, Vice President, League of Women Voters of Maine

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I know you have already heard from several colleagues who also volunteer with the League of Women Voters of Maine, and we have been pleased to participate in these hearings to share with you our knowledge of and experience with a range of voting issues here in Maine and from across the country. As you know civic engagement and the integrity of the electoral process are core League values, and it is through processes like these hearings that we are able to put these values into action.

First, I would like to add my voice to the chorus of testimony you have heard to date asking that whatever policies and practices you consider, they all be viewed through a lens of what works for voters. Voting is a right, not a privilege; and as a matter of public policy, we must do all that we can to encourage every eligible voter to vote. It is, quite simply, the most American thing we do, and more participation is better for democracy.

But here at the League of Women Voters, we also support measures that provide for the smooth conduct of elections, improve the professional administration of the election process, and insure that our elections in Maine are free from operational errors. In this vein, one of the questions that we have considered at the League is around early voting and absentee voting.

True early voting, where the voter completes a ballot and puts it into the ballot box or scanning machine directly on the day they vote early is not allowed by the Maine State Constitution. In 2007 and 2009, early voting pilot programs in a handful of jurisdictions across the State, including Bangor and Cumberland, were well-received, but it was not enough to generate the political support to warrant the state constitutional amendment required to make it a permanent option statewide.

During this trial period, the Secretary of State's office issued three reports on early voting which can be found at http://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/voter_info/early-voting.htm. In the third and final report from January 2010, State election officials and those from pilot municipalities agreed that "the 2009 Early Voting Pilot was a successful venture." And that, "as with the 2007 pilot, Early Voting was shown to provide convenience and ease of access to voters, while at the same time alleviating some of the demands on municipal election officials as they contend with processing increasing numbers of absentee ballots."

Additionally, a follow-up survey of voters who participated in the pilots found that an overwhelming 98% of voters (virtually 100% of those responding to this question) answered “YES,” they would like this option in future elections. While most of these voters cited convenience to their schedules and a desire to avoid long lines at the polls as the most common reasons they liked early voting, it is worth noting that disabilities and other mobility issues were also cited for support of the practice.

Today, some municipalities do run what is often called "early voting," but the technical name for this is in-person absentee voting. The voter appears in person before election officials at the town office or polling place and is given an absentee ballot without having to complete a written application. Voters fill out the ballot then and there, seal it into an absentee ballot envelope, sign the envelope, and turn it in to election officials. The ballot is actually cast (opened and scanned/recorded) by election officials on Election Day or (more recently) the day before. The main difference is in the processing and actual casting of the ballot.

While we have not seen enough evidence to push for early voting on the basis of increased voter participation, we also do not support rolling back Maine’s current no-excuse absentee ballot process. Because the processing of absentee ballots is labor-intensive for towns and election officials, and because the percentage of ballots cast absentee has grown over the years to 50 - 60% of total ballots cast in some municipalities, this process is a stress point for local election officials. True early voting probably offers a more secure, orderly process for the conduct of elections, and for this reason the League would support true early voting as a municipal option.

One study recently cited in a Bangor Daily News editorial ([Absentee voting is for benefit of voters, not candidates](#), *Bangor Daily News*, 9/27/12) on absentee and early voting came to a similar conclusion. “Early Voting and Turnout” by Paul Gronke, Eva Galanes-Rosenbaum and Peter A. Miller of the Early Voting Information Center at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, found that early voting does not boost turnout significantly — unless coupled with same-day voter registration.¹ Most early voters said they would have voted anyway. However, the same study did find that with early voting, “ballot counting is more accurate, it can save administrative costs and headaches, and voters express a high level of satisfaction with the system.”

When you consider recommendations to the next legislature to improve conduct of elections in Maine, we hope you will consider recommending a change to the Maine Constitution and to Maine law to allow for true early voting in those municipalities that might opt into the program. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak and for dedicating your volunteer time to this public service.

¹ Gronke, Paul, Eva Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Peter Miller. 2007. “Early Voting and Turnout.” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 40(4): 639-645.