



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF MAINE

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TO: The Honorable Senator Garrett P. Mason
The Honorable Representative Louis J. Luchini, Co-chairs
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs

DATE: March 27, 2017

RE: LD 979: An Act Regarding Early Voting in Person

Good morning. My name is Ann Luther. I'm the Advocacy Chair of the League of Women Voters of Maine, a volunteer, and a resident of Trenton. The League of Women Voters of Maine submits the following testimony mostly in support of LD 979.

The League of Women Voters believes that voting is a fundamental right of citizenship, and we have been working for almost one hundred years to defend and protect that right. But 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.

We support true Early Voting for Maine elections.

- Early voting reduces congestion on Election Day
- It helps eliminate long lines at the polls
- It reduces pressure on election officials
- It provides an important convenience to many voters
- It contributes to a more secure and orderly process for the conduct of elections

Today, some municipalities run what is often called "early voting," but the technical name for this is in-person absentee voting. The voter appears in person before an election official at the town office or polling place and is given an absentee ballot without having to complete a written application. The voter fills out the ballot then and there, seals it into an absentee ballot envelope, signs the envelope, and turns it in to the election official. The ballot is not actually cast (opened and scanned/recorded) by election officials until Election Day or (more recently) the Saturday or Monday before.

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.

Without early voting, the high volume of absentee voting is one of the biggest issues facing our local election officials in managing the smooth operation of our elections. In some municipalities, absentee ballots constitute up to 60% of all ballots cast, and because these require special handling by election officials, they are extremely labor intensive.

Over the years, Maine has tried a number of different approaches to alleviate the pressure on municipal officials that this trend has caused:

- Suspending only in-person absentee voting for three business days before Election Day. This was in force for just one or two elections prior to 2010, and it was not a bad compromise. It allowed voters to get a no-excuse absentee ballot right up to Election Day, but it reduced the amount of time and effort that election officials needed to spend with each voter witnessing the balloting process.
- Suspending no-excuse absentee voting three days before Election Day. This is currently the law. Absentee ballots are not available after the Thursday before Election Day without a signed affidavit attesting to a valid excuse. We believe this caused some initial confusion with election officials and voters, and there is anecdotal evidence that it has reduced the number of voters utilizing absentee ballots. Of the other measures that have been tried over the years to reduce the pressure of early absentee voting, the only one that is damaging to voter participation may be the one that we've got now. However, we know that this has helped reduce pressure on election officials in the critical days leading up to Election Day.
- Allowing absentee ballots to be cast (fed through optical scanning machines) on the Saturday or Monday before Election Day. This is currently the law. Previously, all absentee ballots had to be cast on Election Day. In some municipalities, this proved physically impossible without dedicating significant staff and a quantity of optical scanning machines to this purpose. This measure, too, has been helpful to election officials in managing the intensive workload leading up to and through Election Day.
- True early voting. True early voting, where the voter completes a ballot and puts it directly into the ballot box or scanning machine on the day they vote early is not allowed by the Maine State Constitution. Maine has conducted early voting pilot programs in a handful of jurisdictions across the State that were very well received by voters. Early Voting was shown to provide an important convenience and ease of access to voters, while at the same time alleviating some of the demands on municipal election officials as they contended with processing increasing numbers of absentee ballots.

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. The combination of measures now in place has alleviated some of that stress so that the operational benefits of implementing true early voting are not as significant as they once were.

The League believes that true early voting offers a more secure, orderly process for the conduct of elections and an important convenience for voters. In an ideal world, we would support reversing the suspension of no-excuse absentee voting and implementing a municipal option for true early voting instead, with the early voting period to cover at least one weekend before the election.

However, that solution requires a Constitutional Amendment, rather than just a statutory change, and in the current practical realities, our election process is not so compromised as to rise to that level of need.

We thank the sponsor for bringing this bill forward. Thank you for your consideration.