

TO: Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs

DATE: February 27, 2025

RE: LD 210: An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027

Good afternoon Sen. Rotundo and Hickman, Rep. Gattine and Supica, members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs,

My name is Al Cleveland. I am here today as the Advocacy Director of the League of Women Voters of Maine and Maine Citizens for Clean Elections. We are testifying neither in support nor opposition to this bill.

The League of Women Voters of Maine is a nonpartisan political organization that has been working for over 100 years to encourage informed and active participation in government, to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and to influence public policy through education and advocacy. We never support or oppose any political party or candidate.

For 30 years, Maine Citizens for Clean Elections has advocated for Maine's Clean Election Act (MCEA) public funding system. We were there at the start to advocate for its enactment in 1996, during the early years when participation was ramping up, when budget challenges and court decisions threatened to weaken the program, and up to today when it is well-established and enjoys broad support among the candidates, voters, and the general public.

According to the Ethics Commission's January 2024 [report](#), steps will need to be taken to ensure that the Clean Elections Fund is sufficient for 2026 — whether by drawing down funding from the following year's appropriation, making a one-time payment into the fund, or adjusting the annual funding. We support a change to the statutory funding because it will encourage the long-term sustainability of the fund and reduce the need for yearly adjustments.

The Clean Elections program remains popular with candidates on both sides of the aisle and with the Maine voters who continue to demand action to reduce the impact of money on politics. Last session, both of your committees passed LD 1966, An Act to Allow Candidates for District Attorney to Participate in the Maine Clean Election Act. This bill wasn't enacted because of the lack of approved funding. We will be back this year with a request to extend Clean Elections to all county offices, including DA, Sheriff, and County Commissioners.

County elections are the only place where Mainers directly elect our law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and other important offices in our justice system. Mainers need to be able to trust that sheriffs, district attorneys, and other county officials can carry out their duties impartially. Like judges, these officials must operate “without fear or favor.” Direct popular elections can help ensure these offices are held accountable. But they also introduce the need for campaigns, and with that, campaign fundraising and the potential for influence by campaign donors. By expanding the Maine Clean Elections Act to allow county-level candidates to use the program, we are ensuring that these offices do not go up for sale, but remain impartial and trustworthy in the eyes of the people they serve.

MCCE and the League asks your Committees to increase the statutory funding to the Clean Elections fund by \$500,000 each year. This modest increase – moving the funding from the current \$3 million to \$3.5 million per year – would ensure that the Clean Elections program remains a viable option for gubernatorial candidates, legislative races, and hopefully county government positions, as well. At a moment when our public policy is being driven more and more by unelected and unaccountable billionaires, Clean Elections is a critical solution to the issues that arise with big money directing political change.

In addition, we support LD 13 to provide the necessary funding for the production and delivery of election materials by the Secretary of State. We ask your Committees to fully fund the office of the Secretary of State and the cost of election materials through LD 13. It should never be an issue whether a policy initiative advances simply because we don’t have the money to print an extra ballot page: the fiscal note for ballots or ballot pages should not be the determinant. For example, when the League was working to pass semi-open primaries, in 2021, the bill ended up with a fiscal note because if more people vote, we’d have to print more ballots. The Office of the SOS should not be put in a position to question or weigh the impact of its support for a bill because the length of the ballots or number of voters would increase costs. More specifically, it’s a perverse disadvantage for a bill to have as a perceived downside that it aims to increase voter participation. Nor should the Office be required to make up these ballot expenses after the fact, depending on how many candidates or questions appear on the ballot in any given year, or based on anticipated voter turnout. Requiring the Office to trade these expenses off against other budget needs continually short-changes the needs of the Elections Division to perform critical functions.

By ensuring that the Clean Elections program and the Secretary of State’s office is fully funded, Mainers can be confident that our elections are free, fair, and secure. Candidates will continue to run for state offices without the need to ingratiate themselves with special interests. Election clerks will continue to have the support and resources of a well-run Elections Division at the Office of the SoS. These budget requests are core to our democratic process.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions from the Committee.