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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AND LEGAL AFFAIRS

Testimony of Shenna Bellows, Secretary of State
Department of the Secretary of State

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Testifying against

L.D. 309 “An Act to Allow a Political Party to Determine How That Party's Nominee Is Selected in a Primary Election”

Senator Hickman, Representative Supica and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs, my name is Shenna Bellows, I live in Manchester, and I am the Secretary of State and chief elections officer. I am speaking today against L.D. 309 because it’s a recipe for confusion and disaster that could undermine public understanding of and trust in our democracy.

A primary serves the purpose of voter selection of partisan candidates for the general election. For many years, Maine utilized political party caucuses rather than primaries. Caucuses were run by the political parties, but when the state transitioned to a primary system, the state was tasked with administering the primary elections.

Introducing the possibility of changing the types of elections used between parties and from cycle to cycle will lead to voter confusion. We know of no other state that allows parties to choose what style of primary they will have. Voters, particularly unenrolled voters, will not easily understand that what kind of election we would have would depend on what party’s primary they were choosing to participate in.

Voter education is a big part of our work in the Division of Elections and in the Secretary of State Department more broadly. Ensuring that voters know what to expect on their ballot and how to fill it out to vote the way they wish to are two main components of that work. Potentially changing the way one or more party primaries are conducted each cycle would be a disservice to voters.

Right now, it is relatively simple to explain to voters: for state and federal races in Primary Elections and federal races in General Elections, any of these races may be conducted by ranked choice voting, if there are enough candidates to require it. State races in General Elections are decided on a plurality basis. We have the posters that are in each voting place and booth explaining how to correctly fill out your ballot to indicate your preference, and that’s consistent from town to town and across all parties.

This bill would also lead to a significant increase in the administrative workload required by the Department of Secretary of State and clerks. It already is more challenging to prepare ballots and materials for Primary Elections, because each party has a separate set of ballots that must be set up, proofread, printed, tested and delivered to the municipalities. This bill would require customized revisions to voter and election official instructions for each party for each Primary Election to reflect what type of primary each party is using.

Additionally, Maine recently implemented semi-open primaries, so that voters who are not enrolled in a party may participate in state-funded primary elections. We should not move backwards towards party committees at partisan conventions again choosing how unenrolled voters can participate in the process of choosing the General Election candidates.

This concludes my testimony. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.