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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AND LEGAL AFFAIRS

Testimony of Shenna Bellows, Secretary of State
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Testifying in support of

L.D. 1446 “RESOLUTION, Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of Maine to Lower the Voting Age to 16 Years of Age”

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. I am testifying in support of L.D. 1446.

Democracy is stronger when it represents everyone, and when everyone can participate – and this includes our young people. In spite of the belief that 16- and 17- year-olds lack the ability to make informed decisions, we are seeing multitudes of youth get involved in politics and organizing complex grassroots movements demanding action on issues they care deeply about and in response to decisions made by politicians and governments which they have had no say in electing.

Already we have seen municipalities across the United States and several countries, including Austria, Argentina, Brazil, Germany, and the United Kingdom, see the value in allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote and extending the right to do so. Going further, 18 states including the District of Columbia and our own state of Maine, allow for 16- or 17- year-olds to pre-register to vote in primary elections so that when they turn 18, they can cast their ballot – but we can do more.

Voting at 16- and 17-years-old will make voting a ritual habit and encourage lifelong civic engagement. Not only that, a Danish professor from the Copenhagen Business School, studied Danish election data and identified a “trickle up phenomenon” – where families had voting-aged youth at home, it also increased the chance their parent or guardian would vote too.

Giving young people the opportunity to become true participants in democracy can lead to less cynicism and disillusionment in their elected leaders and government and ultimately, a more representative democracy.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify and would be happy to answer any questions the committee may have.