



TO: The Honorable Joseph Baldacci
The Honorable Ann Matlack, Co-Chairs
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government

DATE: April 12, 2021

RE: LD 1051 – An Act to Promote Civic Engagement and Voter Participation for Young People by Lowering the Voting Age for Municipal Election to 16 Years of Age

Good morning Senator Baldacci and Representative Matlack and members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government.

My name is John Brautigam. I am here today as Counsel and Policy Advisor for the League of Women Voters of Maine. 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.

Our positions on issues are decided by member consensus, and because we have no position on lowering the voting age to 16, I am testifying neither for nor against LD 1051.

The League of Women Voters was born near the end of the multigenerational struggle for the expansion of voting rights to women. One hundred years later, it is almost incomprehensible that full participation in our democracy was denied to women for so long. Opponents to suffrage argued on completely unscientific grounds that women were intellectually inferior to men. Fifty years ago, opposition to lowering the national voting age to 18 was based on¹ unproven claims that 18-year-olds were too irresponsible and politically immature to be allowed to vote.

Now there's an emerging movement, not just in the U.S. but worldwide, to extend the vote to 16-year-olds. As with the suffrage movement, opponents argue that 16-year-olds as a class are not capable of the responsibilities of voting. Peer research to back this up is inconclusive. In a 2006 paper, Chan and Clayton found that 16-year-olds were politically less mature than older

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/07/womens-suffrage-nineteenth-amendment-pseudoscience/593710/>; Accessed 17 March, 2021.

voters. Their work² was rebutted in a 2010 article, “American Sixteen- and Seventeen-Year Olds are Ready to Vote,” which argues that young adults at 16, but not before, are as mature in citizenship as 18-year-olds are.³

Real-world data on voting by 16-year-olds, which is hard to come by, should become more plentiful as more jurisdictions lower the voting age. Takoma Park, Maryland, has allowed 16-year-olds to vote in local elections since 2013, and several other Maryland and California towns have followed suit. The only countries that allow 16-year-olds to vote in national elections are Austria and Malta.

Since the state’s founding, Maine’s voting age has been lowered twice. Under the original constitution, the voting age was 21 — for every male citizen. Maine lowered its voting age to 20 in 1970, and further lowered it to 18 after ratification of the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution one year later.

Since 2003, 17-year-olds in Maine have been allowed to vote in primaries if they will be 18 at the time of the general election. And, as in fourteen other states plus the District of Columbia, Maine’s 16-year-olds can pre-register to vote. This is part of implementation of Automatic Voter Registration and would help get teens on the voting rolls at the time that they get their driver’s license.

At least one scholar has pointed to possible unintended consequences of allowing minors to vote. Professor Katherine Silbaugh of Boston University School of Law argues that lowering the voting age could lead to undesirable changes such as reducing the time in which a person is entitled to the protected legal status of minors.⁴

Advocates for lowering the voting age point to the benefit to our democracy of allowing high school students to form the habit of voting and being civically engaged, and that once people begin voting they tend to continue voting through their lives. This argument resonates with the League. For more than 100 years, we have worked to encourage informed and active participation in government. Over the last several years, we have strengthened our outreach to high schools around the state: by inviting them to volunteer with us, by registering eligible 17-and 18-year olds to vote, and by developing high school civics curricula. While we do not have a position on LD 1051, we applaud the civic engagement of the youth we have worked with.

² Chan, Tak & Clayton, Matthew. (2006). Should the Voting Age be Lowered to Sixteen? Normative and Empirical Considerations. *Political Studies*. 54. 533-558. 10.1111/j.1467-9248

³ Academy of Political and Social Science. 2011. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0002716210382395>. Accessed 03/17/2021

⁴ Katharine Silbaugh, *Developmental Justice and the Voting Age*, 47 *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 253 (2020). Available at: https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty_scholarship/840. Accessed 3/18/2021.

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