

State and Local Government Committee
Statement in Support of LD 805
by Hon. Janice Cooper
April 12, 2021

Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack and other distinguished members of the State and Local Government Committee. I am pleased to submit this testimony in support of LD 805, An Act to Allow Municipalities to Prohibit Firearms at Polling Places.

As a former representative for the Towns of Yarmouth, Chebeague Island, and Long Island from 2012 to 2020, I am well versed in the many failed legislative attempts to curb gun violence in Maine. Serving on the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, I worked on many of the gun violence bills considered introduced in the last legislature.

I will lay my cards on the table: I have long been distraught at the loss of life and sense of security that abound in our State because of our inability to find common ground on this issue. Even before I assumed my seat in the House chamber, I became known as the Member who wrote an op ed decrying the slaughter at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT, which occurred during the month when I was first sworn in. At the time, I believed that the horrific massacre of five and six year children at the hands of a clearly disturbed young man, with legal access to high capacity weapons capable of mass killings, would be a turning point in America's view of gun violence. I thought that if the circumstances were extreme enough, minds would change. I was wrong.

Likewise, ever escaping episodes of gun violence that followed have changed few minds. The Las Vegas killing of XX people at an outdoor concert. The near murder of two members of Congress, Gabby Gifford and Steve Scalise. In Maine, the steady rise of gun deaths due to domestic violence, suicide and accidents involving children. None of these have shocked the American conscience deeply enough to swing the pendulum to greater efforts to stem gun violence. At least so far.

We are here today because this bill presents another opportunity to balance the rights of gun owners with the rights of citizens in general. Here, we seek to make ordinary people feel secure in that holiest of democratic spaces, the polling station. This bill comes at a time when the act of voting itself is under attack, leading some states to impose more restrictions on access to voting.

Yet who can argue that voting is the foundation of a democracy? Whether one accepts or not the belief that voting in the last election was tainted by fraud, all Americans understand that without free and fair elections, we are no longer a democracy.

So once again, I hope that we are at tipping point, that we acknowledge that the right to vote cannot be free if citizens are afraid of being gunned down while casting their vote. Of course, not all people who like to carry weapons in such places intend to threaten civic minded voters. But the presence of guns in a polling place is by definition intimidating, whether concealed or not. If I walked into my voting place and saw someone carrying, I would walk out. That's me. Not everyone, but many people.

This bill is modest in its approach. It gives municipalities the choice. No town will be required to impose this restriction. It will be up to the community to decide. And if it so decides, Maine allows citizens to vote absentee, so that confrontation may be avoided.

We cannot know if lives will be saved by this bill. But we know that it will ease the minds of many Mainers who walk into their polling places to exercise their fundamental right to vote.