

Alison P Smith 43 Carleton Street Portland Maine 04102

To: Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs

Re: Foreign Contribution Bans in LDs 194, 479, and 641

Date: March 15, 2021

Senator Luchini, Representative Caiazzo, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

Today I testify in general support of the three bills aiming to prohibit political contributions and expenditures by foreign governments and other foreign entities.

I have long believed that campaign finance laws should support and encourage broad participation and provide opportunity for people to run for office and serve. I take as my lodestar the closing words of President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. As the Civil War raged, he asked that those assembled rededicate themselves to the cause for which so many had already died... "and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

More than 150 years later, we are still a work in progress, and the role of money in politics poses vexing challenges. Years of dubious US Supreme Court rulings have left us with laws that provide too little disclosure, too little protection against corruption, and too many opportunities for powerful special interests to invest in electoral outcomes that serve their bottom line. Although we've defied some of the odds here in Maine, we are not immune to national trends.

The sponsors of these three bills rightly question the appropriateness of a foreign government or foreign-owned entity spending money to influence the outcome of campaigns in Maine. Whether it is a candidate race or a referendum, Maine voters make important decisions — who will represent them or whether a particular proposal becomes law.

I do not argue that other countries are not relevant to our people, our economy, and our environment. Nor do I deny the perfectly legitimate and valuable role that non-citizens play in Maine communities. Rather I say that it is Maine people who must make and live with the big decisions that shape our state and affect our lives. Foreign governments and companies, US companies with foreign ownership, and wealthy foreign nationals all have plenty of ways to engage in global enterprise. But our democracy is different. We can and should decide the limits of foreign influence within it.

In addition to the current energy corridor proposal that has brought this issue to the fore, there is also the trend of corporate money playing an ever-larger role in funding campaigns. Couple that with the fact that thirty-five percent of US stocks are owned by foreign investors, another rising trend, and it's clear that this is a long-term issue.

How will we successfully govern ourselves if we allow our election campaigns to be bankrolled by the most wealthy and powerful interests in the world? The priority must be to ensure that ours remains a government of, by, and for the people.

Our founders objected to foreign influence in our democracy — they feared it and they fought it. Successive generations have sought to limit the influence of big money and concentrated wealth in our elections, too. Senator Bennett, Representative Bailey, and Representative Riseman are in good historical company.

I hope that as the committee works these bills, you are able to come to agreement on measures that protect and strengthen Maine's democracy.