

**Testimony before the
Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs**

By Adam Cote

April 5, 2021

Re: L.D. 1126 An Act to Update the Voter Registration Process

Senator Luchini, Representative Caiazzo, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs, my name is Adam Cote and I am a veteran and an attorney and head of the energy practice group at Drummond Woodsum. I appreciate this opportunity to provide testimony **in support of LD 1126**, An Act to Update the Voter Registration Process.

In my role as an attorney, I often testify before the legislature on matters affecting my clients. Today, however, I am testifying personally, as a veteran who served in Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan. During one of those deployments (Iraq), I served as the Voter Assistance Officer (“VAO”) for my battalion, so I would simply like to offer my experiences in that role for your consideration.

VAOs work to ensure that military voters understand their voting rights, how to register to vote absentee, and have access to accurate nonpartisan voting information and assistance. In other words, the role encompasses speaking to each individual platoon within the unit, explain to them the process/timing for turning in paper ballots, staying on top of Soldiers to encourage them to vote and then – for those who say they want to vote -- making sure the ballots are mailed in time to meet the statutory deadline. I can tell you that this was a role I was not particularly keen on taking on because, at the time, I was quite busy doing other things as a platoon leader of engineers in a combat zone. Nonetheless, I did learn a lot. I’m glad I did it and I think my experiences in that role can help inform this Committee as to why you should support this bill.

The process to ensure overseas service members retain their rights as Americans to vote has been around for many years. And I think we would all agree, it is important. But despite the experiences of deployments changing – the advancements not only in technology the military employs, but also with respect to connectivity of Service Members in combat zones – the process of how they can vote in our elections hasn’t improved in the same manner.

For example, when I went to Bosnia in 1997-98, I communicated with my wife (then girlfriend) and family members thru letters. At the time, I was told that the time it took us to send/receive letters was “lightning speed” compared to my predecessors in Vietnam. Then, in 2004-5, when I was in Iraq, we started to primarily use email – a quantum leap in communications for Soldiers overseas. By the time of my deployment to Afghanistan in 2014 everyone was using Facetime. And as a Company Commander, from my tent at Bagram Airfield, I had an iPad, a cell phone and a Government issued advanced computer with a SIPRNET for secure communications.

I am out of the military now, but last week my brother-in-law left for a deployment to Somalia. Though Somalia is one of the most “dis-connected” countries in the world, American Service Members there routinely have access to the internet and it is the primary means of communicating – securely – with the outside world. I suspect we will hear from him about every week. But it will be via the internet, not from letters.

Today is a very different world for overseas Service Members. They still deploy to dangerous areas, but their means of communication are completely and universally different than the days of paper mail. Yet the way we ask them to vote remains the same as when their grandparents or great-grandparents served in Normandy, the Chosin River and DaNang.

OVR would allow veterans a stress-free, secure alternative to registering in person or by mail- the latter of which runs the risk of personal information being lost or damaged in the mail. As a veteran, I have a strong commitment to defending our national security, and our elections are a huge part of that. Online voter registration protects voters’ private information, adding a new layer of security to Maine’s election systems- while the manual data entry and paperwork that comes with a paper form results offers less than airtight security for our voters. Additionally, our veterans deserve the most streamlined and convenient access to our democracy as possible. By eliminating the need to send forms in the mail or deliver them to the clerks’ office in person, OVR does just that.

Online voter registration has the ability to broaden the accessibility and security of our democracy for so many Mainers, particularly within the military community. By implementing OVR, our state would actively be uplifting the stakeholders that make our democracy what it is: the voters. For the sake of strengthening one of the cornerstones of our nation and putting Maine first, I urge you to support LD 1126.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter.