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LD 231 – An Act to Establish Open Primaries
PUBLIC HEARING TESTIMONY IN FAVOR
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Senator Luchini, Representative Caiazzo and members of the Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs:

Maine is one of only 11 states that does not have some form of open primary elections. LD 231 proposes a narrow opening of the primary process to allow unenrolled voters to select one party primary and cast a vote in it.

Since primaries are funded by all taxpayers regardless of whether they are affiliated with a political party, it does not seem fair to charge them for the cost of primaries but not allow them to vote in them. But that is not the most important reason to open the primaries.

The Maine Legislature's reputation for collegiality and cooperation is at risk. The deep divides in our nation are beginning to be reflected in our state. Voter turnout for primary elections is quite low. Participation from both parties usually comes from the more ideological members.

This means that candidates selected in the primary elections are representative of the party extremes, not the center. Independent voters, who represent just over one third of all Maine registered voters, do not have the opportunity to select general election candidates from the full spectrum of those willing to run. We can only pick between the two presented to us by the party primaries.

The fading away of candidates who represent a middle ground fosters division, making it harder to reach agreement on many important issues. State voters are looking for compromise and progress, but increasingly what we are getting is argument and gridlock. Allowing unenrolled voters to participate in the primaries will mean candidates must appeal to a broader spectrum of voters, not just to their party "base."

Some party members worry that the participation of independents will lead to efforts to undermine or derail party candidates. Without the organization, resources and communication abilities of a party, this is highly unlikely. Unenrolled voters do not want to disrupt anything. We simply want to participate in the primary elections our taxes fund.

Party members often say that "all you have to do" to vote in the primaries is register in a party. I served as an independent Maine state senator from 1994-2002. For me, being an independent was a deliberate choice based on specific values. To have to register in a party and then remain a member for 90 days after the election was contrary to those values.

At the time I served there were a number of ways in which an independent legislator's service was restricted. For instance, membership on various legislatively construed boards and committees allowed for participation from the two major political parties only. Even serving as ballot clerks in our own municipalities was prohibited.

Since that time, actions have been taken by the legislature to remedy that. I thank my former colleagues and legislators since then who have worked to bring fairness to those districts that choose to send unenrolled representatives to Augusta.

Opening primary elections to unenrolled voters will strengthen, not weaken, Maine's political process, increase voter turnout and promote full participation by all Maine voters. I hope you will support LD 231.