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Testimony of Representative Grayson Lookner introducing LD 303, “An Act to Establish Semi-Open Primaries to Allow Unenrolled Voters to Participate.”

April 12, 2021

Senator Luchini, Representative Caiazzo, and honorable colleagues on the Committee of Veterans and Legal Affairs. My Name is Grayson Lookner and I represent part of Portland. I am here today to present LD 303, “An Act to Establish Semi-Open Primaries to Allow Unenrolled Voters to Participate.”

Maine has been and continues to be an innovator when it comes to election reform. We value the voices of all of our residents, regardless of their political connections or their economic clout – as a result, we have high rates of voter and civic participation. That is something we should all be proud of about our state, and both our state and our municipal governments are stronger because of it.

We are also a state that embraces political independence, and we frequently elect candidates to state and federal offices who are not enrolled with a political party. These candidates are often ideologically diverse – just like our state – although they frequently face obstacles that candidates who are enrolled with one of the two major parties do not face.

One intractable aspect of our political system in modern times has been the reality that two parties dominate, and too often instead of legislating and governing together for the betterment of our state, we end up in a perpetual campaign cycle, working more to deny the other party success rather than getting stuff done for our constituents.

I see two reasons for this: first, the two major parties do not allow a broad swath of the electorate to participate in their primaries, which are conducted using public resources and tax-payer dollars. Although the vast majority of the time our leaders will be selected from one of the two major parties, unenrolled voters have their wills denied because they cannot vote in primaries. If they were allowed to do so, I am confident that we would end up with leaders who better represent their entire constituency.

Secondly, smaller political parties face systemic barriers to inclusion – especially in state-wide races. In order to qualify for statewide office as a member of a party, currently a candidate must collect signatures from at least 2,000 voters registered with

that party, a nearly impossible task for a party that only counts 5,000 members statewide.

Can we really claim that we have a full democracy when we deny participation to unenrolled voters in primaries, and systematically block other parties from qualifying for the ballot? In my mind, the answer is no, and this bill and my proposed amendments would rectify this issue by simply allowing unenrolled voters to vote in the major party primaries, and also by allowing other, smaller parties ballot access by letting those parties determine whether or not they can have unenrolled voters sign their ballot access petitions.

A last amendment I have proposed is to allow for electronic signatures to be gathered for political candidates for ballot access, similarly to how signatures are gathered and verified electronically for the Maine Clean Elections system. Especially during a pandemic in which social distancing is the primary method of preserving public health, it is unsafe and irresponsible to mandate that candidates go out in public in order to gather signatures for ballot access. Additionally, this change would allow people with disabilities easier access to the ballot. It's time that Maine join the 21st century and allow for electronic ballot access.

I am a Democrat, because I believe in "little d" democracy. It is less often that we hear about "little r" republicanism, which means to be against monarchy and for a system of government controlled by "we the people." Allowing unenrolled voters to fully participate in primary elections moves us more fully towards those ideals.

Thank you for hearing my testimony.