



Senator Luchini, Representative Caiazzo, Members of the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee,

My name is Betsy Sweet and I am speaking today on behalf of Open Primaries Maine in favor of LD 231.

I have been an advocate at the statehouse for 39 years and have spent most of that time encouraging Maine citizens of all interests and political persuasions to get involved in the democratic process – by running for office, advocating for a cause, and first and foremost, always to vote. And, honestly, I believe that right now we are at a critical juncture in this country and in this state. Many people are cynical about our democracy, about their voice or participation mattering, or even believing that politicians want them involved. At its core, I believe LD 231 addresses that cynicism in a meaningful way and says, “Yes, you do matter. And yes, we do want you involved.”

You have already heard what this bill does – allowing “unenrolled” voters to participate in a primary. I will confess about ten years ago when I first heard about this idea, my reaction was negative. I thought – if people want to be involved in a primary, then they should register in a party. But then I started learning more – and started watching what that really meant. Today we see in Maine that almost a third of our voters register as unenrolled in a party. Big swaths of people that we all want to be involved – 49% of veterans, 44% of enlisted people, and over 50% of young people – are registered as unenrolled and, as a result, are locked out of the primary process. At the same time in Maine and across the country more and more races are decided in the primary – and the general election is a formality. So, these big swaths of people are unable to participate in the very foundation of our democracy – voting when it counts. But it doesn’t have to be this way.

LD 231 provides a path that allows people to participate without having to declare a party preference. It says “Yes! We want you to participate. We want as many people as possible to participate in the democratic process. We do not fear more people voting – we welcome it.” It strengthens people’s belief in the system, and it makes people remove the veil of cynicism that believes that political parties only care about themselves, and, I believe, makes for stronger candidates that have to appeal to a wide variety of people from the start. And this is not a radical or even cutting-edge idea. Over 80% of Maine people support this proposal. And Maine is one of only 14 states that do NOT do this. So, many of the fears you may have heard just simply do not occur.

This is our chance to expand democracy. To encourage participation and to restore faith in the democratic process. Let all Mainers know that their voice matters. Please pass LD 231.