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Testimony of Rep. Sam Zager in support of

LD 231 An Act to Establish Open Primaries
LD 303 An Act to Establish Semi-Open Primaries

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs

Senator Luchini, Representative Caiazzo, and other honorable members of the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee, I am Sam Zager, a military veteran representing the good people of District 41 in Portland, pleased to testify in support of these bills.

1. It would be good for military veterans. Perhaps the fact that half of veterans are unenrolled (independent) is a residual effect of being in the service. This is considerably higher than the 32% for the general population in Maine. U.S. soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen don't take an oath to a person or a political party, as happens in other places. Instead, we've taken an oath to support and defend the Constitution, and the ideals embodied therein. This distinction is at the heart of the American enterprise. Last summer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley responded to Congressional questions, "I believe deeply in the principle of an apolitical U.S. military."¹ Even though military members and veterans are certainly entitled to have political views, having spent 11 years working with and listening to others in uniform, I understand why a veteran might be reluctant to join a political party. I don't think that Maine ought to keep that veteran from having a meaningful vote in places where their officials are determined in the primary.

2. It would be good for all voters. In last week's OpEd in the *Portland Press Herald*, Senator Hickman wrote, "We have a responsibility to do everything in our power to proactively ensure that all eligible voters are permitted to vote, including our friends and neighbors who are registered to vote but not enrolled in a political party." I agree.

¹ <https://apnews.com/article/a979ad8beceacd77c692e42448cf7b82>

3. It's strongly desired by Mainers. The best available polling shows that 4 of 5 Mainers -- including Democrats and Republicans -- very clearly express a desire for independents to be eligible to vote in Maine's primaries. If we believe that people's voices ought to be heard in a representative democracy, then opening up primaries to independent voters makes sense.

4. All Maine voters are paying for the primaries, whether they are enrolled in a political party or not.

One suggestion that I would make, as you consider these bills, is some sort of additional funding for "Clean Election" Candidates for the primaries. Like many other members of this Legislature, I ran under the Maine Clean Elections Act (MCEA), so my entire campaign had \$3,650 to spend in the primary. There were two others in the primary, and one of the candidates spent *more than three times* what I was allowed to spend under MCEA. People often can't believe it when I tell them how spartan MCEA candidates' budgets are. This bill would have the unintended consequence of making it even harder for "Clean Election" candidates to take their message to primary voters because they'd have to reach many more voters. One way to account for this and minimize the fiscal note would be to increase funding only for MCEA candidates who are running in a primary race with traditionally funded candidates.

Thank you for your service and consideration. I'd be happy to answer questions.