



TO: The Honorable Senator Louis Luchini
The Honorable Representative Schneck, Co-chairs
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs

DATE: February 25, 2019

RE: LD 753 An Act To Allow Voters To Choose Ongoing Absentee Voter Status.

Senator Luchini, Representative Schneck, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs:

My name is Regina Coppens. I am a resident of Belgrade. I'm a volunteer with the League of Women Voters of Maine. The League is a non-partisan, consensus-driven organization. I am testifying neither for nor against LD 753, An Act To Allow Voters To Choose Ongoing Absentee Voter Status.

Maine consistently ranks among the top states in the nation in voter turnout. Today the rate of voters using absentee ballots is around 35% in Maine. This bill would potentially expand absentee voting by allowing voters to opt into ongoing absentee voter status. Eight states already have this mechanism in place, however the participation rates and requirements vary widely.¹

California has been offering ongoing absentee voter status since 2002, and since implementation, permanent vote by mail voters now number nearly eight million and account for 43% of all registered voters in the state.²

In California, more than 50% of the votes cast in the November 2012 election were by absentee ballot, an increase from 25% from 2000. Passage of this bill has the potential to increase voting by absentee ballot, which some fear is more susceptible to manipulation than in-person voting.

California's experience also raises the question of whether there would be more ballots left unreturned than under the system in which voters must request absentee ballots in advance of every election. In a study published by The California Voter Foundation in 2014, the rate of non-returned ballots in California was highest among the group who opted for ongoing absentee voter status. Also noteworthy, the study found that turnout of permanent vote-by-mail voters is consistently lower in every election than that of one-time vote by mail voters.² The study additionally found that many people who do not intend to vote are still

sent a ballot, resulting in higher costs for the counties and potential election security problems.³

Undeliverable ballots caused by voters changing address or when voters passed away were also an issue cited by four municipalities in a 2011 pilot study conducted by the Maine Department of the Secretary of State on ongoing absentee voter status in Maine.⁴

There is no doubt that ongoing absentee voter status would be a convenience for some, such as the elderly and disabled, who are unable to get to the polls and would benefit from having one less hurdle to cross in voting. Families who work and have young children, and people who often travel for work, could also find ongoing absentee ballot voter status valuable in their busy lives by having just one less thing to remember to do.

In addition, the town clerks involved in the pilot study in Maine said that by getting the absentee ballots out early, it was less likely that voters would miss the return deadline. Late ballots are the number one reason why absentee ballots are rejected.

Voting is a sacred right of citizenship. The League has been celebrating and protecting that right for almost 100 years. Improving voter turnout and removing barriers to voting are goals that we work for year-in and year-out. We applaud efforts such as these to make the ballot more accessible, create efficiencies for the town clerks, and reduce the number of rejected absentee ballots. However the LWV feels that there is not enough evidence at this point to conclude that ongoing absentee voter status will accomplish these goals without creating other issues.

Thank you for your time.

1. Office of Legislative Research, Connecticut General Assembly, States Offering No-excuse Permanent Absentee Voting, by Marybeth Sullivan, Legislative analyst, www.cga.ct.gov/2014/rpt/2014-R-0273.htm
2. Improving California's Vote-By-Mail Process: A Three County Study. www.calvoter.org/votebymail, August 2014, pg 25
3. Improving California's Vote-By-Mail Process: A Three County Study. www.calvoter.org/votebymail, August 2014, pg 26
4. State of Maine Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs, 2011 Report on Ongoing Absentee Voting

