



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

DATE: February 12, 2020

RE: LD 2067 An Act To Authorize Automatic Continuation of Absentee Voter Status until the Termination of That Status

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My name is Penelope Hamblin. I'm a volunteer member of the League of Women Voters of Maine and a resident of South Portland. The League supports LD 2067.

The League has been celebrating and protecting the right to vote for 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 and create efficiencies for town clerks. Ongoing absentee status offers voters a system in which ballots are automatically delivered to requesting voters before every election. Participants don't need to fill out an application every time; in fact, they don't even need to know that an election is coming up.

It's already easy to vote in Maine. Enacting LD 2067 would add yet another choice and convenience for voters. But it's important to consider its overall impact on Maine's absentee voting system.

Ongoing absentee status was tried in Maine during a pilot study conducted ten years ago. In his final report to the legislature, then-Secretary of State Charles Summers recommended against extending the pilot program. His report laid out the pros and cons that are still relevant today. Voters liked it and clerks found it easy to administer. However, Mr. Summers reported that toward the end of pilot, which lasted only a year, some ballots were already being returned as undeliverable because voters had moved or died.<sup>1</sup>

Undelivered absentee ballots are a security issue as well as a waste of time and money for municipalities. If Maine adopts ongoing absentee status as proposed in LD 2067, it will be essential that the Secretary of State's office use every available tool to maintain clean, accurate voter rolls. For this reason, the League recommends that Maine join ERIC, the interstate voter registration data sharing system, as part of its implementation of LD 2067.

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<sup>1</sup> 2011 Report on Ongoing Absentee Voting, Charles E. Summers, Jr., Secretary of State. February 15 2011. Attached to testimony by Julie L. Flynn, Deputy Secretary of State, on LD 753, February 25, 2019. Accessed February 11, 2020 at <http://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/getTestimonyDoc.asp?id=94563>

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The League welcomes a provision in LD 2067 that requires that the clerk attempt to contact a voter within 24 hours if there's a problem with the signature or affidavit on the return envelope. This mandatory notification should help reduce the number of rejected ballots, which can disenfranchise voters if they're not eventually able to correct the problem or vote in person.

There is a national trend, especially in the Western states, toward automatic ballot delivery. In 10 states, voters can opt for permanent or ongoing absentee status. In those states, according to the Election Administration and Voting Survey, an average of 68 percent of voters cast an absentee ballot.<sup>2</sup> Several states have followed Oregon's lead in offering Universal Vote by Mail, in which every registered voter automatically receives a ballot. Complicating the issue of so-called "vote by mail" is that most voters who receive a ballot in the mail don't return it in the mail, but instead drop it off in person or use a secure drop box.<sup>3</sup>

While we can't predict whether adopting this bill would significantly change how we vote in Maine, we should be prepared to see at least some increase in the use of absentee ballots. Our election system is already overburdened by the sheer number of absentee ballots, which are time-consuming to process and validate. In the November 2018 general election, about 186,000 — that's 29 percent of all ballots cast — were absentee.<sup>4</sup>

For years, the League has been advocating for a sensible solution that would ease some of this burden: a constitutional amendment to allow true early voting. About 35 percent of those absentee votes in November 2018 were cast in the presence of the clerk. Those ballots had to be signed, sealed, and secured for later processing like all other absentee ballots. Early voting would allow voters to cast their ballots before Election Day in the same manner as on Election Day. While offering the same convenience for voters, this would mean fewer headaches for election officials.

Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to testify. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>2</sup> M.I.T. Election Data +Science Lab, "Voting by Mail and Absentee Voting," Accessed 2/11/2020  
<https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/voting-mail-and-absentee-voting>

<sup>3</sup> EAVS Deep Dive: Early, Absentee and Mail Voting. 2017.

<https://www.eac.gov/documents/2017/10/17/eavs-deep-dive-early-absentee-and-mail-voting-data-statutory-overview> Accessed 2/12/2020

<sup>4</sup> Analysis of Absentee Ballots for November of 2016 and 2018 Provided by Julie L. Flynn, Deputy Secretary of State, February 25, 2019.