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Testimony of Senate President Beth Edmonds on
LD 1799, "An Act to Establish Open Ballot Voting in Maine"

Good afternoon Senator Marrache, Representative Patrick and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Legal and Veterans Affairs.

I am Senate President Beth Edmonds. I represent the citizens of Brunswick, Freeport, Harpswell and Pownal in Cumberland County.

I'm here today to speak on behalf of LD 1799, An Act to Establish Open Ballot Voting in Maine.

Voting is at the very heart of our democracy, and a healthy democracy is dependent on competitive elections with outcomes reflecting the diverse ideals and platforms of our citizens. As policy makers, it is indeed our responsibility to continually monitor our electoral process and further seek to encourage all citizens to exercise their right to vote.

For the first 135 years of our country's history, minor parties and fusion played a vital role in American electoral politics, invigorating our democracy and bringing new ideas like abolition, the eight-hour work day and temperance into the political mainstream.

Fusion was legal throughout the United States in the 19th century and it was common for both major parties to run fusion tickets with minor parties. The most famous fusion candidate was William Jennings Bryant who, in the 1896 Presidential election, also ran on the Populist line in 28 states.

Parties like the Free-Soilers, Greenback, Prohibition and Populists ran candidates in thousands of elections all across the country in coalition with one of the major parties, avoiding the "wasted vote" problem that makes minor parties marginal today. Minor parties regularly captured a significant share of the popular vote and both major parties found "fusing" with minor parties to be a valuable tool in building diverse coalitions and bringing in new voters.

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Bans on fusion began in the late 1890s – some historians say largely a result of railroad and banking interests' opposition to Populist reforms – and effectively eliminated these parties; in 1890 there were 450 fusion candidates for U.S. Congress, Senate and Governor. In 1910 there were fewer than 50.

Today fusion is legal in just 8 states. New York – where I have strong ties – is one of those states.

Minor parties and fusion voting continue to play a vital role in New York elections. Minor parties and their agendas are taken seriously because the votes on their lines often provide the margin of victory in close races. Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Governor George Pataki and New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani all won narrow victories in New York due to votes on minor party lines. Fusion strengthens the chances of a major party's candidate and allows voters the ballot freedom to support the minor party's values.

In 2006 better than 68% of New York legislative candidates were cross-endorsed by one of New York's three significant minor parties – the Independence Party, the Conservative Party and the Working Families Party. Three other minor parties – the Right to Life Party, the Liberal Party and the Green Party – lost their ballot status following the previous gubernatorial election.

The information you have before you demonstrates that fusion voting is relatively simple to implement and can indeed encourage higher turnout by providing voters the opportunity to cast their ballot for a candidate with a real chance of winning while remaining committed to an agenda that reflects their values.

A third of Maine voters don't identify with either of the major parties. Perhaps it's time for us to seriously consider minor party ballot access and provide them with a constructive role in Maine politics. I urge you to carefully consider LD 1799.

I leave you with a few words from Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Those who stay away from the election think that one vote will do no good. 'Tis but one step more to think one vote will do no harm."

I'm happy to answer any questions.