

Testimony before the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs
LD 245 - An Act To Reestablish a Presidential Primary System in Maine

February 6th, 2019

Senator Luchini, Representative Schneck, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of LD 245 - An Act To Reestablish a Presidential Primary System in Maine.

My name is Jill Barkley and I am the former Chair of the Portland Democratic City Committee, a position I served in from 2010 until 2016. During this time, I was designated the Caucus Chair of three Democratic caucuses in Portland: 2012, 2014, and 2016. Having experienced the Portland Democratic Caucus in 2008, I knew the 2016 caucus would have its share of challenges. The four biggest pieces of feedback I received were about:

- Location and parking
- Layout of check-in and access to rooms
- The need for more volunteers and
- The need for more staff from the City Clerk's Office

A group of volunteers, Maine Democratic Party staff, the City Clerk and I worked hard to address and plan for all of those lessons learned for the 2016 caucus in Portland. We planned for:

- A new location with parking
- A new layout that would promote crowd flow
- More volunteers and
- More staff from the City Clerk's office to register and enroll new voters

Additionally, the Maine Democratic Party provided voters who could not attend in person with absentee ballots. Over 18,000 were processed across the state leading up to the caucus.

Then, an estimated 5,000 people showed up, with an estimated 2,000 of them voters that needed to be registered and enrolled in the Democratic Party.

Regardless of the location, the layout, the number of volunteers, or staff from the City Clerk's office, this was going to be a time consuming process. We thought we'd be able to start caucusing at 3:00 p.m. and be done by 5:00 p.m. When all was said and done, we weren't able to start caucusing until 6:30 p.m. and were done at 7:30 p.m.

As things became more delayed, we took the following actions to try to address some of the frustration:

-We began to process ballots of voters who were already checked in as absentee ballots, so they could leave if they wanted to and still vote before the caucus started.

-We sent volunteers up and down the lines outside to communicate that everyone who had been in line to register or enroll by 1:00 p.m. would be registered or enrolled and that everyone who had been in line to check in by 2:00 p.m. would be checked in and allowed to vote and caucus.

-We tried our best to make sure that elderly people and anyone with any health issues could move up to the front of the line.

Still, I know that not every need was met. I know that some chose to leave and not stay in line. I do not blame them.

The Portland City Clerk's Office were only legally required to be at the caucus for an hour, but the hard working staff was there for most of the day. They closed their line at 1:00 p.m. and left around 5:00 p.m. When they left, they turned away new voters and voters who needed to be enrolled in the Democratic Party.

The Maine Democratic Party wanted voters to vote and did not want to turn anyone away. We began to issue provisional ballots to everyone present who could make a statement that they were a registered and enrolled Democratic voter in Portland. We did this for an hour and a half, until everyone had a ballot. We did our best to not turn anyone away who was there to legally vote.

At the end of the day, more than 4,000 people voted in the 2016 Portland Democratic caucus, making it the highest turnout in history. Still, because of the circumstances, voters were disenfranchised because of our caucus system.

Even if the caucus had gone perfectly according to plan, the day would have lasted about four hours. That's a long day for folks who are differently abled, elderly, responsible for child care, sick, working and unable to take a day off – and the list goes on. Not everyone is able or willing to participate in a caucus. Even those who do seldom understand the complex rules that guide the entire ordeal.

To put together a successful 2020 Portland Caucus, one I personally will not be convening, the City of Portland and the Maine Democratic Party are likely to need to start planning this year. The cost of figuring out how to do this and avoid the complications of 2008 and 2016 are going to be astronomically high.

Voting makes sense to most people and is much more easily accessible, especially given Maine's incredible voting laws. I urge the committee to vote "ought to pass" and re-establish a presidential primary system. Thank you.