

The Maine Heritage Policy Center Testimony to Support LD 482

"An Act To Reduce the Participation Thresholds for Various Municipal Referenda and To Change the Measurement of Those Thresholds from Votes Cast for and against the Question to Votes in Favor of the Question"

Senator Claxton, Representative Martin, and distinguished members of the Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Adam Crepeau and I serve as the policy analyst for The Maine Heritage Policy Center. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of LD 482, "An Act To Reduce the Participation Thresholds for Various Municipal Referenda and To Change the Measurement of Those Thresholds from Votes Cast for and against the Question to Votes in Favor of the Question."

As state law stands now, it is extremely difficult for municipalities to withdraw from regional school units, create and amend charters, and deorganize altogether. In general, municipalities should have a greater ability to govern themselves. Right now, state statute requires municipalities to turnout at least 50 percent of the number of votes cast in the last gubernatorial election in order for a vote to withdraw from a regional school unit to be considered valid.

The Maine Heritage Policy Center supports this bill because it will give municipalities more freedom to withdraw from regional school units. This bill decreases the required votes to 25 percent "in favor" of withdrawal instead of 50 percent of the number of overall votes cast in the last gubernatorial election. This change would significantly lower the threshold of total voters but would still require at least 25 percent of the number of votes cast in the last gubernatorial election to be "in favor" votes.

Some municipalities are subject to paying more than their "fair share" of funds to their regional school districts. For example, in 2013, the City of Saco voted to withdraw from RSU 23 due to inequities in the cost-sharing formula.¹ While Saco was successful in withdrawing, other municipalities in Maine were not so fortunate. In 2013, Belfast, Belmont, Northport, and Swanville all fell short of obtaining the fifty percent threshold required by current law.² Based on the popular vote ratios presented in an article from the Penobscot Bay Pilot, these towns might have been able to withdraw if LD 482 was the law at that time.³

In addition, this bill makes it easier for municipalities to adopt new municipal charters, revise current charters, or modify their charters. It would cut the total vote threshold in half from requiring 30 percent of the total number of votes cast in the last gubernatorial election to 15 percent that need to be in favor of the measure. Again, The Maine Heritage Policy center supports this because it gives greater strength to voters in municipalities.

¹<http://bangordailynews.com/2013/11/06/news/portland/saco-votes-3-to-1-to-withdraw-from-school-district/>

² <https://bangordailynews.com/2013/06/14/news/midcoast/withdrawal-woes-plague-belfast-area-schools/>

³ <https://www.penbaypilot.com/article/low-voter-turnout-kills-rsu-20-withdrawal-bid/15775>

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Lastly, this bills significantly changes the threshold for voters in municipalities to decide if they want to deorganize. It changes the threshold from 50 percent of overall voters from the last gubernatorial election to requiring one-third of overall votes cast in the last gubernatorial election to be in favor of deorganization.

In short, this bill would give voters more power over their investments in their municipalities and regional school districts. We urge the committee to vote “Ought to Pass” on this bill. Thank you.