



TO: The Honorable Craig Hickman
The Honorable Laura Supica, Co-Chairs
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs

DATE: February 3, 2025

RE: LD 118: An Act to Allow Candidates for Sheriff and District Attorney to Participate in the
Maine Clean Election Act

Good morning Senator Hickman, Representative Supica, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs,

My name is Al Cleveland. I'm a resident of Portland. I am here today as the Advocacy Director of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections. We are here in strong support of LD 118.

Maine Citizens for Clean Elections has been the leading campaign finance organization in Maine since 1995 and is one of the nation's most respected state-based organizations advocating for democratically funded elections. We are proud of our national reputation. But we are all Mainers, and our nonpartisan mission has always been with and for the people of this state.

County elections are the only place where Mainers directly elect our law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and other important offices in our justice system. Mainers need to be able to trust that sheriffs, district attorneys, and other county officials can carry out their duties impartially. Like judges, these officials must operate "without fear or favor." Direct popular elections can help ensure these offices are held accountable. But they also introduce the need for campaigns, and with that, campaign fundraising and the potential for influence by campaign donors.

Historically, the majority of District Attorney campaigns are either self-funded (which is an issue of equity and opportunity) or funded by lawyers who expect to have cases within that district. Contributors to sheriffs include law enforcement associations — and more lawyers. Between 2014 and 2022, total spending has more than doubled in races for sheriff, DA, and county commission. The 2022 Cumberland County District Attorney contest cost more than \$76,000 and was a target for spending by out-of-state interests. In 2022 and 2024 general elections, only 4 of the 16 races for Sheriff were competitive.

With judicial and local elections around the country becoming increasingly partisan and high-spending, Maine should take this chance to get ahead of the trend and insulate our justice system from potential corruption or the perception of corruption. We must protect Maine from the outsized influence of wealthy donors, whatever their special interests.

By expanding the Maine Clean Elections Act to allow county-level candidates to use the program, we are ensuring that these offices do not go up for sale, but remain impartial and trustworthy in the eyes of the people they serve.

We'd like to propose an amendment to this bill to include County Commission races. Commissioners are the counties' chief elected officials and are ultimately responsible for the fiscal operations and policy decisions affecting county government including the county jails. They also serve, in effect, as the municipal officials in Maine's many unorganized territories. These are critical roles in our government, yet they consistently have uncontested races. Clean Elections would allow for a greater candidate pool to access these roles.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions from the Committee.