



TO: The Honorable Senator Anne Carney
The Honorable Representative Matt Moonen Co-Chairs
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on the Judiciary

DATE: February 26, 2024

RE: LD 2007 - An Act to Advance Self-determination for Wabanaki Nations

Good morning, Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Gina Coppens and I am a volunteer with the League of Women Voters of Maine. I testify in support of LD 2007.

The League of Women Voters of Maine is a nonpartisan political organization that has been working for over 100 years to encourage informed and active participation in government, to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and to influence public policy through education and advocacy. We never support or oppose any political party or candidate.

Recognizing tribal sovereignty means respecting the right to self-government among Wabanaki people. Many of the best features of American democracy were influenced by principles of equality, freedom, and respect that were common in tribal governments — much more common than in European governments at the time. Our founders were inspired by these examples as they envisioned individual liberty in our new nation. By recognizing tribal sovereignty, we reaffirm our belief in government “of the people, by the people and for the people,” the most foundational principle of our democracy.

Tribes in Maine have not benefited from 151 federal laws¹ which have passed since the 1980 Maine Indian Land Claim Settlement Act was signed, including laws impacting housing, education, employment equality, food security, healthcare and healthcare access. That makes no sense. The Wabanaki tribes should have the same benefits as tribes in other states. State legislation can and must fix this issue.

The Native American Voting Rights Act, for example, is likely to be re-introduced in Congress. It would establish a Native American Voting Rights Task Force which would fund tribal-state consortiums to bolster Native American voter registration and participation among tribal communities, and it includes provisions to increase Native access to voter registration sites and polling locations. Without passage of the bill before you now, this important federal bill would not apply to the Wabanaki tribes unless they were explicitly named in the Act.

Despite their inherent sovereignty, tribes in Maine have historically been excluded from both true sovereign status and equal voting rights with other Mainers. Maine was one of the last states to comply

¹Suffolk University, Report to the Task Force on Changes to the Maine Indian Landclaims Settlement Act, <http://legislature.maine.gov/doc/3636>

with the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act, which conferred US citizenship on all Native Americans born within the territorial limits of the country. Native American voters did not have equal voting rights in Maine until the 1960s.

In light of this history, it's all the more important that tribes in Maine be able to have the benefits of all the protections that come with equal status with other federally recognized tribes. We know that the Wabanaki tribes in Maine have fallen behind as other tribes have thrived over the past 30 years. LD 2007 would address these harms and restore fairness and equity for the Wabanaki Nations.

Please vote Ought to Pass on LD 2007. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions from the Committee.