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Voting is not just a right, it is our civic duty and should be conducted safely and fairly

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New Hampshire takes pride in our dedication to the democratic process. Granite Staters have turned out in record numbers for our midterm and primary elections because this is a state that deeply values every individual voice. As we move towards September's primary elections, we have needed to take a hard look at our election system and find ways to focus on both the public health and safety precautions that will need to be in place during this cycle and the accessibility needs that will need to be put in place for future elections.

The House and Senate recently passed HB 1672, an omnibus bill regarding election law and voter registration. The bill included text from a series of bills passed already in the House and Senate that create a more accessible and equitable system of voting.

The measures include online voter registration, a measure already adopted by 41 states. New Hampshire and Maine are the only remaining New England states who have yet to adopt online voter registration. Beyond the applicability in our current coronavirus environment, in states where online voter registration has been implemented, it has expanded access and participation for young voters, people with mobility issues, and busy workers. The system, run through the New Hampshire Secretary of State's office, would not only help to encourage participation in the democratic system, but reduce the amount of time a new voter spends at their polling location, thus aiding in proper social distancing.

In this same vein, it is time for New Hampshire to join the 30 other states currently using the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) to share voter information or data from the statewide centralized voter registration database. ERIC allows for secure cross referencing of registration information to identify if there are cases of fraudulent voting, improves the accuracy of voter rolls, helps to register eligible citizens, reduces costs, and improves efficiencies in the voting

process. This would help to reduce the chances of duplicate voting, provide verification of registration whether or not the individual is in New Hampshire, and send out letters to eligible Granite State voters who have not yet registered to vote. This is an important step in modernizing our election process towards a more free, fair, and secure system.

HB 1672 also includes provisions to expand voting by mail and absentee voting. While we are encouraged by the Secretary of State and the governor's new positions on absentee ballots as they take public health and safety into account, the problems it addresses are not new to New Hampshire. Voters have experienced difficulties in physically accessing polling locations long before the coronavirus outbreak. Shifting work schedules, child care complications, and other extenuating circumstances often leave people without time to cast their vote on election day. The uncertainty regarding the coronavirus pandemic and the state's economic reopening has amplified those complications, making the need to finally implement no excuse absentee voting and voting by mail — not just for this election cycle, but permanently.

With the understanding that more people will be voting absentee this election cycle, our municipalities need flexibility and time in order to properly count incoming ballots. In public testimony, we heard how waiting to process all absentee ballots on election day not only can create a bottleneck, but can increase the risk of mistakes while the Town or City Clerk is processing absentee ballots and voter check-in simultaneously. Particularly in a year where participation through absentee ballots is expected to significantly increase, the ability to check for errors early on will be crucial in ensuring that no vote is left uncounted due to a simple mistake.

New Hampshire's dedication to the democratic process has not been lessened by the coronavirus. Our state remains stronger together, and that includes working as a Legislature to ensure every eligible voter is able to participate in this election cycle free from fear for their health and safety.

Voting is not just a right, it is our civic duty and should be conducted safely, fairly and with the same passion that makes New Hampshire nationally recognized for our proud tradition of engagement.