

STATE OF MAINE DEMOCRACY

League of Women Voters of Maine | Maine Citizens for Clean Elections



DEMOCRACY ME



THIS STUDY WAS CONDUCTED BY DEMOCRACY MAINE

Democracy Maine © Copyright 2025

This study was conducted by Democracy Maine, a collaboration between the League of Women Voters of Maine, Maine Citizens for Clean Elections, and Maine Students Vote.

Contributors include: John Brautigam, Julie Canniff, Suzanne Carmichael, Al Cleveland, Michelle Conners, Michael Fisher, Jen Lancaster, Ann Luther, Jake Maier, Evan Tess Murray, and Sigrid Olson

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION Purpose of this Report	PG. 4
CHAPTER ONE Representative Government	PG. 6
CHAPTER TWO Voter Participation and Individual Characteristics	PG. 11
CHAPTER THREE Voter Participation and District Characteristics	PG. 14
CHAPTER FOUR Voting Rights	PG. 18
CHAPTER FIVE Election Methods	PG. 21
CHAPTER SIX Conduct of Elections	PG. 24
CHAPTER SEVEN Money in Politics	PG. 27
CHAPTER EIGHT Freedom of Information	PG. 33
CHAPTER NINE Newspapers and Digital Media	PG. 36
CHAPTER TEN The Digital Divide	PG. 42
CHAPTER ELEVEN The Judiciary	PG. 46
CHAPTER TWELVE County Government	PG. 50
CONCLUSIONS Looking to the Future	PG. 55
APPENDIX A Digital Democracy	PG. 60
APPENDIX B Summary of Report Indicators	PG. 62



INTRODUCTION

This report examines and assesses the state of democracy in Maine along several dimensions using indicators based on publicly available data, published reports, and research conducted by the League of Women Voters of Maine and Maine Citizens for Clean Elections. These organizations work together to protect and strengthen civic participation in our democratic institutions. We believe that a solid foundation of knowledge and measurable outcomes are necessary to craft and sustain the public policies that support and protect an inclusive democracy. This is the fourth edition of our report, “Maine: The State of Our Democracy,” and like the previous iterations published since 2020, it sets a baseline for our continuing efforts in advocacy, civic participation, and voter engagement.

Who We Are

LWVME and MCCE are nonpartisan political organizations that encourage informed and active participation in government and seek to influence public policy through education and advocacy. We never support or oppose any political party or candidate. We joined forces in 2018, with Maine Students Vote joining in 2021, to strengthen our advocacy and educational efforts. In collaboration as Democracy Maine, we work together and with other partners to make government more equitable, inclusive, and accessible by improving elections; informing, protecting, and engaging voters; and reducing the influence of big money in politics.

Purpose of This Report

A healthy democracy is a complex system, dependent on the interplay of many laws, institutions, and cultural norms. It is built on the actions, large and small, of hundreds of thousands of individuals, and those individuals' faith that their actions will matter.

As we publish this report, our national democracy is in crisis. Due process and the rule of law, free and fair elections, and the separation of powers are all being challenged, and many Americans feel helpless in the face of rising authoritarianism. Strong state laws and systems are a shield against federal attacks on democracy, and we continue to hold Maine to the highest standard and resist efforts to weaken our voting laws.

In that context, this report reaffirms our commitment to democratic values and the integrity of fact-based research. We acknowledge our debt to librarians, academics, election officials, and journalists; and we stand with them as freedom of speech, access to information, and scientific inquiry are being attacked.

This report also highlights many of the weaknesses in the building blocks of democracy

at the local and county levels. The more we look beyond the state aggregate numbers, the more we see inequities in representation, access to local news and information, and uneven levels of civic engagement. Addressing today's crisis will require addressing these inequities and rebuilding trust in democracy.

This report offers a broader perspective on the state of democracy in Maine in several selected areas: Representative Government, Voter And Civic Participation, the Effect Of District Demographics On Voter Turnout Voting Rights, Barriers To Voting, Election Methods, Conduct Of Elections, Money In Politics, Freedom Of Information, Newspapers And Media Access, Digital Equity, the Judicial System, and County Government.

In each of these areas, we have selected indicators from published reports or easily accessible data to show how Maine rates on these indicators and whether the trend is positive or negative. Where possible, we have attempted to compare Maine with other states to provide a larger context for our findings. Each chapter provides a brief overview of why the subject matters to democracy and a short assessment of the situation in Maine. We also present the selected indicators that we've measured and the key conclusions from our analysis (along with graphs to illustrate our findings, where relevant). Each chapter provides a brief discussion of the methodology and sources used, along with suggestions for future research and, in some cases, pointers to further reading. A final chapter discusses overall conclusions.

The areas and indicators selected for the report were informed and guided by our mission and priorities, and we limited ourselves to easily accessible data. We hope to continue publishing this report biennially in odd-numbered years. We believe the report offers a timely, objective, and informative portrait of the state of democracy in Maine.

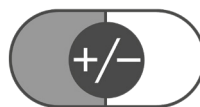
A note on indicators: Each indicator is assessed in terms of what the finding implies for the state of democracy in Maine, whether negative, positive, mixed, or difficult to judge.



The — indicates a negative finding, impact, or trend.



The + Indicates a positive finding, impact, or trend.



The +/- indicates a mixed “good news/bad news” finding, impact, or trend.



The ? indicates that it is hard to judge the impact of the finding.

CHAPTER ONE

Representative Government

KEY INDICATORS



Indicator #1 | *Percentage Aged 55-74 in the Legislature vs. in Maine Population*

The percentage of baby boomers in the Legislature is very high (58%) relative to their numbers in the general population (36%).



Indicator #2 | *Percentage of Women in the Legislature vs. in Maine Population*

Women make up 41% of the Legislature but comprise 51% of the general population.



Indicator #3 | *Percentage of Women in the Legislature in 2025 vs. in Earlier Years*

The percentage of women in the 2025 Legislature dipped slightly from 2023, when it was at a historic high. Still, at 41% today, that's almost 14% higher than it was 25 years ago. There is still room for improvement, but we have made significant progress.



Indicator #4 | *Partisan Representation in the Legislature*

The efficiency gap is a standard for measuring how closely the partisan makeup of an elected body matches votes cast and is often used to quantify the effects of gerrymandering. Maine has very low efficiency gaps, less than 1% for both the state House and Senate, meaning that the partisan makeup of our legislature closely reflects the partisan split in votes cast. An 8% efficiency gap is accepted as an indication of problematic gerrymandering.

GENDER REPRESENTATION IN MAINE'S 132ND LEGISLATURE

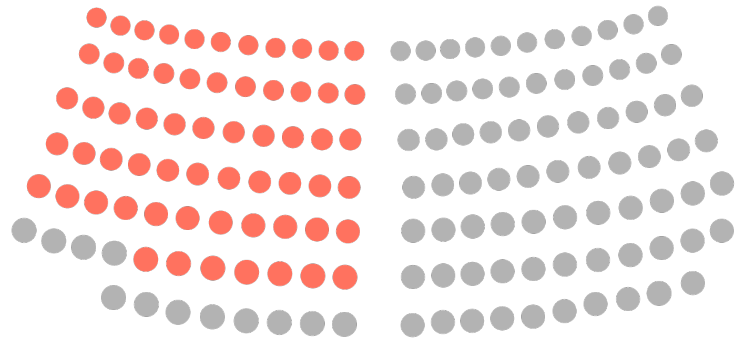
Senate:



37%

Of the 35 Senate members, 13 are women.

House:



41%

Of the 151 House members, 62 are women.

WHY IT MATTERS:

The demographic composition of our Legislature tells us something about whose voices get heard in state government and who has access to power. How representative can a government be if it does not reflect its entire constituency, or if it does not provide representation proportional to the electorate? How can we have the best leadership possible if there are substantial barriers to service for a significant number of qualified people?

SITUATION IN MAINE 2025:

We examined the age and gender of members of the Legislature to see whether we are electing and appointing people who represent us all. To put it bluntly, the Legislature is and has been dominated by older white men, although the number of women serving has grown over the last quarter century. Barriers to service are real for women and younger adults. Despite a recent increase in compensation,¹ legislative service still pays poorly. Many younger people in their critical earning years cannot afford to serve without putting a drag on their current or future financial security — unless they have independent resources or a high-earning spouse/partner. It's hard for young people to serve. It's harder for women: The wealth gap between men and women and the high cost of a political career make it harder for women to pursue this vocation, as does the extra burden of child care. The barriers are even higher for women of color. However, women continue to hold a majority of cabinet positions, a feat achieved for the first time in 2020.

This year, for the first time, we also looked at the “efficiency gap” in the state legislature. The efficiency gap is a measure of the extent to which votes for party candidates match representation in the elected body.² Although our legislature is

closely divided, voters are also closely divided. Our legislative districts are relatively small, and our apportionment process is relatively fair and bipartisan, meaning that our legislature's partisan split reflects the split among our voters.

DISCUSSION:

From 2000 to 2025, the gender balance in the Maine legislature has fluctuated slightly (see Figure 1), but the average age of legislators has proven remarkably stable, with an advantage tilted toward older age groups (see Figure 2). Research at the federal level indicates that older representatives pay more attention to issues that relate to seniors.³ This is only natural. If that finding holds true in our state legislature, then its policy agenda may tilt toward the interests of older, white men. Representation matters. We want a legislature that reflects our varied interests and priorities.

Why is this so hard to achieve? Women frequently reach leadership positions in the legislature once elected — indicating that they are perfectly able to do the job. Academic studies^{4,5} and conversations with current and former legislators suggest that legislative service does not pay enough to enable people to serve if they need to earn a living or support a family. It is almost impossible to hold a full-time, year-round job and perform legislative service at the same time. The result is that people defer public service until their financial circumstances are more secure, that is, until they are well into their fifties or sixties. Many young men simply cannot afford to serve; these barriers are even greater for women. Median wealth for single women is only 73% that of their single male counterparts.⁶ Child-care responsibilities also fall disproportionately on women.

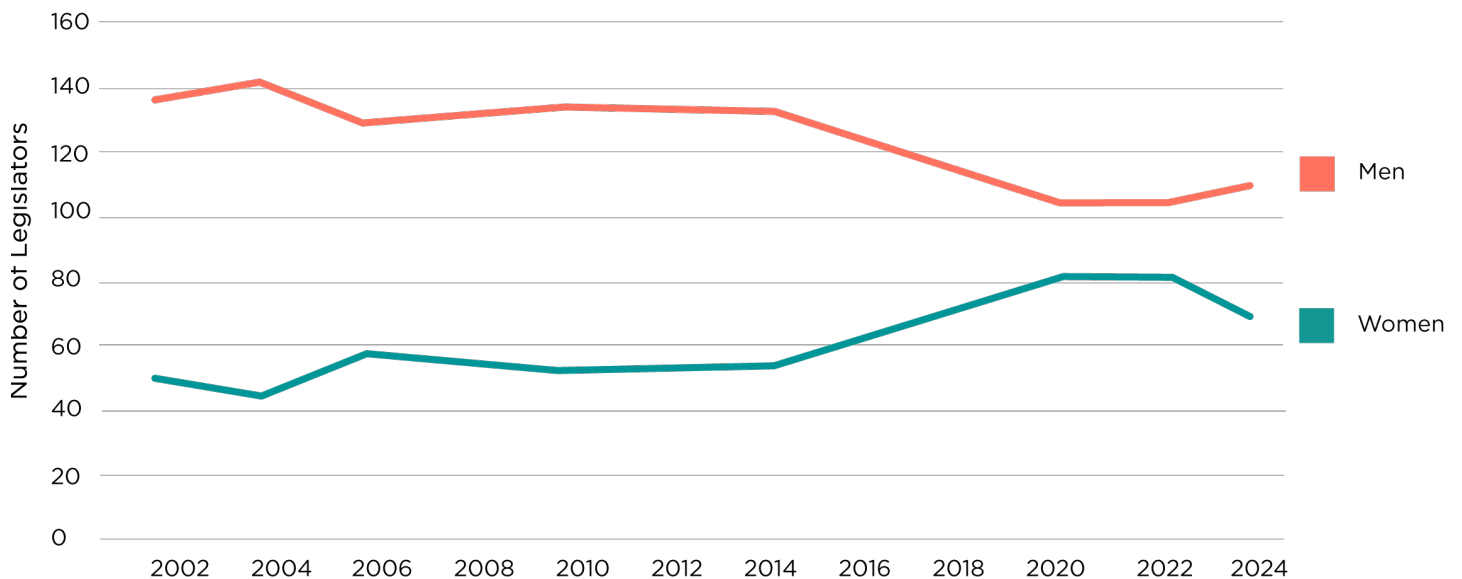


FIGURE 1 | Gender Makeup of Maine's Legislature, 2002-2024

One of the often-cited reasons why women are less likely to run for public office is that the burden of political fundraising is heavier for them. Maine has addressed this problem by offering public funding to candidates. The Maine Clean Election Act (MCEA) eliminates the financial barrier to running. Indeed, in the years immediately following passage of the Act, more women did run for office and win.⁷

In addition to looking at the Legislature, we also looked at the gender distribution of cabinet-level positions and constitutional officers going back to 2000. The current gubernatorial administration is the first in Maine's history headed by a woman, and it is the first to appoint a greater number of women than men to department-head/cabinet-level positions.⁸

Maine's government includes three constitutional officers (the Secretary of State, the State Treasurer, and the State Attorney General) and one statutory officer (the State Auditor). Maine's first woman Secretary of State was elected by the Legislature in 2020, and she continues to serve in that role. The other three officers are currently men. If the governor, the constitutional officers, the statutory officer, and the cabinet members are considered together as

the executive leadership of Maine's government, 55% of that leadership is comprised of women, a slightly greater percentage than the percentage of women in the general population.

Finally, Maine's bipartisan reapportionment process and its relatively small legislative districts result in a legislature that reflects the partisan preferences of Maine voters. Representation in Maine is not distorted the way it is in some states where extreme partisan gerrymandering leaves a substantial number, if not a majority, of voters feeling that they have no voice in policy-making.

AGE	AT LARGE	SENATE	HOUSE	ALL LEGISLATORS
20-39	29.65%	4	17	11.35%
40-54	23.13%	3	43	24.86%
55-74	35.55%	27	81	58.38%
75+	11.67%	1	9	5.41%

FIGURE 2 | Age Breakdown of the 132nd Maine Legislature, House and Senate



METHODS:

Indicators 1-3: We looked at the age and gender distribution of the 186 incoming members of the new Legislature going back to the year 2000. Data for the House from 2000-2018 was provided by the Clerk of the House. Data for the Senate from 2000-2018 was provided by the Secretary of the Senate. From 2019 through the beginning of the 132nd Maine Legislature in 2025 (House and Senate), age and gender data were drawn from publicly available data as well as from the Catalyst database, available to participating members. Comparative data for the population of Maine is from the 2023 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates⁹ provided by the U.S. Census.

Indicator 4: Partisan Representation: The efficiency gap is a measure used to quantify the effects of gerrymandering and was computed as recommended by the Brennan Center using election results provided by the Maine Secretary of State. The method measures “wasted” votes in each district - every vote for a losing candidate and also every vote over the number needed to win for the winning candidate - and looks for parity in wasted votes overall. It is intended for a bipartisan system, but adding calculations for additional parties did not meaningfully change the results.

We looked at the age and gender of the cabinet members going back to the year 2000 based on publicly available data.

FURTHER RESEARCH:

It would be worthwhile to compare Maine with other states (such as Nevada, which currently has a 62% female Legislature) and to understand the reasons for the differences in gender representation. Not enough data is available on race, ethnicity, gender/sexuality, or economic origin. An important topic for the future is the racial composition of our people and our legislature. Maine is one of the whitest states in the country, but hard data is not available on the racial composition of the Maine Legislature, and even the numbers of non-whites in the population are too small to make statistical inferences.

Progress may be on the horizon in this area since legislation passed in 2021 to pilot a program of assessing the racial impact of pending legislation. It would also be interesting to examine demographic representation at the county and municipal level. Town and city government positions often provide pipelines to the state legislature, particularly for women. It would be a more challenging project to analyze the demographics of senior leaders of the executive branch departments. That demographic information (or even an identification of the persons holding those positions) is difficult for the public to find. Some of the departmental websites provide that information, but many do not.

ADDITIONAL READING:

1. Women in State Legislatures 2024, Center for American Women in Politics, <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/levels-office/state-legislature/women-state-legislatures-2024>
2. Black Women in Elective Office, Center for American Women in Politics, <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/black-women-elective-office>
3. Billings, R. (2021, December 13). Pilot launched to assess racial impact of state legislative bills. *Press Herald*. <https://www.pressherald.com/2021/12/13/pilot-launched-to-assess-racial-impact-of-state-legislative-bills/>
4. Research Division. (2021, February). Women in the Nevada Legislature. Research Division Legislative Counsel Bureau. https://www.leg.state.nv.us/Division/Research/Documents/Women_NVLegislature.pdf
5. National Conference of State Legislatures. (2022, June 12). 2022 Legislator Compensation. <https://www.ncsl.org/about-state-legislatures/2022-legislator-compensation>. *Note that a new Maine law (LD 205: "An Act to Update the 10 Reimbursement for Travel-related Expenses Incurred as a Result of the Performance of 11 Legislative Duties") went into effect in early 2023 that increases the mileage reimbursement rate to 55¢ per mile or the federal standard, whichever is lower. It also increases the daily housing allowance from \$38 per day to \$70 per day and the meal allowance from \$32 per day to \$50 per day.
6. Rayasam, R., McCaskill, N., Jin, B., & Vestal, A. (2021, February 22). Why state legislatures are still very white — and very male. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2021/state-legislature-demographics/>
7. Traflet, J., & Wright, R. (2019, April 2). America doesn't just have a gender pay gap. It has a gender wealth gap. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/04/02/america-doesnt-just-have-gender-pay-gap-it-has-gender-wealth-gap/>
8. Maine Population 2023 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs). (2023). *World Population Review*. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/states/maine-population>
9. Take Part. (n.d.). Infographic: Does Congress Look Like America? YES! *Magazine*. <https://www.yesmagazine.org/education/2016/09/15/infographic-does-congress-look-like-america>

SOURCES:

1. Billings, Randy, "Maine lawmakers get 61% pay increase." *The Portland Press Herald*, January 2, 2025, <https://www.pressherald.com/2025/01/02/maine-lawmakers-get-61-pay-increase/>
2. Petri, Eric, "How the Efficiency Gap Works." *Brennan Center for Justice*. https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legal-work/How_the_Efficiency_Gap_Standard_Works.pdf
3. Haydon, Matthew R., and James M. Curry. "Congress Is Old. Does It Matter?" *LegBranch*, 12 Nov. 2018, <https://www.legbranch.org/2018-3-5-congress-is-old-does-it-matter/>
4. Bangs, Molly. "Women's Underrepresentation in Politics: No, It's Not Just an Ambition Gap." *The Century Foundation*, 21 Sept. 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/womens-underrepresentation-politics-no-not-just-ambition-gap/?agreed=1>
5. Shames, S. (2017). *Out of the Running: Why Millennials Reject Political Careers and Why It Matters*. In Google Books. *NYU Press*. <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=DAXvCwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR10&q=shauna+shames&sig=f84OQwuGUnmnVJ4GSpPzy6T3i-E#v=onepage&q=shauna%20shames&f=false>
6. Bennett, N., Hays, D., & Sullivan, B. (2022, August 1). 2019 Data Show Baby Boomers Nearly 9 Times Wealthier Than Millennials. *Census.gov*. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/08/wealth-inequality-by-household-type.html>
7. *2007 Report on the Maine Clean Election Act*. (2007). Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices. https://www.Maine.gov/ethics/sites/Maine.gov.ethics/files/inline-files/2007_study_report.pdf
8. U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *QuickFacts Maine*. The United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/ME/HCN010217>
9. Cabinet | Office of Governor Janet T. Mills. (n.d.). <https://www.Maine.gov/governor/mills/about/cabinet>

CHAPTER TWO

Voter Participation and Individual Characteristics

KEY INDICATORS



Indicator #1 | *Maine's Voter Turnout*

Maine's turnout in 2024 was 74.8%. This is a bit lower than 2020 but still higher than previous Presidential years, and is in line with voting trends across the country.



Indicator #2 | *States with the Highest Voter Turnout*

Maine has consistently been in the top 10% of states in terms of voter turnout over the last 20 years. In the 2024 general election, Maine's turnout of 74.8% was the third highest, and the overall national turnout was 67.7%.



Indicator #3 | *Voter Turnout by Gender*

In recent elections, women in Maine have either voted at a slightly higher rate than men, or exactly on par with them; in November 2024, women and men were equally likely to vote.



Indicator #4 | *Voter Turnout by Age*

Maine led the nation in youth voter turnout in 2024, with 60% of voters between ages 18 and 29 voting in November. The only state higher was Minnesota, and the national average was 47%.

WHY IT MATTERS:

Voter participation is the centerpiece of a democratic society. Analyzing which groups of people are more or less likely to vote can help us better understand the barriers to participation. If we are to have a healthy democracy, we need to acknowledge and mitigate sources of political inequality, including economic, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and other demographic disparities. Inadequate data may make it difficult to quantify the extent of demographic disparities. But we should not interpret a lack of data to mean that disparities do not exist and do not need to be addressed.

SITUATION IN MAINE 2025:

Maine consistently has a comparatively high voter turnout rate (see Figure 1). However, a significant percentage of eligible voters still do not participate in each election. On average over the past several elections, about 60% of Maine’s voting-eligible population voted in November in midterm years and about 75% in presidential years. Year-to-year trends tend to mirror national trends. Women are equally represented in Maine’s voting population. We noted that the percentage of women in the population versus the percentage of women who vote tend to be almost the same (see Figure 2). Young people vote at a lower rate than older people, but Maine leads the nation in youth voter turnout as well.

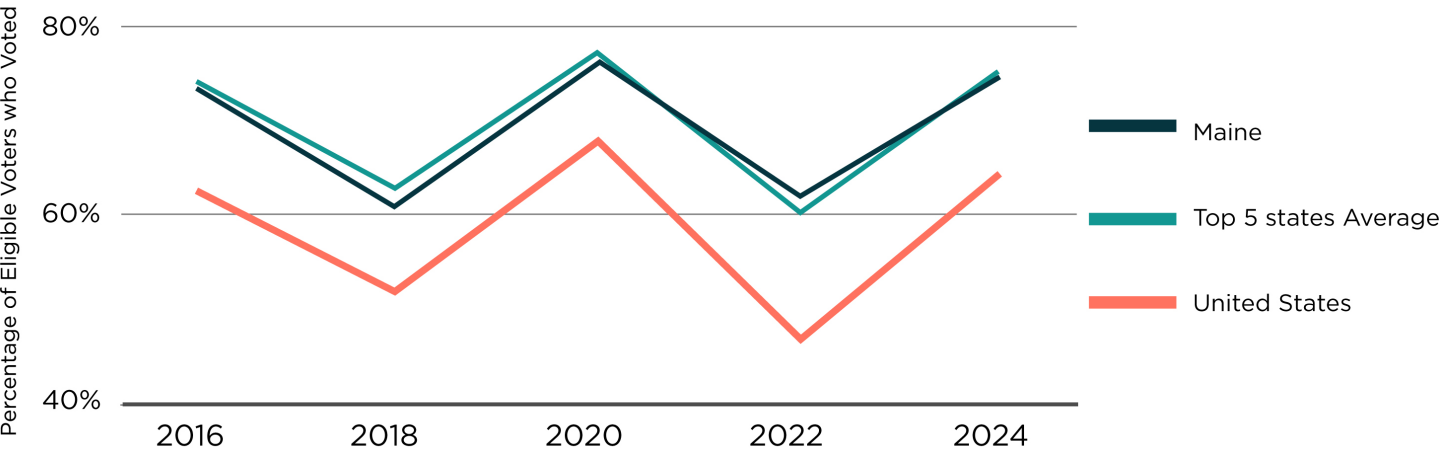


FIGURE 1 | Turnout in National Elections Since 2016

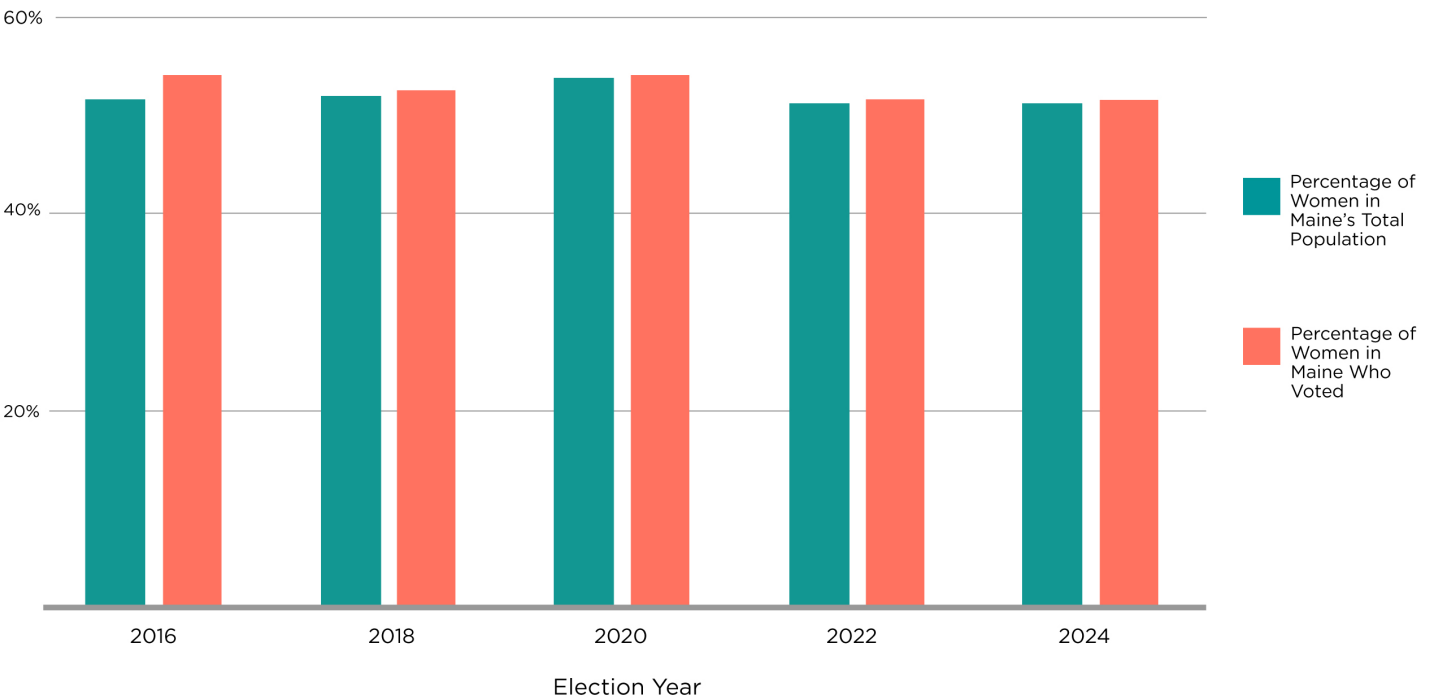


FIGURE 2 | Percentage of Women Who Turnout to Vote in Maine

DISCUSSION:

Maine’s voter participation rate has held steady over the last 20 years in both presidential and midterm elections. Although Maine’s youth generally vote at a lower rate than other age cohorts in the state, Maine leads the nation in youth turnout, with only Minnesota seeing more young people vote in November 2024 (see Figures 3 and 4). Nationally, youth participation has trended upward in the last decade, and Maine is no exception. However, even though voter turnout in Maine is at or near the highest in the nation, about a quarter of Maine’s electorate is not participating. Lower turnout may be a consequence of racial and economic disparities. While we do not have the data we need in order to quantify the impact of racial disparities, in Chapter 3 we will look in more detail at the effect of socioeconomic disparities in general on voting in Maine.

METHODS:

We analyzed data from the Maine Secretary of State,¹ the United States Election Assistance Commission,² the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University,^{3,4} and the US Census Current Population Survey.⁵ We compared turnout to previous elections going back 20 years as well as to other states and the nation as a whole.

FURTHER RESEARCH:

If we could explore data on voter participation across other demographic variables, such as educational attainment or occupation, and on voting behavior of specific marginalized populations, such as unhoused or incarcerated people, multivariate analysis could enable us to examine the net effects of each of these variables individually and together.

In addition, our focus on voter turnout for November elections in even-numbered years ignores the many other opportunities for Maine voters to participate in state and local government, including state primaries and referenda, municipal elections, and annual town meetings. We know turnout is lower for elections at other times of year, but we have not yet analyzed available data on municipal turnout

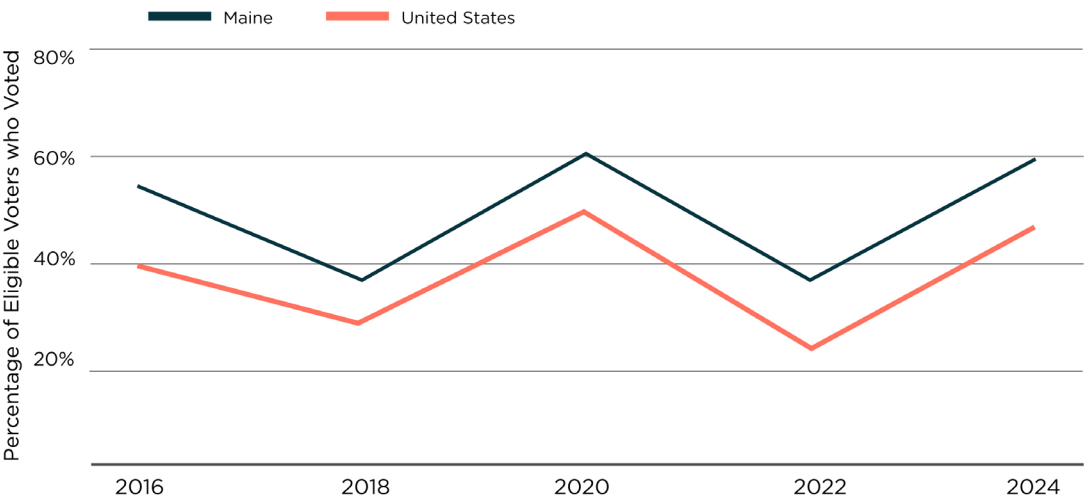


FIGURE 3 | Youth Voter Turnout Over Time in Maine

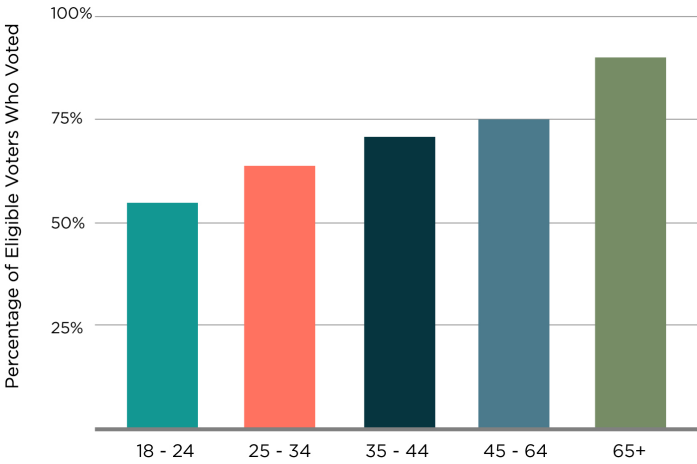


FIGURE 4 | Maine Voter Turnout in Nov. 2024 by Age

SOURCES:

1. Bureau of Corporations, Elections & Commissions. (n.d.). Voter Data | SOS. <https://www.maine.gov/sos/elections-voting/voter-data>
2. *Election Administration and Voting Survey 2024 Comprehensive Report*. U.S. Election Assistance Commission. (2025, June 6). https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2025-06/2024_EAVS_Report_508c.pdf
3. Tufts University. (n.d.). *Youth voting and civic engagement in America*. CIRCLE. <https://circle.tufts.edu/explore-our-data/youth-voting-and-civic-engagement-america>
4. Tufts University. (n.d.). *The Youth Vote in 2024*. CIRCLE. <https://circle.tufts.edu/2024-election>
5. U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Voting and Registration*. United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/topics/public-sector/voting.html>

CHAPTER THREE

Voter Participation and District Characteristics

KEY INDICATORS



Indicator #1 | *Poverty and Voter Participation*

A higher poverty rate in a district continues to strongly correlate with a lower voter participation rate. While Maine's turnout is high overall, the difference in turnout between districts is striking, with the poorest house districts voting at half the rate of the richest.



Indicator #2 | *Race and Voter Participation*

While voter participation tends to be lower in districts with more racial diversity, we found that for the 2024 general election, the correlation is weak.



Indicator #3 | *Housing Type and Voter Participation*

Another commonly cited economic indicator is the rate of owner-occupancy; in Maine, people who do not own their homes are far less likely to vote than people who do. Like the poverty rate, this correlation with voter turnout is strong.

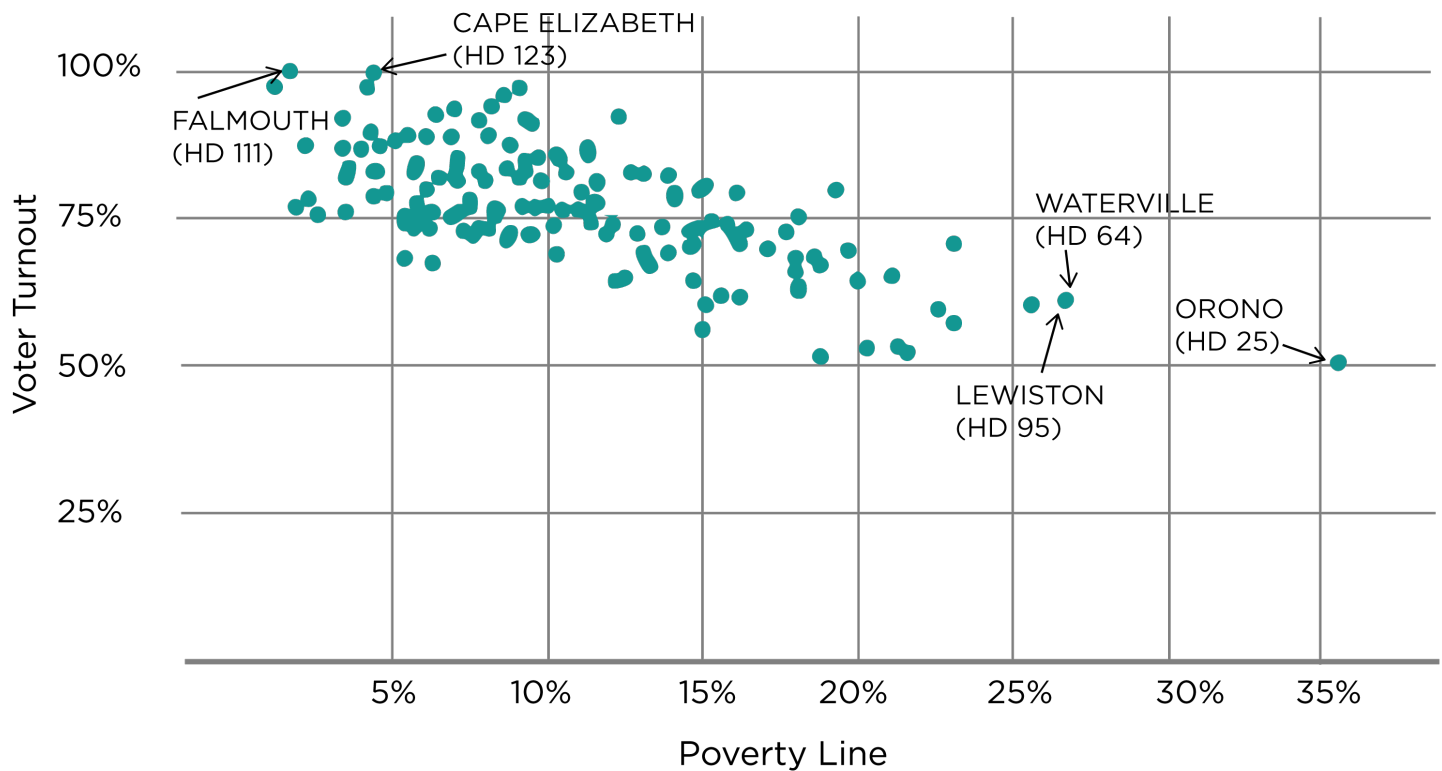


FIGURE 1 | Maine House Districts, 2024 Voter Turnout and Poverty Rate

WHY IT MATTERS:

Where people live can provide valuable information about certain structural barriers and disparities that may affect voter participation, particularly where data on individuals is unavailable. For example, we may not know an individual voter's income, but if they live in a high-poverty area, they and their neighbors are more likely to be experiencing poverty and associated barriers to political participation than those living in more affluent areas (see Figure 1). Measuring the relationship between voter turnout and district characteristics — such as poverty rate, racial makeup (see Figure 2), and prevalent housing type — can provide valuable insights into voter access and potential interventions needed to reduce barriers to enfranchisement.

SITUATION IN MAINE 2025:

In the aggregate, Maine has a lower poverty rate (10.4% vs. 12.5%¹ in 2023) and a higher voter participation rate than the nation as a whole (see Chapter 2). However, these rates vary widely across districts, and we would expect districts with higher poverty rates to have lower voter turnout. This relationship holds true for Maine, where a higher poverty rate in a district continues to correlate strongly (0.69) with lower voter turnout.

Ninety percent of people in Maine identify themselves on the census as white only, not mixed-

race or Hispanic/Latino. At the House district level, this rate ranges from 67% to 98%. The most racially diverse districts are in urban areas. While voter participation tends to be lower in districts with more racial diversity, we found that for the 2024 general election, the correlation was weak (coefficient of 0.25). In 2022, we found a stronger correlation; ultimately, the effect of racial disparity on voting in Maine is hard to capture statistically.

Maine's owner-occupancy rate is higher than the nation as a whole, at an estimated 74.4% compared to 65.2%. Of the indicators we reviewed, the owner-occupancy rate had a similar effect as the poverty rate (correlation coefficient of 0.64). Renters are more likely to face residential instability, which makes it harder to know where and when to vote and to connect with local political issues and candidates. Having to update a voter registration address may also create an additional barrier for voters who move more frequently.

DISCUSSION:

Maine leads the nation in voter participation overall, but those high numbers obscure stark differences in participation in different regions, with some districts voting at half the rate of others. To help us understand these differences, geographic analysis is a starting point for exploring factors that may be in play. We can easily point to a state with lower

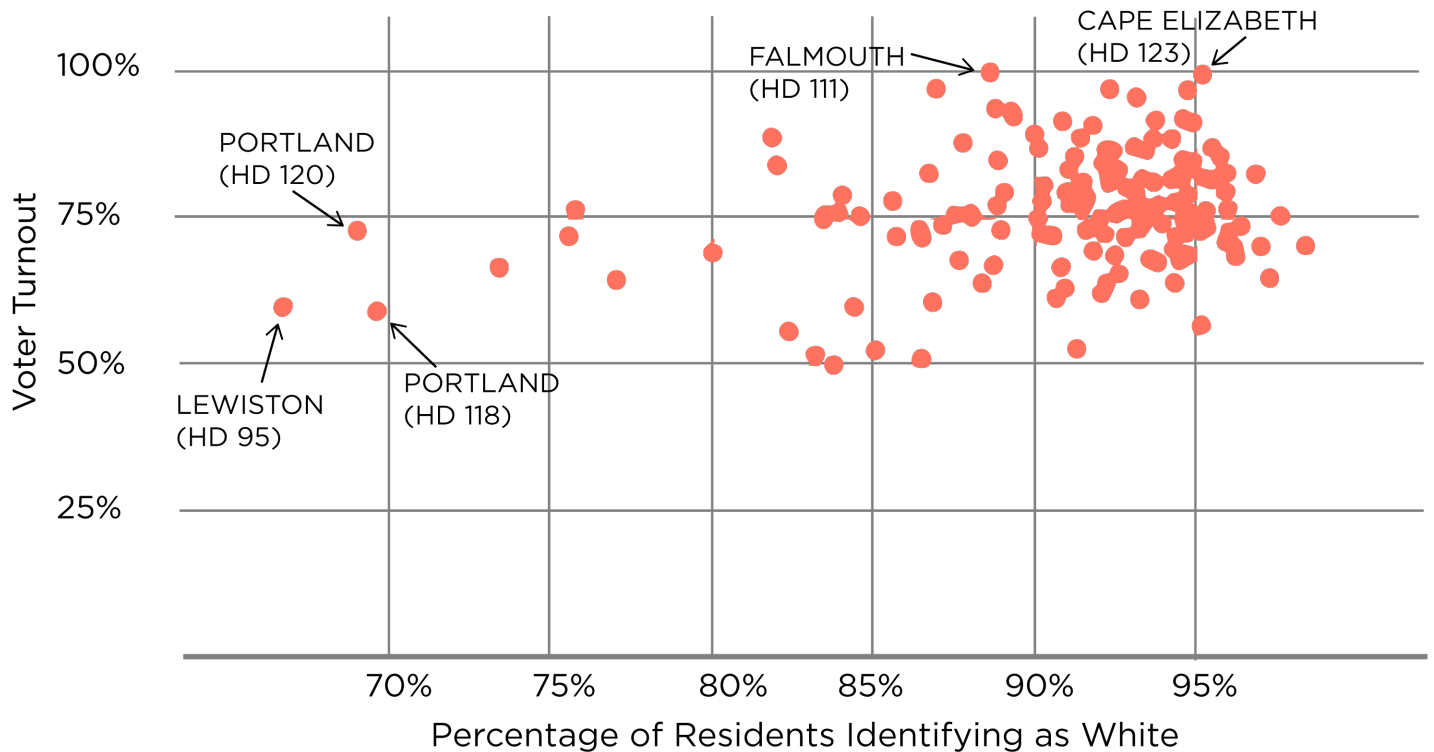


FIGURE 2 | Maine House Districts, 2024 Voter Turnout & Percentage of Residents Identifying as White

turnout and see the effects of voter registration deadlines, limits on absentee voting, or other state-level policies; but those can't explain the variance within our own state.

We explored the statistical relationships between voter turnout and district characteristics, which can provide valuable insights into voter access, socioeconomic barriers to enfranchisement, and potential interventions to reduce these barriers. The stronger the correlation between voter participation rates and certain district demographics — such as poverty rate, racial makeup, and prevalent housing type — the more likely it is that socioeconomic barriers may be keeping people from voting.

Voter participation in 2024 was most strongly correlated with economic measures including poverty and rate of owner-occupied housing. Racial makeup showed a weaker relationship than in the past; even though districts that had more racial diversity had lower turnout rates, the relationship is inconclusive. In addition, race, poverty, and home ownership are interrelated, which makes it difficult to identify a single underlying driver of low participation and suggests the potential for compounding barriers. Some of these barriers could include lack of time off work, transportation and child care shortages, lack of access to information

about when and where to vote or documentation needed to register, and who the candidates are and what issues are on the ballot.

METHODS:

For all indicators, we compared 2024 voter turnout data by House district from the Maine Secretary of State's office⁴ to rates of poverty, owner-occupied housing, and white only population, which we drew from the 2023 American Community Survey.^{5,6} We calculated correlation coefficients to analyze the strength of the relationship between voting propensity and each of these characteristics. A moderate to strong correlation (between 0.5 and 1.0) shows enough evidence of a relationship for us to mark the indicator as negative. In a healthy democracy, whether or not people in an area are poor should have no effect on how likely they are to vote.

FURTHER RESEARCH:

There are a number of opportunities for future analysis of voting participation based on demographics and geography. We will continue to monitor the relationship between voting participation and poverty, racial makeup, and geographic factors. Additional metrics for analysis might include average distances to polling locations, eligible voters per polling place, and residential

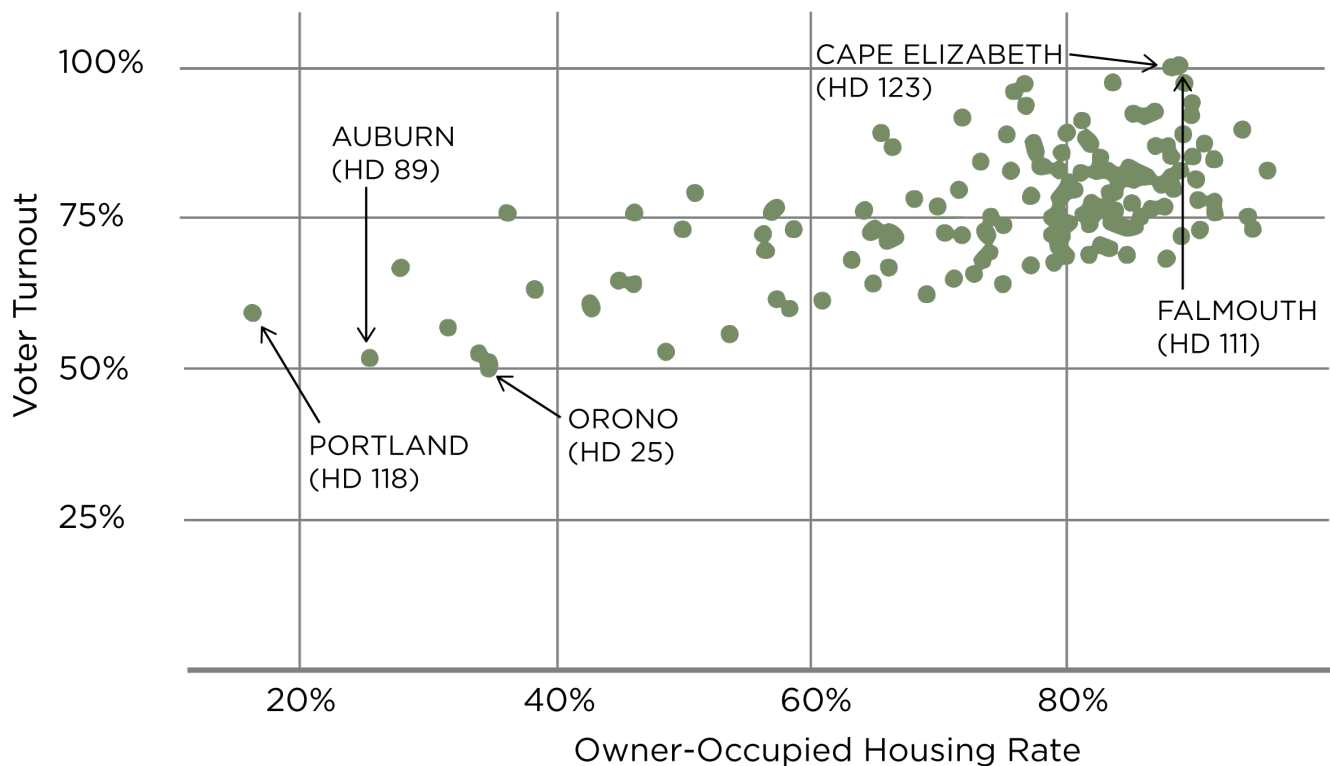


FIGURE 3 | Maine House Districts, 2024 Voter Turnout and Owner-Occupied Housing Rate

instability, as well as how these factors may affect voting patterns in local vs. statewide and national elections. Studying these relationships would help us to further identify and reduce barriers to voting in future elections as well as to assess the effectiveness of policies implemented to improve voter access. It could also be beneficial to apply more in-depth statistical methods, to control for the interaction of these variables.

ADDITIONAL READING:

1. Akee, R. (2019, February 7). Voting and Income. Econofact. <https://econofact.org/voting-and-income>
2. Smith, J., & Pattabhiraman, T. (2020, October 29). How Inequality Keeps People from Voting. Greater Good Magazine. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_inequality_keeps_people_from_voting
3. Simmons, L. (2022, August 18). If You Lived Here, You Might Be a Voter By Now. Stanford Graduate School of Business Insights. <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/if-you-lived-here-you-might-be-voter-now>
4. Scholars Strategy Network. (2019). Securing Fair Elections: Challenges to Voting in the United States and Georgia. <https://scholars.org/fairelections>

5. Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Harvard University Press. <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674942936>

SOURCES:

1. Bureau of Corporations, Elections & Commissions. (n.d.). *Voter Registration Data, Election Data and Online Forms*. Maine.gov. <https://www.Maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/data/index.html>
2. U.S. Census Bureau (2025). *2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate B25003, B29001, and B17101 Tables*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov/advanced>.

CHAPTER FOUR

Voting Rights

KEY INDICATORS



Indicator #1 | *Same-day Registration*

Maine is one of 23 states that allow same-day voter registration (SDR), also known as Election Day registration. Any eligible voter may visit the polls on Election Day, register to vote with valid identification, and cast a standard (non-provisional) ballot then and there. Studies show that on average, SDR increases voter participation by seven percentage points.



Indicator #2 | *No Photo ID Requirement*

Although voters must prove their identity in order to register to vote, Maine is one of 15 states that does not require a picture ID or proof of citizenship to vote at the polls on Election Day. Studies have shown that requiring strict photo ID can to reduce voter turnout by as much as 4%.¹



Indicator #3 | *No Felony Disenfranchisement*

Maine is one of two states (the other is Vermont) in which incarcerated citizens have the right to vote. Felony disenfranchisement laws, which became common during the Jim Crow era, affect Black Americans at a rate four times that of other Americans.



Indicator #4 | *Reducing Barriers to Voting*

Between 2019 and 2024, Maine significantly upgraded its election infrastructure to include three new measures that make voter participation easier: Automatic Voter Registration, Online Voter Registration, and Absentee Ballot Drop boxes

WHY IT MATTERS:

Voting is the most fundamental expression of citizenship in our democracy. The expansion of voting rights to include all Americans, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender, and the breaking down of barriers to citizens' voter participation — from literacy tests to poll taxes — has been one of the great successes in the evolution of American democracy. In 21 states, 32 voting laws expanding voting were enacted in 2024.

However, this experiment in multiracial, inclusive democracy is under threat. Beginning in 2010 many states started implementing new voting restrictions, a trend that aggressively accelerated after the 2020 election. Since 2021, 79 restrictive voting bills have become law in more than 20 states. This is over four times the number of such bills passed from 2013 to 2016.² Between January 1 and December 31, 2024, at least 10 states enacted 19 restrictive voting laws. Thankfully, restrictive measures have not passed in Maine, where several steps have been taken to improve access to the ballot. Nevertheless, Maine's democratic project will not be complete until every eligible citizen is registered to vote and informed about candidates and issues, and barriers to casting a ballot have been eliminated.

SITUATION IN MAINE 2025:

According to a 2018 report of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, Maine "has some of the most inclusive and protective voting laws in the country, making it one of the most democratic states in the United States. Its residents may register to vote on Election Day, there is no photo identification requirement when casting a ballot, and those convicted of crimes are not deprived of the franchise."³

Implementation of automatic voter registration (AVR) was intended to further remove barriers. In 2019, Maine joined 17 other states that had enacted automatic voter registration (AVR) laws, under which citizens are automatically registered to vote when they interact with the Bureau of Motor Vehicles or other state agencies. Maine implemented AVR at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles in 2022. The process as implemented is not genuinely automatic; it does make registering or updating registration information easier, but people must go through a separate transaction to do it. So despite issues with partial implementation, AVR has been used more than 20,000 times to update voter registrations.

Absentee ballot drop boxes were first used in 2020 in response to the COVID emergency

declaration, allowing voters to securely and conveniently return their ballots. In 2021, the use of drop boxes was codified by the 130th Legislature. As of November 2024, there were 360 absentee ballot drop boxes in use across the state, with voters in over 75% of Maine's towns and townships having access to a drop box.

Online voter registration (OVR) became available to voters in Maine in February of 2024, with Maine joining 41 other states that offer this service. The roll-out of Maine's OVR system was relatively smooth, and 37,975 voters used it in 2024, constituting 19% of all voter registration transactions.

As of February 1, 2024, voters who will be at least 65 years of age at the next election or those who self-identify as having a disability will be able to obtain an ongoing absentee voter status. Those who qualify for this status will automatically receive an absentee ballot for each election in which they are eligible to vote without having to submit a request for each one.

DISCUSSION:

Maine leads the nation in protecting voting rights and reducing barriers to voting. Maine's leadership status has been enhanced with the passage and implementation of AVR and OVR. But voting rights have come under assault in many states in recent years. Photo ID requirements, closures of polling places, voter roll purges, proof of citizenship requirements, and registration drive restrictions have put barriers in the way of millions of American voters. Here in Maine, repeated attempts to restrict voting rights and ballot access have been unsuccessful — so far. Bills calling for a photo ID requirement at the polls were defeated in every legislative session of the last decade. Strict photo ID laws have been found to place a disproportionate burden on minority voters; a nationwide, county-level study found that they suppressed minority turnout by 5.3 to 7.8 percent.⁴

Many of these services are in danger due to a ballot referendum coming up in November 2025, "Voter ID for Maine." The League of Women Voters recognizes this as voter suppression, pure and simple, and opposes it as it opposes all efforts to create barriers to a citizen's constitutional right to vote.⁵ This referendum seeks to require voters to provide very specific forms of ID in order to vote, revokes ongoing absentee voter status, limits the use and number of absentee drop boxes such that many towns will be unable to practically use them, requires

absentee ballots to be requested in person, and prevents authorized third parties from delivering absentee ballots.

In addition, proposed federal legislation would disenfranchise tens of millions nationwide by requiring a passport or birth certificate matching one's current ID in order to register to vote; the latter requirement would have a disproportionate effect on women who changed their last names.

METHODS:

For the qualitative indicators of pro-voter laws, we looked at "Voting Rights in Maine," a 2018 report from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights,³ and "Voting Laws Roundup: 2024 in Review" by the Brennan Center for Justice.² We scored every U.S. state on these indicators, and found that only Maine and Vermont scored 100%. Additionally, while the MIT Elections Performance Index⁶ cited Maine's lack of online voter registration in 2022 as a factor in Maine's middling performance in this index (ranked 33/50 states. Maine's implementation in 2023 of online voter registration represents an improvement we anticipate will be incorporated into the next update of MIT's index. For the impact of same-day registration, we referred to a peer-reviewed 2001 study in *Social Sciences Quarterly* and a 2022 peer-reviewed study in *The Journal of Politics*.⁷ Data on states without photo ID requirements is from the National Conference of State Legislatures.⁸

FURTHER RESEARCH:

While Maine voters enjoy protective laws, some hidden barriers to voting may remain and prove harder to assess. In consultation with experts, we hope to investigate how access to the ballot can be improved by lowering the cost of voting. The costs of voting might include the time and expense of registering to vote, gathering information on candidates and issues, determining how and where and when to vote, traveling to and from a polling station or election office, and waiting in line. So-called "voter conveniences" might work to reduce the cost of voting and improve voter participation. Efforts at voter education and engagement, outreach to marginalized voters, and accommodations for those with disabilities and those speaking languages other than English might all work to lower the cost of voting and improve voter participation.

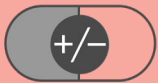
SOURCES:

1. Darrah-Okike, J., Rita, N., & Logan, J. R. (2021). *The Suppressive Impacts of Voter Identification Requirements*. *Sociological Perspectives*, 64(4), 536-562. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121420966620> (Original work published 2021)
2. Brennan Center for Justice. (2025, January 15). *Voting Laws Roundup: 2024 In Review* | Brennan Center for Justice. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-2024-review>
3. Maine Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. (2018). *Voting Rights in Maine*.
4. Kuk, J., Hajnal, Z., & Lajevardi, N. (2020). *A disproportionate burden: strict voter identification laws and minority turnout*. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2020.1773280>
5. League of Women Voters. (2025). *What is the voter suppression referendum?* <https://www.lwvme.org/node/3423>
6. Elections Performance Index. (n.d.). Maine. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Election Data + Science Lab. Retrieved April 26, 2025, from <https://elections.mit.edu/#/data/map?view=state-profile&state=ME&year=2022>
7. Brians, C.L., & Grofman, B.N. (2001). *Election Day Registration's Effect on U.S. Voter Turnout*. *Social Science Quarterly*, 82, 170-183; Grumbach, J. M. and Hill, C. (2022) *Rock the Registration: Same Day Registration Increases Turnout of Young Voters*. *The Journal of Politics*, 84, 405-417.
8. Voter ID Laws. (2024, February 2). National Conference of State Legislatures. <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id>

CHAPTER FIVE

Election Methods

KEY INDICATORS



Indicator #1 | *Ranked Choice Voting (RCV)*

Maine uses RCV in elections for the U.S. President, U.S. Senate, U.S. House of Representatives, and in all primaries for state and federal offices. We do not yet use RCV to elect the governor and state legislators because of an opinion of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court. Two municipalities currently use RCV for local elections: Portland and Westbrook.



Indicator #2 | *National Popular Vote (NPV) Interstate Compact*

NPV would ensure that the elected president is the candidate who receives the most votes nationwide. Maine enacted the Compact in 2024, joining sixteen other states and the District of Columbia.



Indicator #3 | *Semi-open Primaries*

Since 2024, unenrolled voters have been allowed to participate in the primary of the party of their choice (a “semi-open primary”). Opening primary elections to unenrolled (that is, independent) voters will encourage broader participation in candidate selection. As of November 2024, 31.9% of active Maine voters were “unenrolled.” This significant portion of Maine voters is now able to participate in Maine’s primary elections.



Indicator #4 | *Presidential Primaries*

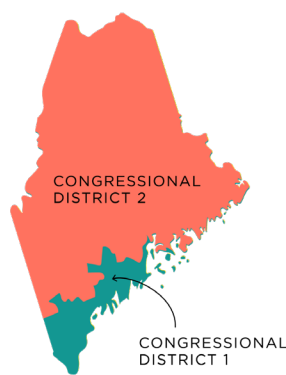
Presidential nominating caucuses restrict participation in the nominating process. Legislation passed in 2019 re-established presidential primaries in Maine. Presidential primaries were held in both 2020 and 2024.



Indicator #5 | Redistricting

Maine does not have a nonpartisan redistricting commission, but we do have a 15-member bipartisan commission appointed in redistricting years. New maps must be approved by a super-majority of the Legislature and are ratified by the Maine State Supreme Court if the Legislature cannot agree. In 2021, Maine's legislative maps were passed with minimal public input; the State House and State Senate maps were approved by the commission less than a week after their release to the public. Maine's congressional districts featured minimal change and were not substantially biased towards either party.

When does Maine vote using Ranked Choice Voting?



- ★ All Mainers use Ranked Choice Voting in **primary** and **general** elections for:

U.S. President
U.S. Senate
U.S. House

- ★ All Mainers also use Ranked Choice Voting in **primary** elections for:

Governor
Maine Legislature



- ★ Portland and Westbrook voters, additionally, use Ranked Choice Voting in **general** elections for:

Local offices
(Mayoral, City Council, and School Committee races)

WHY IT MATTERS:

Fair and equitable election methods can help ensure that elections have broad public participation and that election outcomes represent, to the extent possible, the collective view of the broadest coalition of voters. Election methods that are designed to thwart majority rule, including plurality-winner elections and extreme partisan gerrymandering, undermine representative government.

SITUATION IN MAINE 2025:

In 2022, Maine improved access to its elections by passing a semi-open primaries bill, allowing unenrolled voters to vote in the primary of their choice; the first semi-open primary elections were held in March and June of 2024, and approximately 17% of people who voted in either one are currently registered as unenrolled — 46,030 voters. Maine is among the leading states for Ranked Choice Voting (RCV), requiring it for all federal elections and federal and state primaries. There are still opportunities to do better by extending RCV to include the gubernatorial and legislative general elections, as voters originally intended.

In 2020, Maine joined a growing super-majority of states (currently 43 states) in abandoning the presidential caucuses in favor of presidential primaries. These methods help elect individuals with the broadest possible support.

While Maine does not have independent, nonpartisan redistricting commissions, we do have a bipartisan commission that protects against the worst abuses of extreme partisan gerrymandering. Although the Princeton Gerrymandering Project has found Maine's State House and Senate maps have a bias toward Republicans of 7.8% and 4.3% respectively, this is principally due to constraints on state legislative redistricting imposed by the Maine Constitution. As reported in Chapter One, Maine has a very low efficiency gap — the measure of the extent to which votes for party candidates match representation in the elected body.

Maine also joined the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact in 2024, although the Compact will not take effect until and unless enough states join.



Pictured Above: Scenes from the November 2024 election in Lewiston and Blue Hill.

Pictured Left: Clerks working the poll location in Southwest Harbor

DISCUSSION:

Maine is a leader in the use of Ranked Choice Voting, but a court advisory opinion has, to date, prevented its full implementation. In the intervening years, additional courts have considered the issue, and a different interpretation has been presented by a court considering the situation in Alaska, which stated that RCV elections comply with plurality requirements. In this light, whether RCV will be used for all races remains to be seen in Maine. The City of Portland has had Ranked Choice Voting since 2011; RCV expanded at the local level when Westbrook adopted it in 2021.

Legislation to implement semi-open primaries for 2024 became law in 2022, and Maine held two semi-open primaries in 2024, in which approximately 17% of voters were registered as unenrolled.

Maine's 2021 redistricting produced legislator-drawn maps that — while drawn with minimal public input — were not overtly gerrymandered.

METHODS:

We drew on decades of work, studies, and evidence-based testimony by LWVME and allied organizations about best practices for elections that ensure broadly representative outcomes.^{1,2,3} Data about redistricting was drawn from the Princeton Gerrymandering Project's analysis of Maine's 2021

redistricting process.⁴ Maine's Constitution imposes many restrictions that are uncommon across the country on how to draw state legislative districts, making many metrics of fair redistricting, such as district compactness, difficult to apply to Maine. However, data on partisan bias (measuring how many seats each party would win in a hypothetical 50%-50% election) was used to illustrate structural biases in Maine's redistricting process. Voter participation data was drawn from Maine's actual voter history data, as maintained by local election officials, accessed through NGPVAN. NGPVAN indicates current party registration rather than registration at the time of the election. So this data should be considered an estimate rather than an exact count. Data on registration status of voters participating in open primaries was obtained from the Office of the Secretary of State.

SOURCES:

1. Primary Elections Study. (2018, November 17). *League of Women Voters of Maine*. <https://www.lwvme.org/primarystudy>
2. Study on Ranked Choice Voting. (2011). *League of Women Voters of Maine*. <https://www.lwvme.org/studyRCV>
3. Legislative Priorities for 2023-24. (2023). *League of Women Voters of Maine*. <https://www.lwvme.org/Alert>
4. Maine. (2021). Gerrymandering Project. <https://gerrymander.princeton.edu/reforms/ME>

CHAPTER SIX

Conduct of Elections

KEY INDICATORS

**Indicator #1 | *Use of Paper Ballots***

Maine has always used paper ballots and not electronic voting machines. Paper Ballots are considered to be a best practice for security and recounts.

**Indicator #2 | *Security of Ballots***

Maine's chain of custody and ballot handling procedures ensure that ballots are secured before, during, and after an election. These ballot security laws were strengthened in 2022 with the passage of legislation to prevent third-party access to ballots after an election.

**Indicator #3 | *Training for Local Election Officials***

Local election officials are offered training and ongoing support, but participation records are not available.

**Indicator #4 | *Public Monitoring of Elections***

Allowing members of the public to monitor critical election activities provides important transparency and increases trust in elections. Maine law guarantees only political parties be granted access to observe polling places. However, since 2022, LWVME volunteers have also been allowed to observe in every target location. In addition, Ranked Choice Voting tallying, recounts, and now audits are public and readily observable.

**Indicator #5 | *Recount Protocols***

Recount protocols are strong in state elections, and post-election audits were first implemented in early 2025. Post-election audits protect against systematic errors in races outside of the recount margin. Hand-marked paper ballots are necessary, but not sufficient, to ensure secure elections.

**Indicator #6 | *Rejection Rate for Absentee Ballots***

Absentee voting, both early in-person and by mail, is a popular voting method in Maine. The rate of rejection of returned ballots is consistently below 1%. This is due in large part to the simple signature requirements for returning ballots and to clerks following up on (“curing”) deficient ballots.

**Indicator #7 | *Wait Time to Vote***

Among 128 observation reports filed by LWVME observers in November 2024, 79% reported voters waiting less than 45 minutes to vote, with 53% waiting less than 10 minutes. Many observers noted a smooth flow of voters.

**Indicator #8 | *Modern Voter List Procedures***

Voter lists must be accurate and up-to-date to ensure secure administration of elections. In 2022, Maine joined ERIC, an interstate consortium that improves information sharing among states to help keep voter lists accurate. Maine also implemented automatic voter registration at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles. Both of these practices ensure that Maine’s voter lists are accurate and up to date.

WHY IT MATTERS:

Well-run elections enable voters to access and complete their ballots efficiently and trust that their ballots will be counted. Public confidence in election outcomes requires that voters believe all ballots have been counted correctly. Policies and processes that undermine voter confidence in election results discourage participation and lead people to believe their votes do not matter. Elections should be secure, accurate, recountable, accessible, and transparent.

SITUATION IN MAINE 2025:

Maine is fortunate to enjoy well-run elections overall, having experienced few serious election issues in the last 20 years. Efforts to modernize and standardize elections in Maine may be hampered by our large number (over 500) of election jurisdictions, with local election officials who are not directly accountable to the Secretary of State. But that local control also means that a failure in any single jurisdiction is unlikely to have a catastrophic impact.

Maine’s state and federal ballots are created and approved by the Secretary of State to ensure that they are consistent statewide and formatted correctly.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the quality of training and educational resources for election administrators relies heavily on the experience and professionalism of the municipal clerks and the Secretary of State. An area of increased

concern in recent years has been significant turnover among town clerks. However, the establishment in 2024 of the Division of Audits and Training within the Office of the Secretary of State promises to bring additional resources to this critical function.

DISCUSSION:

Maine continues to use paper ballots in all elections. Ballots are stored, and, when necessary, transported in lock boxes with numbered seals. The public is permitted to monitor critical ballot processing activities. Numerous recounts indicate that the ballot processing systems currently in use accurately record votes, and a post-election ballot audit was successfully piloted in the spring of 2025. Full implementation of a post-election audit protocol will help ensure detection of systemic tabulation errors and correction of any erroneous outcomes.

Absentee voting remains popular with Maine voters. In the 2024 general election, 45% of the ballots in the presidential election were cast absentee and only 0.46% of returned absentee ballots were rejected. In the presidential and state senate primaries, 17% and 27% of ballots, respectively, were cast absentee. The rejection rates for ballot issues were both well under 1%. Voter errors signing the ballot or filling out accompanying paperwork account for about half of the rejected ballots.



NO DATA, NO PROBLEMS:

One challenge in assessing Maine's election administration is a lack of consistent data — or any data at all in some areas. In large part, this is due to Maine's decentralized voting system: each municipality is responsible for reporting data on items such as absentee ballot status. This can create inconsistencies in how data is reported, reducing the utility of that data. It also means certain data is not collected. For instance, there is no publicly available central source for reports of polling place problems, or learning how often municipal clerks receive training on conducting elections.

METHODS:

We drew on decades of work, studies, and evidence-based testimony by the LWVME and allied organizations about best practices for elections that lead to broadly representative outcomes. We analyzed 2024 absentee voting data provided by the Maine Secretary of State, which showed that well under 1% of cast absentee ballots were rejected.¹ We also used the MIT Elections Performance Index for certain metrics, which assessed election administration in each state in the 2022 election.²

Pictured Above Left: *Poll workers registering voters in Manchester*

Pictured Above: *Voters in line in Windham*

FURTHER RESEARCH:

An area for future consideration is whether there is adequate funding in the Elections Division to address changing conditions and emerging trends that may test the adaptability and resilience of our election systems and procedures.

ADDITIONAL READING:

1. CalTech/MIT Voting Technology Project. <https://vote.caltech.edu/>
2. Election Security. (n.d.). U.S. Election Assistance Commission. <https://www.eac.gov/voters/election-security>

SOURCES:

1. Bureau of Corporations, Elections & Commissions. (n.d.). *Voter Registration Data, Election Data and Online Forms*. Maine.gov. <https://www.Maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/data/index.html>
2. *Elections Performance Index*. (n.d.). Maine. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Election Data + Science Lab. Retrieved April 26, 2025, from <https://elections.mit.edu/#/data/map?view=state-profile&state=ME&year=2022>

CHAPTER SEVEN

Money in Politics

KEY INDICATORS



Indicator #1 | *Percentage of Eligible Candidates Who Use the Clean Elections*

Maine has one of the most robust publicly funded election systems in the country. Fifty-five percent of the 347 legislative candidates in 2024 participated in the Clean Elections (CE) program. CE participation rates are still below their peak, but a solid majority of state legislators continue to fund their campaigns without obliging themselves to individual and corporate donors.



Indicator #2 | *Health of the Clean Election Fund*

The Clean Election Fund remains adequate for legislative races, but questions remain about its capacity to fund gubernatorial candidates. If there had been a CE certified gubernatorial candidate in the 2022 general election, or if there is one in 2026, the added cost could call the sufficiency of the fund into question and affect candidate willingness to participate.



Indicator #3 | *Campaign Finance Transparency*

Maine has a strong tradition of disclosure and enforcement. Recent statutory improvements include the requirement to report gubernatorial transition funding and a disclosure requirement applicable to smaller municipalities when a ballot question campaign raises over \$5,000. Still, “dark money” that cannot be traced to its original source continues to flow through — even dominate — Maine electoral campaigns with little effective disclosure.



Indicator #4 | *Corporate Contributions*

Many states ban corporate contributions to party committees, candidate PACs, and candidate committees. Not Maine. Between 2014 and 2024, candidates, leadership PACs, and caucus PACs received a total of \$40.41 million directly from corporations. They received as much as \$12.5 million more from PACs that are allowed to accept corporate contributions. In 2025 the legislature again killed a bill that would have fixed this glaring weakness in Maine’s campaign finance laws.

WHY IT MATTERS:

Today, we have more concentrated wealth and income in the United States than at any time since the beginning of the last century. There is nothing more antithetical to the rights of citizens in a democratic republic than concentrated wealth and power.

Research at the federal level shows that legislators and policymakers are vastly more attentive to the interests of the affluent than those of everyone else.¹ Affluent donors get what they want. The rest of us get what we want when, and only when, we want what they want. When big-moneyed interests spend in political campaigns, they create a feedback loop in public policy that further advantages their own interests, deepening the chasm between themselves and ordinary people. American democracy is failing to serve the needs of the vast majority of its citizens. And our people know it.²

Recent developments at the federal level have only heightened our gravest concerns. Reigning in big money in politics is critical to sustaining a vibrant democracy.

And all of these problems are exacerbated by gaps in the regulation structure intended to provide the public with information about who is spending to control our elections.

SITUATION IN MAINE 2025:

The Clean Election program is Maine's most important policy to address the impact of money in politics, and therefore participation in this voluntary program is an important barometer of the state of our democracy. In each election cycle since the CE program began, at least half of the candidates have been publicly funded. A persistent minority continues to use private funding. Several factors could explain this. Some candidates may find that it is easier to raise private money than to qualify for public funding. Others may believe that the cap on public funding is not adequate for the campaign they plan to run. And yet others may have ideological objections to using public funding. The highwater of participation was 2008 when 85% of legislators were elected using CE.³

Participation in recent cycles has been lower. In 2022, 60% of the legislative candidates running in the general election participated in the CE program and this level slipped to 55% in 2024. Participation rates among those who won the general election and assumed office have been

somewhat higher than the overall participation rates. In 2022, 62% of elected Representatives and 74% of elected Senators used Clean Elections. In 2024, 54% of elected Representatives and 69% of elected Senators used the program. CE participation rates are still below their peak, but a significant share of state legislators continue to fund their campaigns without obliging themselves to individual and corporate donors.

The size of the Clean Election Fund remains barely adequate. If a candidate in the 2022 gubernatorial general election had used Clean Elections, the added cost would have severely strained the fund. The budget for the 2026-2027 biennium continues to fund Clean Elections at previous levels, but robust participation among gubernatorial candidates in 2026 could require funds in excess of the amount allocated for the cycle, necessitating an advance draw-down from the following fiscal year.

The funding formula in the original Clean Election law was remarkably prescient and is not the cause of this uncertainty. Rather, the fund has been "raided" for other purposes. The missing funds have never been replaced, removing the buffer that was intended to ensure that all eligible candidates could count on full funding. To protect the solvency of the fund and the confidence of participating candidates at all levels, a total of \$6,631,156 (plus interest) inappropriately removed from the fund in past budget cycles should be repaid.

There was also a bill in the legislature in 2025 to increase the annual appropriation from \$3 million to \$3.5 million, which would help. The health of the fund received increased scrutiny as the legislature in 2025 considered a measure to allow candidates for county office to participate in the Clean Election program in future cycles.

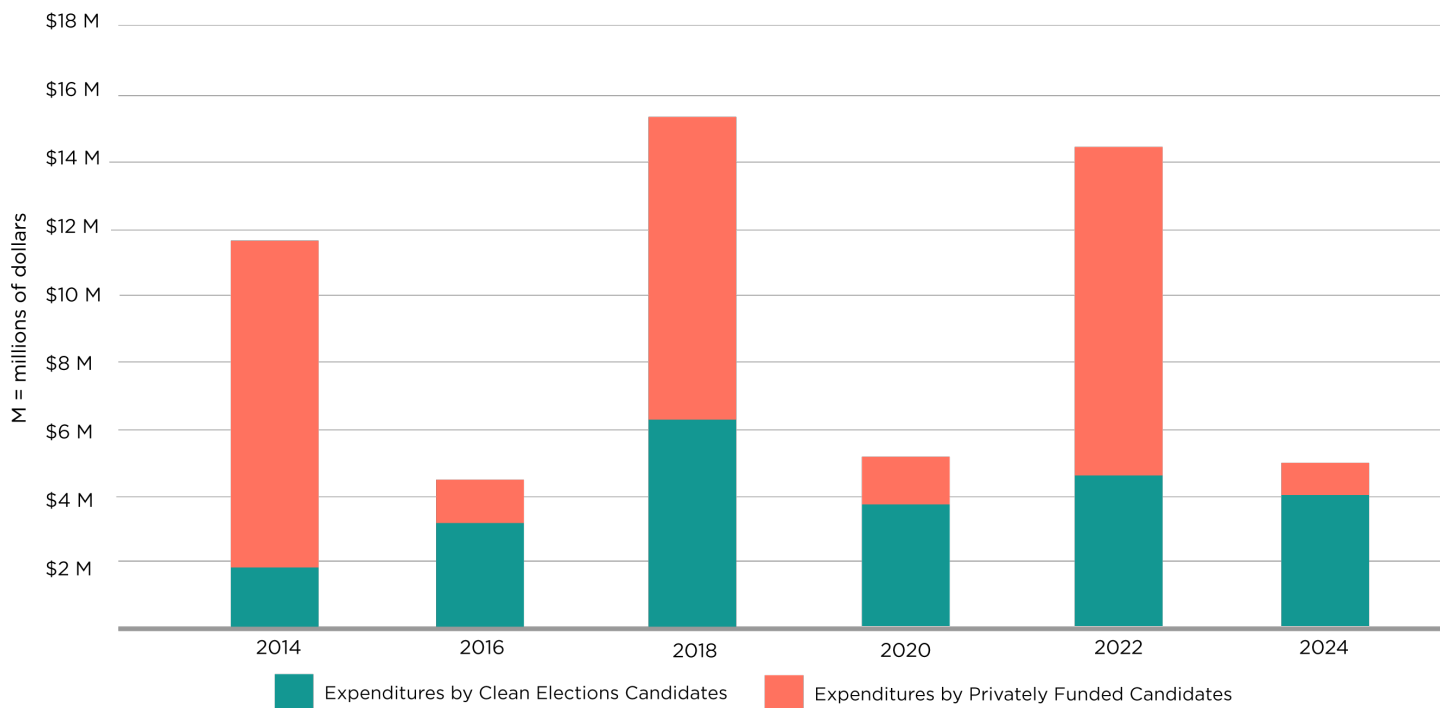


FIGURE 1 | Total Spending by Privately Funded and Clean Election Candidates

Figure 1 illustrates how the relative success of Clean Elections in legislative campaigns has not carried over into gubernatorial races. CE funding dominates in years with legislative races only (2016, 2020, and 2024), but private funding dominates in years with a gubernatorial election (2014, 2018, 2022). Total expenditures in state races reached an all-time high of almost \$16 million in 2018 — \$6 million for CE candidates (half of that for the governor’s race) and almost \$10 million for those using private funding. Total spending on each of the past three gubernatorial elections exceeded \$8 million and reached almost \$11 million in 2018 when the gubernatorial election was an open seat race. In this period CE legislative candidates spent between \$2 million and \$4.5 million in each cycle (see Figure 2).

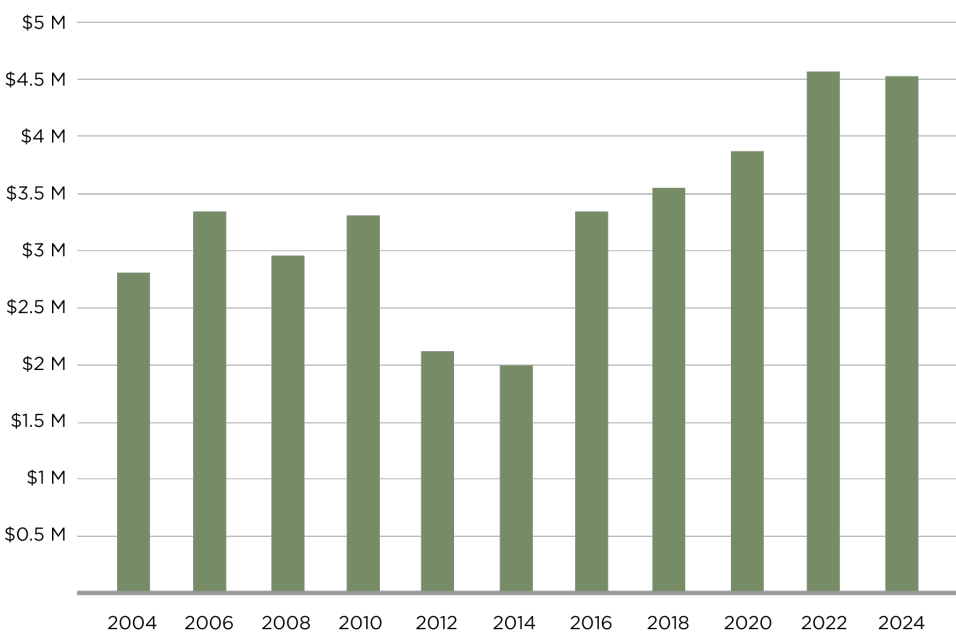


FIGURE 2 | MCEA Payments to Legislative Candidates

This does not tell the whole story. Courts have ruled that individuals, businesses, nonprofits, and PACS may make unlimited independent expenditures to support or oppose candidates—CE participants or not. Although we can’t restrict independent expenditures, we can require transparency. Maine has recently adopted improvements in disclosure including the requirement to report fundraising during the crucial gubernatorial transition period. We have also extended transparency requirements to ballot question campaigns in smaller municipalities. In the first year, voters in seven municipalities had already benefited from this new disclosure requirement.

DISCLOSURE IN NAME ONLY

Maine campaign finance reports are replete with organizations featuring made-up names that provide no meaningful information about the actual sources of funds, such as: The PAC for America's Future, American Comeback Committee, The Fairness Project, Sixteen Thirty Fund, Liberty Initiative Fund, or the Action Now Initiative. Other contributors come with labels that reveal the bare minimum about the organization's identity, yet still say little about the true source of their political funds. Examples include The Democratic Governors Association, The Republican Governors Association, Everytown for Gun Safety Action Project, National Rifle Association, and the National Education Association.

Despite these efforts, the flow of “dark money” continues. One recent example is the For Our Future PAC (FOF) which was an important source of funds for at least five Maine Leadership PACs supporting legislative candidates. FOF is funded primarily by the Concord Fund — an entity that is technically not a campaign organization so is not required to report its donors. Maine transparency rules do not reach the Concord Fund, though we have repeatedly attempted to address this

shortcoming. In 2024 the legislature killed a bill that would have required “true source” disclosure — reporting the original contributors who fund the generically named political action committees prominent in lists of large contributors. A similar bill was also defeated in 2025.

Although most voters do not recognize the difference, campaign spending can be divided into two categories — spending by candidates themselves, and separate spending by organizations trying to influence the outcome of the election. In the past, candidate spending usually exceeded independent spending from uncertain sources, but no longer. Figure 2 compares independent expenditures — often using “dark money” — with spending controlled by candidates. In 2024, the total amount of independent expenditures nearly matched the sum of spending by candidates themselves.

We also track the activities of two special types of political action committees — Leadership PACs and Caucus PACs. Leadership PACs are committees controlled by legislators or legislative candidates and used to influence elections for the House or Senate. Caucus PACs are controlled by the political party operation within each of the major legislative caucuses. Both types represent close ties between powerful officials and major donors. These PACs often receive substantial contributions from corporations and other business entities. They merit particularly close scrutiny.

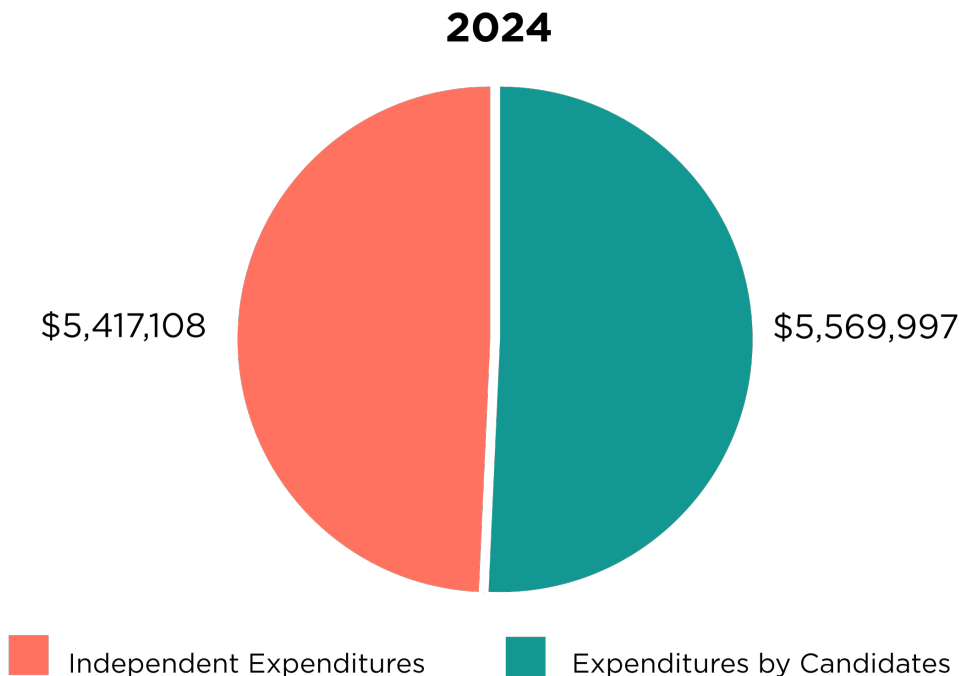


FIGURE 3 | Total Independent Expenditures vs. Total Spending by Candidates

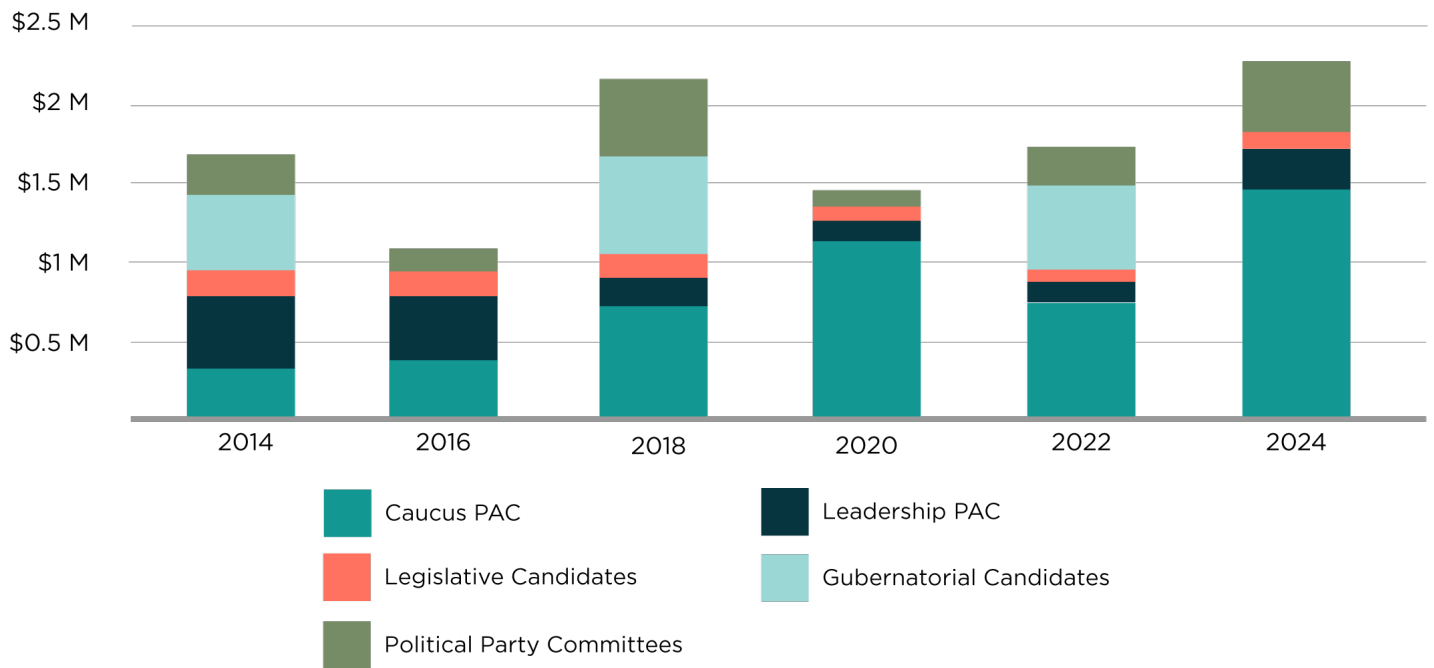


FIGURE 4 | Corporate Contributions to Caucus & Leadership PACs, Candidates, and Political Party Committees

Contributions from businesses also require closer examination, since they may have very specific interests in the actions of our state government. Figure 4 focuses on contributions from commercial sources to Leadership PACs, Caucus PACs, candidates and the political parties. Corporate contributions reached a high point in 2024 of \$2,290,164 with 64% of it going to Caucus PACs which use these contributions to support candidates.

DISCUSSION:

Maine has done more than most other states in combating the corrosive effect of money in politics. Since the inception of public funding in 2000, thousands of candidates have qualified and used public funding to run for state office without raising money from wealthy special interests. There is evidence that this has broadened the pool of candidates and contributed to diversifying the legislature.⁴ Funding for the program requires constant vigilance, especially in tough budget years.

Despite this success, unfinished business remains. Unaccountable and undemocratic funding continues to play an outsized role in determining our policies and those who run our government. Whether or not a person can get access to political money can still reinforce existing power dynamics across race, gender, income, and other demographic factors.

Maine lags behind other states in banning corporate contributions to candidates, candidate PACs, and even party committees.

Maine has most of the disclosure requirements found in other states, but over time political players have found ways to work around those laws. Most members of the public do not readily distinguish between independent expenditures and candidate spending, but the difference is critical. Independent expenditures are not subject to the same requirements, raising issues of transparency and accountability.

A significant amount of the money used for independent expenditures comes from undisclosed sources. Advocates in Maine must continue working to pass “deep disclosure” requirements — such as those in Arizona and Alaska — identifying the original source of spending in campaigns.

Recognizing that the *Citizens United* decision is an obstacle to regulating campaign spending by corporations, Maine has been seeking a partial solution by attempting to ban corporate spending by foreign contributors — an approach which is on stronger constitutional grounds. A 2023 ballot question banned foreign contributions in state ballot question campaigns, but the law has been challenged in court. In July 2025 we were disappointed to learn that the United States

Court of Appeals found constitutional problems with the law. We are now assessing options for moving forward. In 2022 Maine's largest city enacted its own ban on foreign contributions to ballot question committees while also banning corporate contributions to candidates. A simple state ban on corporate contributions to candidates remains elusive. Meanwhile, a 2024 ballot question to limit spending by independent expenditure PACs remains in effect but is tied up in litigation. The District Court heard the case in May 2025 but has not yet issued a ruling. Depending on the District Court's decision, it may be appealed to the First Circuit, and potentially the Supreme Court, where the justices may be asked to reconcile this concept with the *Citizens United* decision.

METHODS:

We looked at both quantitative and qualitative sources in assessing these indicators. The quantitative sources included data on campaign contributions and expenditures maintained by the Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices as reported by candidates, parties, PACs, lobbyists, and entities making independent expenditures. Our qualitative sources included reports from our volunteer and staff lobbying teams, and conversations and interviews with policymakers and officials in Augusta.

FURTHER RESEARCH:

A neglected area of analysis and policy development relates to the impact of current money in politics on socially and economically disadvantaged communities, including new Mainers, low-income individuals and families, racial and demographic minorities, and those toward the bottom of other socioeconomic metrics. Another area for future research is how well the Clean Election program operates among those who do not have deep ties to political parties or other institutions.

ADDITIONAL READING:

1. Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices. <https://www.Maine.gov/ethics/>. This site includes many reports, guides, and links to current laws and regulations.
2. Burke, E., & Maine Ethics Commission. (2019). 2019 MCEA Report. Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices. https://www.Maine.gov/ethics/sites/Maine.gov.ethics/files/inline-files/Final%202019%20MCEA%20Report_0.pdf

3. The Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices maintains an on-line database of campaign finance information reported by candidates, committees and political parties. <https://mainecampaignfinance.com>
4. Money in Politics Series. (2012-2021). Maine Citizens for Clean Elections. <https://www.maineanelections.org/mip>

SOURCES:

1. Gilens, M. (n.d.). *Inequality and Democratic responsiveness*. RSF. <http://www.russellsage.org/research/inequality-and-democratic-responsiveness>
2. Cramer, K. J., & Cohen, J. D. (n.d.). *Opinion / many Americans believe the economy is rigged* (published 2024). New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/21/opinion/economy-research-greed-profit.html>
3. Prior to 2011 Clean Election candidates were able to use "matching funds" when they were being outspent, but a court decision ended that part of the Clean Elections law. As a result, participation dipped. Matching funds were soon replaced by "supplemental funds" but the participation rate has never fully recovered.
4. *2007 Study Report*. Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices. (n.d.). https://www.Maine.gov/ethics/sites/Maine.gov.ethics/files/inline-files/2007_study_report.pdf

CHAPTER EIGHT

Freedom of Information

KEY INDICATORS



Indicator #1 | *Number of Reported FOAA Requests*

Number of FOAA requests and processing time remains consistent over the last five years. Thirteen state agencies reported receiving a total of 3,548 Freedom of Access Act (FOAA) requests in 2024. Agencies reportedly devoted 3,289 hours to answering these requests and charged \$14,871 in fees.



Indicator #2 | *FOAA Implementation, Enforcement and Ombudsman Role*

State level agencies' annual reports to the Ombudsman provide needed FOAA data. Beyond that, there is little to no information available concerning implementation or enforcement at any other level or public entity.



Indicator #3 | *Budget Transparency*

Anecdotal evidence from multiple sources suggests that some budgetary deliberations by the Legislature's Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee members may violate FOAA by occurring out of public view. Possible evidence includes Committee budgetary work sessions which appear to be choreographed prior to the public meeting during which there is no discussion or deliberation.



Indicator #4 | *Rise in Burdensome Requests*

The Right to Know Advisory Committee has been tasked with a discussion of the rise in burdensome requests. These appear to be requests whose purpose is to bog down governmental agencies and tie up critical resources. The Committee has made some recommendations to better streamline Maine law, but the discussion is ongoing.

WHY IT MATTERS:

Now more than ever, our democracy functions best when people have good information about how their government is performing. When elected officials and public administrators know that they operate under assumptions of transparency, there is less incentive or opportunity for negligence or malfeasance. Equally important, when the public exercises its democratic voice through elections and other means, that voice can be fully informed by reliable information about how well our government is meeting our needs and expectations. Finally, a vibrant and robust media — both the traditional press and all forms of new media — can only function as a watchdog when the operations of government are open and available for all to see.

FOAA VS. FOIA

What is the difference between the Freedom of Access Act, FOAA, and the Freedom of Information Act, FOIA?

FOIA is a federal law and applies to federal offices and agencies.

FOAA is state law and applies to state offices and agencies.

SITUATION IN MAINE 2025:

The high-water mark for reported FOAA requests was 4,022 in 2019, and the low point in recent years was 1,238 in 2017. State agencies processed 54% of requests in five days or less. Agencies provide a deadline by which they will have completed the request, and state law requires that they fulfill the response within five days of that deadline. In 2024, 62 requests required more than a six month processing time, and 43 required more than a year to process — presumably, those requests will be completed in 2025.¹

Government operations and public meetings continue to utilize pandemic-driven changes, like Zoom, to increase public access to proceedings. Remote access improves accessibility and participation, and this now seems to be a staple in Maine government.² However, at the municipal level, citizens may experience frustration at the lack of notice they receive of public meetings, a lack of documentation of what transpires, and/or lack of an archive of proceedings on a searchable website.

The Right to Know Advisory Committee has been considering how to quantify the number of FOAA requests that could be labeled as burdensome and what could be amended in Maine law to better support staff and the FOAA process overall.³ A “burdensome” request is not explicitly defined in Maine law, but agencies can deny a FOAA request if there is evidence to demonstrate that the request is burdensome or oppressive. A request could be labeled “burdensome” if it would require many hours of staff time, if it was submitted in bad faith, if the same request has been repeatedly submitted, and so on. Bad actors have also been known to weaponize FOAA requests, and could be using it as a means to harass public officials.

After the shooting event in Lewiston in October 2023, FOAA requests skyrocketed. The media expressed frustration over the lack of access to information, and eventually in June 2024, Maine State Police would release thousands of pages of documents related to the Lewiston incident.⁴ Stakeholders within the Maine press and broadcaster groups plan to coordinate with various Maine law enforcement associations to convene meetings on how to address the pressures and constraints on the flow of information regarding public safety incidents and ongoing criminal investigations.⁵

DISCUSSION:

Significant issues loom for those concerned about freedom of information. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is the federal law that provides the right to transparency in government operations at the federal level. The effectiveness of this law is being threatened by staffing cuts in the responding agencies.⁶ The Freedom of Access Act (FOAA) is the Maine law that directs local, county, and state protocol for transparency in Maine. Almost all FOAA requests received by state agencies are responded to within the required time-frame of five days but some may require a process time that takes a few days, weeks, months, or even over a year.

In some respects, Maine’s robust vision of public access remains aspirational. There is no uniform tracking system across state agencies, which makes it difficult to track variations in data. The state ombudsman office is a staff of one person, who works to mediate conflicts, confusion, and dissatisfaction throughout the FOAA process. Over the last few years, about 16-18% of requests escalated to the ombudsman were due to “denial” of the original request. Some people may submit a FOAA request, have it denied, and then

never know why. The Right to Know Advisory Committee amended the law to state that agencies must provide a reason for the denial, with a link to a citation or statute.³

While the number of FOAA requests has increased since the Ombudsman first started to collect data in 2013, suggesting that the public is slowly becoming informed of FOAA, there could be more public education efforts overall.

A common complaint from citizens is the lack of access to local government proceedings and information, especially at the county level. For more information on county websites and access to county information, see Chapter 12. Our survey of all sixteen county websites revealed that twelve do not mention FOAA; only one offered comprehensive details. This is troubling and suggests that county employees are not enforcing FOAA properly or informing their public about their freedom of access rights.

METHODS:

Our data came from conversations with various experts on FOAA matters within Maine as well as a review of statistics and reports filed by the FOAA Ombudsman and the Right to Know Advisory Committee.

FURTHER RESEARCH:

The 589 contacts reported by the FOAA Ombudsman in 2024 offer a very limited sample from which no conclusions can be drawn. The Right to Know Advisory Committee, which offers periods for public comment and sends out various surveys to state agencies, does not collect annual data by which to judge FOAA's full implementation or enforcement. A review of the FOAA Ombudsman statute and their annual work suggest that some statutory responsibilities remain unexplored or unfulfilled.

SOURCES:

1. Kielty, B. L. (2025). *Public Access Ombudsman Report for 2024*. State of Maine Office of the Attorney General. <https://www.Maine.gov/foaa/docs/Ombudsman-2024-Annual-Report.pdf>
2. Kielty, B. L. (2024). *Public Access Ombudsman Report for 2023*. State of Maine Office of the Attorney General. <https://www.Maine.gov/foaa/docs/Ombudsman%202023%20Annual%20Report%20.pdf>
3. State of Maine 132nd Legislature. (2025, January). *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Right to Know Advisory Committee*. <https://legislature.Maine.gov/doc/11363>
4. Terhune, J. (2024, June 7). *Maine State Police release thousands of pages of documents on Lewiston mass shooting*. Maine Public. <https://www.mainepublic.org/Maine/2024-06-07/live-updates-state-police-release-thousands-of-documents-tied-to-lewiston-mass-shooting>
5. Newhouse, Sean Michael, "Democratic oversight leader warns against staff cuts to agency FOIA offices." *Government Executive*, March 20, 2025 <https://www.govexec.com/oversight/2025/03/democratic-oversight-leader-warns-against-staff-cuts-agency-foia-offices/403938/>

CHAPTER NINE

Newspapers and Media Access

KEY INDICATORS



Indicator #1 | *Number of Newspapers*

We still have a healthy number of newspapers for a state our size, but it's fewer now than it was even two years ago. In 2025, the five daily newspapers owned by the Maine Trust for Local News went to four; the fifth, the Brunswick Times Record, became a weekly. Bangor Publishing still publishes one daily and a single weekly — The County — combining four weeklies in Aroostook County. Maine now has 33 weeklies, a loss of three over the year.¹



Indicator #2 | *News Deserts*

Maine has five counties that classify as news deserts (counties with 0-1 local news outlet): Knox (1), Piscataquis (1), Sagadahoc (1), Somerset (0), and Waldo (0).² This includes both newspapers and digital sites. Somerset has the highest poverty rate in Maine (15.6%)³ and has not had a news outlet since we started issuing this report in 2021. It continues to highlight a correlation between news deserts and rural, impoverished areas.



Indicator #3 | *Newspaper Circulation*

Print subscriptions for Maine Trust papers declined in 2024, but digital subscriptions increased by 11%. Most of the 14 weeklies now include digital subscriptions. The four daily papers have gone to five days per week, and the Maine Sunday Telegram is the only Sunday paper. Circulation for Bangor Publishing, Penobscot Bay Publishing, and Maine Stay Media Publishing is stable with digital and print options.



Indicator #4 | *Decline in Number of Newsroom and Broadcast Staff*

We have been seeing a declining number of Maine's broadcast announcers, news analysts, reporters, journalists and editors, and in the next ten years each group will experience negative growth from -20% to -62% respectively.¹⁸ A national service program, Report for America¹⁵ is a new resource for Maine's newsrooms to recruit journalism interns.



Indicator #5 | Concentration of Ownership of Print and Broadcast Media

As of 2025, the Maine Trust for Local News manages four of Maine's dailies and 14 weeklies.⁴ Maine's other local newspapers are owned by a combination of non-profit news organizations: Maine Independent News Collaborative⁵ and the Maine Monitor,⁶ for-profit newsrooms, Maine-owned Bangor Publishing principal among them, and advocacy groups. Maine's ownership shift to non-profit news has allowed newsrooms to resist corporate take-overs.

Out of 146 radio stations, only nineteen have Maine owners; the others are a mix of corporate owners, religious stations, and small private owners. Maine Public Broadcasting owns ten radio stations and five TV stations. The other seven TV affiliates are owned by national corporations (Sinclair Broadcasting, Gray Media, and Rockfleet Broadcasting).⁷

WHY IT MATTERS:

Local news ecosystems matter. They foster engagement in government and elections, which lead to a strong and active democracy. At the time of publishing this report, public news had just come under attack by the new federal administration, which is threatening to cut funding to vital news services Americans rely on to receive quality, comprehensive stories. Media outlets that most Mainers once treasured and respected, and deemed independent and nonpartisan, now are increasingly seen as polarizing.

Today, less than 5,600 newspapers remain across the country. Over half the nation's counties live in a news desert, where residents have zero or only one local newspaper.¹ Since 2005, the circulation of newspapers has decreased by over 60%. To keep up with the shifting landscape, news outlets shift to digital media, with some newspapers dropping their print distributions entirely.⁸ North Carolina's efforts in converting their news deserts into sites for sustainable, trustworthy local journalism are a model for other rural states.⁹

Social media now controls a major portion of our news diet, with one third of Americans getting their news from Facebook and YouTube.¹⁰ As people turn toward social media for their news, they increasingly encounter inaccurate, unreliable, or misleading content. Users can become entrapped by algorithms and fall into news silos, where their feed is dominated by partisan posts that confirm their biases. Mis- and disinformation is on the rise. Perhaps one of the best antidotes is to replace news deserts with information oceans — digital news sites propagated by local journalists who share reliable, accurate information.⁹

CHILLING OF FREE SPEECH

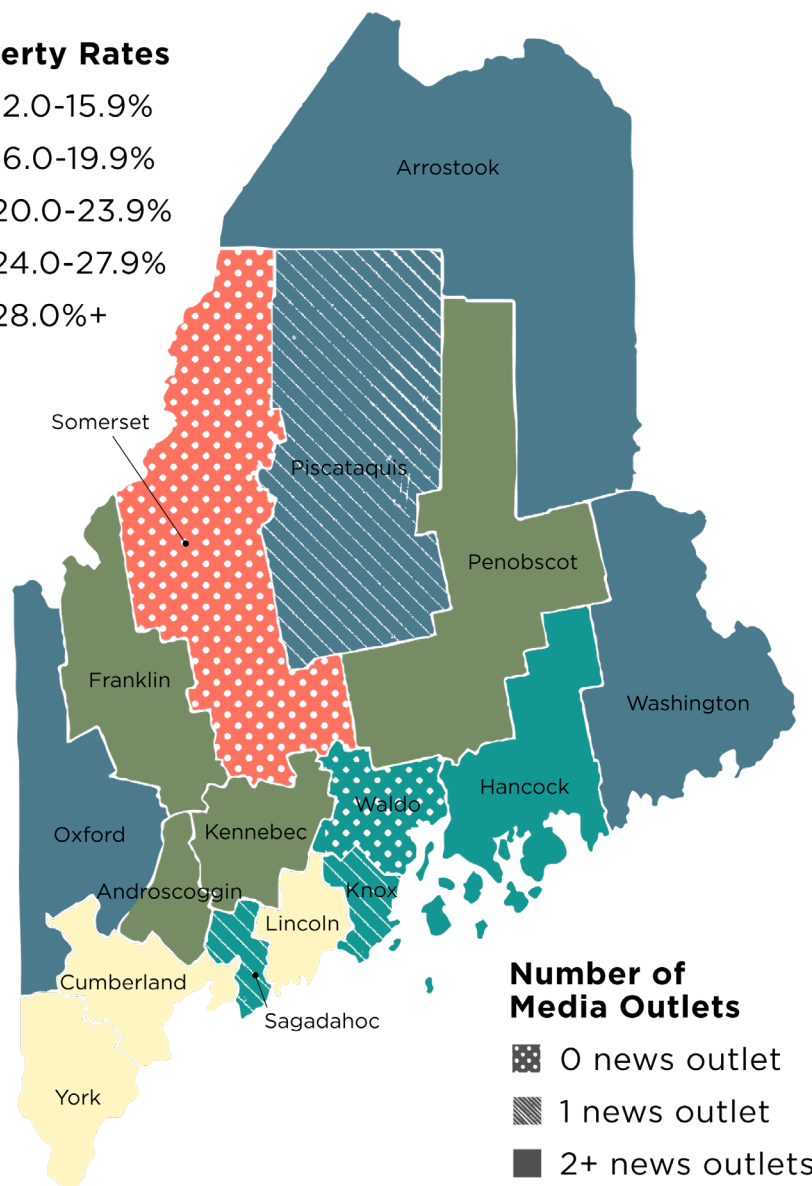
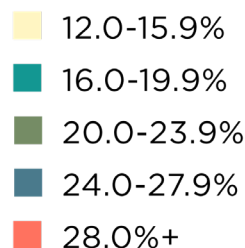
This is an unprecedented time. In its first six months, the new federal administration has issued numerous Executive Orders that are extraordinary uses of presidential power or unconstitutional. President Trump gained the office by leveraging social media, and his administration continues to use it to spread false information. In an effort to curtail any critical media and erect barriers for the free press, the administration has also targeted multiple national media outlets, for example, banning the Associated Press from press briefings and stripping funding from NPR and PBS. This looks like a multi-pronged program of leveraging federal funds to intimidate independent media and chill free speech.

SITUATION IN MAINE 2025:

The Maine news landscape is benefiting from reinvestment in local news by leaders who recognize that Americans need sources that tell the truth and deal in reality. Michael Tomasky, editor of The New Republic, in his interview for Democracy Maine on The Media Revolution, states that "Most Americans support local journalism, they support the new non-profits [Courier News, National Trust, Baltimore Banner, Heartland Signal, Substack] that feature journalists, social scientists, economists who present factual analysis."¹¹

Jon Marcus of the Nieman Laboratory published a Report entitled "Maine is becoming a laboratory for non-profit news,"¹² highlighting "Maine's new media ecosystem showing how non-profit journalism can promote collaboration, investigative reporting, coverage of underserved

Poverty Rates



Number of Media Outlets

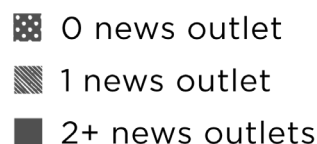


FIGURE 1 | Comparing Poverty Rates and Number of Media Outlets in Maine Counties

groups, and disparate points of view.” Maine’s long tradition of supporting and sustaining their local newsrooms fits well with a non-profit collaborative ethic, and has allowed Maine to resist corporate takeovers. And, as Marcus observes, Maine benefits from a wealth of experienced journalists, media executives, and donors.

This means that Maine’s five dailies primarily feature state-wide and regional news, while Maine’s weeklies cover local news with local staff for all but Somerset and Sagadahoc county. Maine’s publications are owned by a range of local nonprofit and for-profit corporations.

Circulation for the daily newspapers has remained consistent since 2022. For example, the 38,000 subscribers to the Portland Press Herald have a choice of digital or digital and print options for four daily newspapers and free access to fourteen weekly newspapers covering Cumberland, Androscoggin, York Counties, and parts of Franklin County.

Maine’s weeklies cover local news for the majority of Maine residents. Most of them have combined circulation to cover three or more towns in a geographic area. The Midcoast Villager,¹³ for example, published by Reade Brower’s Maine Stay Media with a circulation of 9,845, has standard features from obituaries to sports and cultural calendars and publishes separate newsletters for readers in Belfast, Camden and Rockland.

Most of the local weeklies have only one person serving as full-time editor and reporter, helped by part-time local stringers serving multiple roles. In

2017, a non-profit media organization called The Ground Truth Project,¹⁴ founded the Report for America service corps.¹⁵ Report for America matches news organizations looking for coverage with emerging journalists. Report for America pays half their salary, the news organization pays the rest, and journalists make a two-year commitment with an option for a third year. The Bangor Daily News,¹⁶ Portland Press Herald, and The Maine Monitor¹⁷ are searching for and have hired journalists through Report for America.

Despite the increasing interest in sustaining local news organizations, the Maine Center for Workplace Research and Information in Maine’s Department of Labor projects negative growth in media jobs over the next ten years.¹⁸

DISCUSSION:

Despite an increasing commitment by national non-profits to sustaining local news, Pew Research Center continues to track declining public interest in local news. Shearer, et al.,¹⁹ found that only 9% of adults get local news from print newspapers. Yet Wang, et al.,²⁰ found that 85% of adults believe their local journalists are important to their community's well being, stating that their local reporters are non-partisan, accurate, cover the most important stories, and keep a close eye on local political leaders.

There are 60 “pink-slime” websites in New England, eleven in Maine alone, that pose as local news sources.²¹ They are click-bait mills not operated by journalists — or anyone local for that matter. In Maine, and across New England, the vast majority of these “pink slime journalistic” sites are owned and operated by Metric Media, LLC. The company employs freelancers to write articles that are paid for by undisclosed “clients,” typically conservative operatives. Stories tend to favor politics, with only a few covering true local information.

Trust in news, overall, has eroded and today only 31% of Americans trust what they read in the media. The Trust Project²² is a consortium of top news companies that follow a set of eight international standards for quality journalism that is, “accurate, accountable and ethically produced.” The Maine Monitor and WCSH-TV are members of the Trust Project dedicated to sustaining trust in local journalism.

A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in September 2024 found over half of U.S. adults receive news from social media either sometimes or often. Of the social media platforms used, Facebook surpasses the rest. One third of U.S. adults (33%) reported they regularly get news from Facebook compared to 32% for YouTube; 12% for X, formally known as Twitter — a percentage that has decreased in the last two years; 20% for Instagram; and 10% or less for other social media sites such as Reddit, Snapchat, and LinkedIn. Tiktok is quickly gaining traction similar to sites like Instagram, with 17% receiving their news through the platform, up from 3% in 2020.¹⁰ Consumption of social media news varies by age and political affiliation.

As Mainers get more and more of their news from social media, the quality and accuracy of the information on social media platforms becomes increasingly important. While traditional

publications are guided by journalistic norms and professional standards, and ultimately by media law, content on social media is mostly guided by the policies and staff of the platforms' parent companies. In the last few years, X/Twitter and Meta have scrubbed any and all meaningful content moderation.

Social media is a driving force of mis- and disinformation. “News Influencers” are now part of the landscape, especially on Tiktok, and many are not journalists or affiliated with a media outlet.²³ A Pew-Knight Initiative study found that 37% of TikTok users receive news from news influencers.²⁴ Tiktok's connection to China has long raised concerns over national security and spurred a temporary ban in 2025. In 2023, Maine joined the list of state governments that banned the app on state phones and other devices.²⁵ It is expected that a permanent ban would impact a number of Maine influencers,²⁶ but Tiktok's future is still in the balance at the time of this report's publication.

METHODS:

Indicators 1, 3, 5: We requested the *2024 State of Local News Report* published by Northwestern University's Medill School for Journalism, Media & Integrated Marketing Communications. This report provides annual datasets for every state in the following categories: newspapers, digital sites, ethnic media, digital networks and public broadcasting. Each category includes the name of the media, owner or publisher name and type, circulation or website. The Portland Press Herald regularly features stories about the Maine Trust for Local News and their efforts to sustain daily and weekly newspapers in southern and western Maine. We consulted the World Population review for Maine counties to record population change from 2022-2023. Hancock and Knox counties were the only counties to show negative growth. And the U.S. Census Quick Facts provided the percentage of people in poverty for each county. The Maine Association of Broadcasters directory lists Maine's TV and radio stations including the name of the station, the owner and the location of the station's business office. Finally, we visited Maine's daily and weekly websites to look at the range of articles, and note the features available to readers and subscribers.

Indicator 2: We utilized the “State of Local News 2024” report published by Northwestern University's Medill School for Journalism, Media & Integrated Marketing Communications. We utilized the Pew Research reports on local news and articles

in “Columbia Journalism Review” on local news experiments.

Indicator 4: The Maine Center for Workforce Research and Information database for the category – Media Occupations – includes broadcast announcers and radio disc jockeys (27-3011), news analysts, reporters and journalists (27-3023), editors (27-3041) and writers and authors (27-3043). The data displays employment and job openings in 2022 and projected for 2032, annual growth, annual job openings and educational requirements. We reviewed listings on the website Report for America, for newsroom recruiting in Maine. The Bangor Daily News, The Portland Press Herald and The Maine Monitor are searching for and have hired journalists through Report for America.

FURTHER RESEARCH:

The majority of Maine’s radio and television stations reach audiences in Cumberland, Kennebec, Hancock, and Penobscot counties — the same regions that are well represented by newspapers. Only two owners of more than one radio station are based in Maine — the Bennet Radio Group based in Norway and Blueberry Broadcasting, L.L.C. based in Bangor. Maine Public Broadcasting offers state-wide television and radio. The majority of the out-of-state corporate owners include a lot of religious groups. Identifying and analyzing who owns which stations, and which are promoting a political ideology will require further research.

This chapter has also been informed, in part, by the League of Women Voters of Maine’s work on Digital Democracy. Each month the League hosts a discussion to explore a different facet of this crisis that involves disinformation, conspiracy theories, extremism, and surveillance, all working together to threaten democracy with toxic online content. Does Big Tech promote a distorted news landscape and endanger civil society, our civil rights, and our privacy? See Appendix A: Digital Democracy, on page 60, for a discussion on this topic.

ADDITIONAL READING

1. *American Journalism Project*. The American Journalism Project (n.d.). <https://www.theajp.org/#> is a venture philanthropy investing in and building digital nonprofit newsrooms that are governed by, are sustained by, and look like the public they serve.
2. National Trust for Local News. (n.d.). <https://www.nationaltrustforlocalnews.org/> is a non-profit newspaper company dedicated to protecting and sustaining local news. Their mission is for local news to stay in local hands.

3. Stonbely, S. (2024). Op-Ed: A new collaborative model for mapping the U.S. local news landscape. *Columbia Journalism Review*. https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/op-ed-a-new-collaborative-model-for-mapping-the-u-s-local-news-landscape.php
4. *Newspapers in rural America as incubators of change*. National Trust for Local News. (2024, June 24). <https://www.nationaltrustforlocalnews.org/post/newspapers-in-rural-america-as-incubators-of-change>
5. Amjambo Africa. (n.d.). <https://www.amjamboafrica.com/>
6. Sunlight Media Collective. (n.d.). <https://www.sunlightmediacollective.org>
7. Capital Research Center. (n.d.). *Influence-watch: Metric Media, LLC. Influence Watch*. <https://www.influencewatch.org/for-profit/metric-media/>
8. St. Aubin, C. & Liedke, J. (2024, September 17). *News Platform Fact Sheet: News consumption across platforms, news consumption across digital platforms, who uses each news platform*, Pew Research. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/?tabItem=4ef8dece-845a-4b25-8637-ceb3114503c5>

SOURCES:

1. Metzger, Z. (2024, October 23). *State of Local News Project*. State of local news 2024: Expanding deserts, shifts in ownership, and expanded digital coverage. <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/2024/>
2. Metzger, Z. (2024, October 23). *State of Local News Project*. News Orgs:all data. <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1z8N7vgM9mkVOPnBuCsqqY-g1LzCVB-Fz/edit?gid=2012450575#gid=2012450575>
3. Maine Department of Labor Center for Workforce Research & Information. (n.d.). County Profiles. <https://www.Maine.gov/labor/cwri/dashboards/county-profiles>
4. *Maine Trust for Local News*. National Trust for Local News/Maine. (n.d.). <https://www.nationaltrustforlocalnews.org/Maine>
5. Maine Independent News Collaborative. (2023, October 18). <https://maineindependentnews collaborative.org/>
6. The Maine Center for Public Interest Reporting. (2020). *The Maine Monitor*. <https://themainemonitor.org/>
7. Maine Association of Broadcasters. (n.d.). *Maine Association of Broadcasters*. <https://www.mab.org/>

8. Russell, E. (2025, March 5). Maine trust for local news will reduce some print editions, lay off workers. *Portland Press Herald*. Retrieved from <https://www.pressherald.com/2025/03/04/maine-trust-for-local-news-will-reduce-print-shift-distribution-of-some-newspapers/>.
9. Stonbely, S. (2024a). From news deserts to information oceans: Reframing local landscapes for the digital age. *Columbia Journalism Review*. https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/from-news-deserts-to-information-oceans-reframing-local-landscapes-for-the-digital-age.php
10. Sidot, O. & Dawson, W. (2024, November 2024). *Social media fact sheet: Tech adoption trends*. Pew Research <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>
11. Tomasky, M. (2025, January). *Lets talk about digital threats to democracy: The media revolution*. Democracy Maine and The League of Women Voters Maine, Alaska, Colorado. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epkV6XtHtiO>
12. Marcus, J. (2025, March 4). Maine is becoming a laboratory for nonprofit news. *Nieman Reports*, (Winter 2025). Retrieved from <https://niemanreports.org/maine-nonprofit-national-trust-for-local-news-press-herald/>.
13. Midcoast Villager. (n.d.). *Midcoast Villager*. <https://www.midcoastvillager.com/>
14. *The Ground Truth Project*. The Groundtruth Project. (n.d.). <https://thegroundtruthproject.org>
15. *Report for America*. Report For America. (n.d.). <https://www.reportforamerica.org/>
16. Bangor Daily News, Current Position for Local Reporter in Knox County. (2025). *Report for America*. Retrieved from <https://www.reportforamerica.org/newsrooms/bangor-daily-news-2/>
17. *Newsroom Positions in Maine*. Report for America. (2025). https://www.reportforamerica.org/newsrooms/?rfa_location%5B%5D=maine&rfa_medium=&rfa_media_type=&rfa_year=2025&position=
18. *Center for Workforce Research and Information: Occupational group*. Maine.gov/labor/. (n.d.). <https://www.Maine.gov/labor/cwri/dashboards/employment-projections>
19. Shearer, E., Matsa, K. E., Lipka, M., Eddy, K., & Forman-Katz, N. (2024, May 7), *Americans' changing relationship with local news*, Pew Research. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2024/05/07/americans-changing-relationship-with-local-news/>
20. Wang, L., Lipka, M., Matsa, K.E., St. Aubin, C., & Shearer, E., (2024, July 24), *How Americans get local political news*, Pew Research. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2024/07/24/how-americans-get-local-political-news/>
21. Ryan, A. (2024, June 26). Inside the rise of new england 'pink slime' news outlets: 'my worst fear is someone looks at this and thinks it's real.' *Boston Globe*. Retrieved from <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2024/06/26/business/pink-slime-fake-news-new-england-west-cook/>.
22. The Trust Project. (n.d.). <https://thetrustproject.org/>
23. Wang, L., Stocking, G., Bestvater, S., & Widjaya, R. (2025, January 17). *A closer look at Americans' experiences with news on TikTok*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/01/17/a-closer-look-at-americans-experiences-with-news-on-tiktok/>
24. Stocking, G., Wang, L., Lipka, M., Matsa, K. E., Widjaya, R., Tomasik, E., & Liedke, J. (2024, November 18). *America's news influencers*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2024/11/18/americas-news-influencers/>
25. Maine is the latest state to ban tiktok for state workers. (2023, January 19). *Associated Press*. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/article/politics-maine-state-government-china-business-734ce1flabde9c3b2a9c8172c6763d01>.
26. Murphy, J. (2024, April 24). *Tiktok ban signed into law could impact content creators in Maine*. WMTW News 8 Portland. <https://www.wmtw.com/article/tiktok-ban-signed-into-law-could-impact-content-creators-in-maine/60596213>
27. Scire, S. (2024, September 26). The national trust for local news keeps buying newspapers: here is what they have learned. *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2024/09/the-national-trust-for-local-news-keeps-buying-local-newspapers-heres-what-theyve-learned/>.
28. Bengani, P. (2024). Nonprofits and PACS that spent \$14 million on Metric Media Network in 2021-2022. *Columbia Journalism Review*. https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/the-non-profits-and-pacs-that-spent-14-million-on-the-metric-media-network-in-2021-22.php
29. Gottfried, J. (2024, January 31). *Americans' social media use*. Pew Research. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/01/31/americans-social-media-use/>
30. U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. (2024 March). *Annual and Cumulative Estimates of the Resident Population for Counties in Maine: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2023* (CO-EST2023-POP-23). <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-counties-total.html>
31. *World Population Review, Maine Counties*. World Population Review. (n.d.). <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-counties/Maine>

CHAPTER TEN

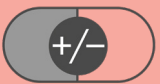
The Digital Divide

KEY INDICATORS



Indicator #1 | *Broadband Coverage*

10% of Maine’s “broadband serviceable locations” are unserved. This is a substantial decrease from 18% just two years ago. The Maine Connectivity Authority maps connection speed for over 630,000 addresses throughout the state. According to their data, more than 63,000 locations are unserved, meaning their connectivity speeds are inadequate (below 100/20 — 100 megabits per second download speed/20 megabits per second upload speed). Of these, approximately 34,000, more than half the unserved locations, have no connection at all¹.



Indicator #2 | *Remote Access to Public Meetings*

33% of sampled cities and towns allow remote participation in public meetings, which is still not many, but it is up from 25% two years ago.

WHY IT MATTERS:

Using modern voter services such as online voter registration and absentee ballot tracking requires, at a minimum, a computer and an internet connection, as does accessing election information on a town website or commenting at a public hearing over Zoom. Some residents are less able to participate in our democracy because they are on the wrong side of the “digital divide.” In general, the digital divide is the gap between those with serviceable internet access, digital literacy, and digital resources and those without.²

BROADBAND SERVICEABLE LOCATIONS

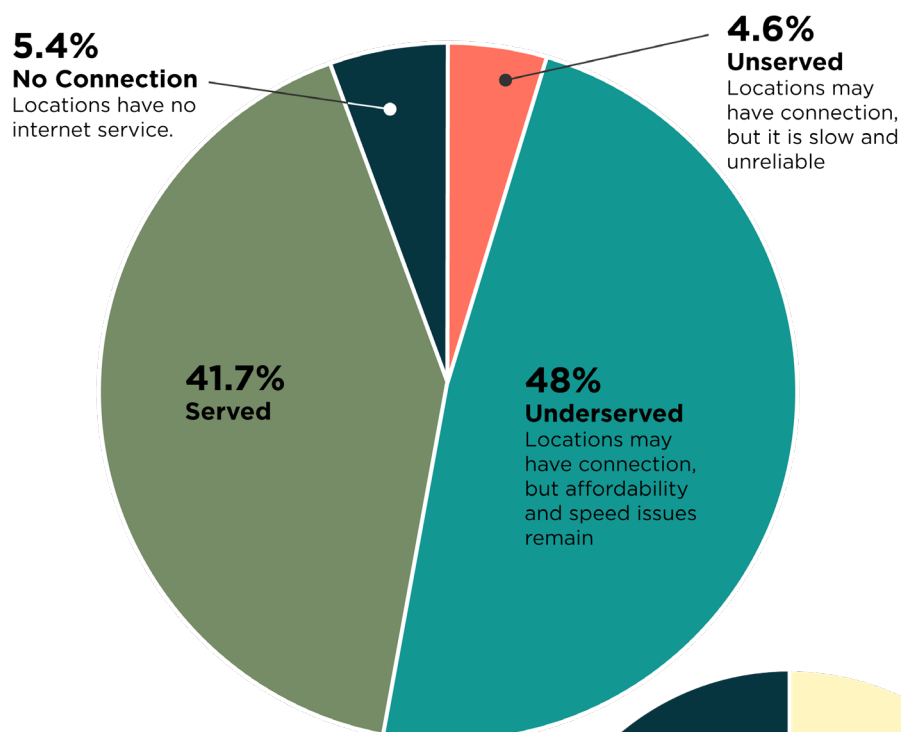
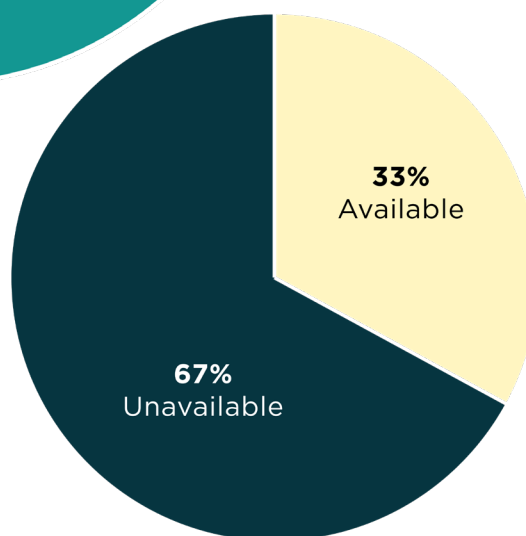


FIGURE 1 | Broadband Serviceable Locations

There is a digital divide among governments, too. Many state and local government websites provide easy-to-find — and use — election information, online voter services, and remote access to public meetings. On the other side of the divide, some small towns have no official website at all. Or, if available online, voter information may be hidden multiple clicks away from the home page, out of date, or downright inaccurate.



A survey of 80 Maine towns

FIGURE 2 | Remote Participation in Public Meetings



SITUATION IN MAINE 2025:

Since the publication of our 2023 report³, a lot of progress has been made toward closing the digital divide, primarily through the work of the Maine Connectivity Authority (MCA). The MCA was established in 2021 as a quasi-governmental agency tasked with achieving statewide access to reliable, high-speed internet⁴ and in 2024 they released Maine's Digital Equity Plan. This plan details the actions it will take to improve access to high-speed reliable internet and remove barriers to connectivity, with a particular focus on populations most affected by the digital divide.^{4,5} They identify these barriers: the quality of internet connections; cost of internet service; internet safety; lack of digital skills; access to devices; and useability of government resources offered online.⁵

Since 2023, the number of unserved locations has decreased from 18% to 10%, the number of underserved locations has fallen from 69% to 48%, and the number of served locations has increased from 13% to 41.7%.

While connectivity is improving, it is harder to measure the other aspects of the digital divide: digital literacy and digital resources. Being digitally literate is having the ability to utilize technology to find, create, evaluate, and communicate information.⁶

The Digital Equity Asset Inventory, available through the Maine Connectivity Authority's website, is a list of organizations and the services they have available. These include: device access, digital literacy, and tech support.⁷ This inventory is being rebranded as Tech Help for ME and will be available in the Spring of 2025, though at the time of this writing the link is inactive.⁸ Maine's Digital Equity Alliance (DEA) is one of the Maine Connectivity Authority's digital equity initiatives. The DEA is a self-led coalition working toward digital equity and is tasked with organizing the annual Digital Equity Workshop.⁹

Digital literacy resources for Maine adults include partnerships with the University of Maine,¹⁰ community colleges, Maine state¹¹ and public libraries, Maine adult education, local government resources, and the National Digital Equity Center's Maine Digital Inclusion Initiative.¹²

For those who have the means to participate in digital democracy, Maine has modernized its online voter services with the implementation of absentee ballot tracking in 2020 and online voter registration in 2024, which allows Mainers to register to vote online up to 21 days before election day. Another innovation in online civic services arrived in 2020, when the COVID-19 emergency forced rapid adoption of remote videoconferencing for public meetings. The state

Legislature and larger cities and towns held hearings and government meetings over Zoom, which allowed residents to participate from home. Even after the state Legislature resumed in-person public hearings, it continued to provide Zoom access using the “hybrid” meeting style. Hybrid meetings allow remote participation through Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Live streaming allows residents to watch but not participate.

At the Maine Voter Information Lookup Service, you can type in your address to find out your voting information, elected officials, and a sample ballot. However local ballots are not available here.¹⁴

DISCUSSION:

The first aspect of the Digital Divide, internet access itself, is improving. There are now 41.7% of Maine broadband serviceable locations with fast, reliable, and affordable connections, up from 13% in 2023. Although this represents a significant improvement, there remain some 367,000 locations with inadequate or no coverage.

The other aspects of the Digital Divide — digital literacy and digital resources — are harder to measure, but there are still quantifiable gaps, particularly between residents in small towns versus residents in larger towns and cities. As we’d expect, larger towns and cities offer hybrid meeting access, and most towns and cities offer live streaming, while residents of the smaller towns must drive to town hall.

METHODS:

Indicator 1: We used data from the presentation The State of Connectivity in Maine, presented to the Energy, Utilities, and Technology Committee of the Maine Legislature in January 2025. Data shows 10% unserved [approximately 63,000 broadband serviceable locations below 100/20 (100 megabits per second download speed/20 megabits per second upload speed)]; 48.3% underserved [approximately 304,300 locations with speeds between 100/20 and 100/100]; 41.7% served [approximately 262,700 locations with speeds of at least 100/100].¹

Indicator 2: In our February 2025 survey sampling 80 cities and towns, we found that 26 — that is, 33% — were conducting hybrid town/city council or select board meetings. We visited the websites of the five largest (by population) towns in each county to determine whether they supported remote participation in city/town council or select board meetings.

SOURCES:

1. Butcher, Andrew. (2025, January). The state of connectivity in Maine. <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/11473>
2. Epstein, D., Nisbet, E., & Gillespie, T. (2011). Who’s responsible for the digital divide? Public perceptions and policy implications. *The Information Society*, 27(2), 92-104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2011.548695>
3. Democracy Maine. (2023). State of Maine Democracy. https://www.lwvme.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/2023_March_State%20of%20Democracy%20in%20Maine_WEB.pdf
4. Maine Connectivity Authority. (2022). Digital equity. <https://www.maineconnectivity.org/digital-equity>
5. Maine Connectivity Authority. (2023). Maine’s digital equity plan. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1uPNy46uEoWoUx4gvuFEDVhgYrCwvz4b5/view>
6. American Library Association. (2023). Digital literacy. <https://literacy.ala.org/digital-literacy/>
7. Maine Connectivity Authority. (2022). Digital Equity Asset Inventory. <https://www.maineconnectivity.org/digital-equity-asset-inventory>
8. Maine Connectivity Authority. (2022). Resources. <https://www.maineconnectivity.org/resources>
9. Maine Connectivity Authority. (2024). Digital Equity Alliance guiding document. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ii2CfyPyvSu7LU_SGhRf6x0BYxbtV-C26Y8p5I5bIVc/edit?tab=t.0
10. Maine Digital Inclusion Initiative. (2020). National Digital Equity Center. <https://mainecenteronaging.umaine.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/201/2020/07/MDII-Overview.pdf>
11. Maine State Library. (n.d.). Digital Literacy - Search by Topic. [maine.gov](https://www.maine.gov/msl/digital/literacy.shtml). Retrieved April 5, 2023, from <https://www.maine.gov/msl/digital/literacy.shtml>
12. Maine Digital Equity Center. (n.d.). National Digital Inclusion Initiative. <https://digitalequitycenter.org/our-strategies/>
13. Bureau of Corporations, Elections, & Commissions. (2024). Absentee voting in Maine. <https://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/voter-info/absent.html>
14. State of Maine. (2017). Maine voter information lookup service. https://www.maine.gov/portal/government/edemocracy/voter_lookup.php

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Judiciary

KEY INDICATORS



Indicator #1 | *Selection of State Court Judges*

Maine scores well here because it does a good job of nominating and choosing state court judges — the District Court, Superior Court, and Supreme Judicial Court. These Judges are not elected, and the nomination process focuses on merit rather than politics.



Indicator #2 | *County Probate Courts*

Probate judges work outside the coordinate judicial system, and they are elected rather than appointed on merit, elevating political factors over other qualifications. And since county-based probate judges only work a few days per month, they are expected to practice law to earn a living, resulting in pervasive conflicts of interest



Indicator #3 | *Judicial Vacancies and Staffing*

As noted in the 2025 State of the Judiciary report, judicial vacancies remain and additional resources are needed in court staffing.¹ The Supreme Judicial Court had a vacancy since January 2024 but with the appointment of Justice Juliz Lipez in March 2025 now has its full complement of Justices.



Indicator #4 | *Gender in the Judiciary*

Women comprise 51% of Maine's general population but only 34% of the state judiciary. While this is an improvement over the situation in our 2021 report, more progress is needed. Maine now has the second consecutive woman serving as Chief Justice of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court.



Indicator #5 | *Legal Services for Indigent Parties*

Thousands of Mainers face court proceedings each year and often need legal help, but many go without it. On the criminal side, Maine lacks a full public defender system and has too few attorneys willing to take cases. Civil legal needs are also widespread, especially for low-income residents dealing with housing, health care, fraud, immigration, or abuse. Civil legal aid organizations exist but are underfunded and overstretched.

WHY IT MATTERS:

Fair and impartial justice and access to adequate representation in the judicial system are cornerstones of our democracy. Decisions by state court judges and local prosecutors have an impact on the lives and livelihoods of many Mainers every year. The fair and prompt administration of civil and criminal justice by judges and prosecutors who are representative of citizens whose cases come before them is fundamental to the legitimacy of our law. Representative judges and prosecutors, and fair and equal access to the assistance of counsel in critical judicial proceedings, are keys in fostering respect for the judicial system.

Choosing judges by popular vote has the effect of injecting politics into the branch of government for which independence and impartiality are indispensable. The campaign fundraising that goes along with judicial elections creates the appearance that judges can be bought, or that judicial candidates may be obligated to big donors. And if “big money” can elect a judge, that undermines confidence in the rule of law.²

SITUATION IN MAINE 2025:

The judicial selection process is crucial to fairness and confidence in the courts. Most Maine courts are intentionally insulated from short-term political pressures, allowing judges to follow the facts and the law to the best of their abilities. Maine’s state court judges are nominated by the governor and confirmed by the senate for seven-year terms. Traditionally, each governor has appointed a Judicial Nominations Advisory Committee consisting of Maine attorneys to review and recommend candidates. The Maine State Bar Association provides information on re-appointments. While the process has worked well, it is not mandated by law; it is a strong tradition in Maine but vulnerable to the norm-breaking whim of a future governor.

This process is not perfect, but it avoids the pitfalls of electing state court judges — a process criticized in other jurisdictions as politicizing this branch of government.

DISCUSSION:

Maine’s judicial selection process appears to be conducted without undue partisan or political influence, with candidates evaluated and recommended by an advisory committee made up primarily of practicing attorneys. But for whatever reason, many seats on state courts remain unfilled, contributing to backlogs and delays.

Sadly, Maine’s county-based probate courts lag far behind the judicial branch. Their part-time, elected judges remain an outdated anomaly, stubbornly resistant to change. Maine probate courts are rooted in the constitution and for this reason efforts to modernize and strengthen them have proven difficult. The probate courts’ unique 19th Century origins isolate judges in these

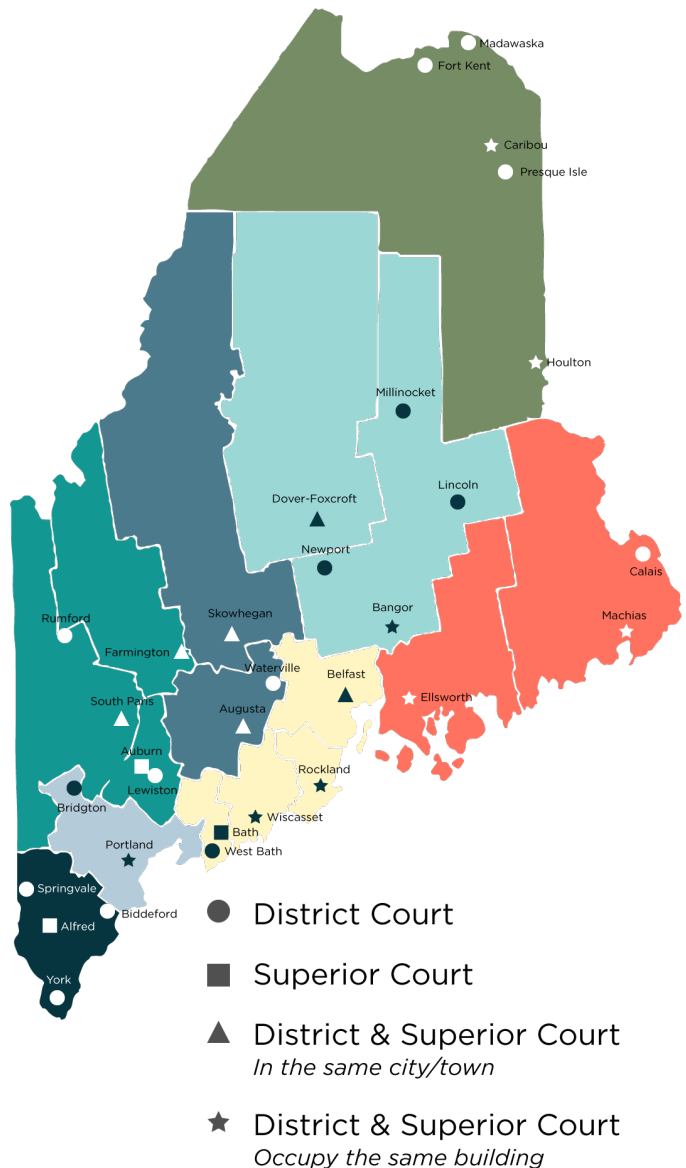


FIGURE 1 | Map of Maine’s Court System

specialized courts. What’s worse, probate judges are part time and are expected to supplement their income by practicing law, often in other probate courts. The resulting ethical issues have been simmering for years and the probate courts show increasing signs of dysfunction, with reports of judges unable to balance their solemn judicial

responsibilities with their “day job” in the private practice of law. Over the years Maine has seen many proposals to move the probate courts into the judicial branch, creating full-time appointed positions supported by a coordinated judicial system including training and administrative support. This reform is overdue.

Judges in Maine’s judicial branch still do not reflect the makeup of the population as a whole, most notably when it comes to representation of women. See Figure 2. The percentage of female judges continues to increase, though Maine is a long way from parity.³ There are signs that the legal profession as a whole is gradually becoming more representative. The supply of female attorneys continues to grow as a percentage of the bar as a whole. At the University of Maine School of Law, 63% of the incoming class is women.⁷ Time will tell whether this will eventually lead the judiciary to more closely represent the general population.

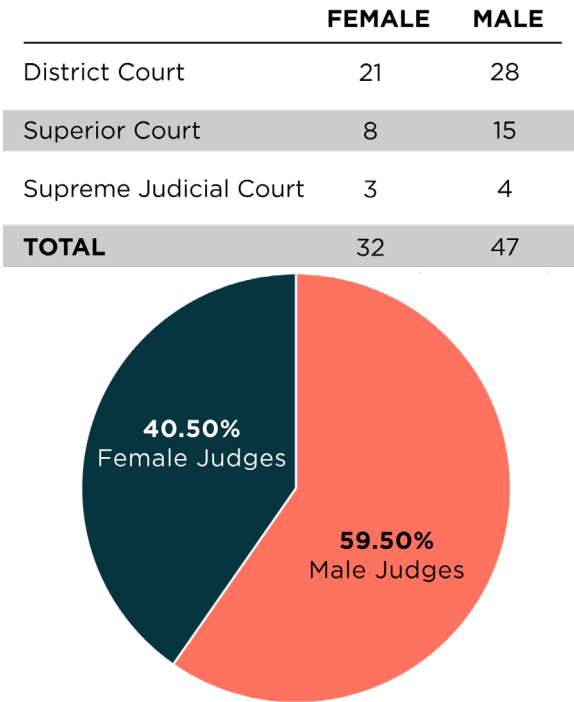


FIGURE 2 | State Judges in Maine

Maine’s struggle to provide legal counsel for indigent criminal defendants has received plenty of public attention. As many as 1,000 criminal defendants may be without an attorney at any time. The legislature has increased funding, and a court is weighing possible remedies including releasing people lacking an attorney from jail, but there is no consensus on the best solution. The re-named Maine Commission on Public Defense Services is charged with providing oversight,

support, and advocacy under the constitutional principle that no person charged with a crime should be without legal counsel simply because they cannot afford it. In January 2025 a Superior Court ruled that the state is violating this constitutional guarantee.

In her 2025 State of the Judiciary address Maine’s chief justice noted that despite many efforts, “the crisis in the availability of constitutionally required counsel has only grown.”⁸

A similar problem creates structural barriers for low income parties in civil cases such as landlord-tenant law, protection from abuse and harassment, family matters, financial fraud, and foreclosures. Parties to a civil case have no constitutional right to counsel, but the impact of an eviction or severe abuse and harassment can be as detrimental to a person’s well-being as the outcome of many criminal cases. When someone unfamiliar with the rules of court attempts to handle significant litigation on their own they not only increase the risk of a bad outcome, they also burden the judiciary itself. Even in the context of a tight state budget, these important interests should not be considered optional. The shortage of legal counsel in both criminal and civil proceedings reflect structural barriers continuing to hinder low-income individuals from accessing justice.⁹

METHODS:

Indicator 1: We obtained information on the judicial selection process from the governor’s website. For comparison, the National Center for State Courts has comprehensive information about judicial selection in other states.¹⁰

Indicator 2: We reviewed the documents assembled by the Commission to Create a Plan to Incorporate the Probate Courts into the Judicial Branch for information on the probate courts and the opportunities for reform.¹¹

Indicator 3: The Chief Justice addressed issues relating to court resources, staffing and vacancies in her State of the Judiciary Address.¹

Indicators 4-5: We examined the gender distribution of Maine’s state court judges as of December 31, 2022 based on data on the court system’s website. Gender identification should be based upon self-identification when that information is available. In this case, however, we relied upon assumptions about names being an indication of gender, and in some cases upon photographs or personal knowledge about a

particular person. We followed a similar process to determine the gender of Sheriffs and District Attorneys.^{3,4,5}

Indicator 6: We reviewed extensive news coverage of the State of Maine's system for the provision of legal representation of indigent parties, including quotes from and data provided by the Chief Justice of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court and the Executive Director of the Maine Commission on Public Defense Services as reported in this coverage.

FURTHER RESEARCH:

Questions exist about the representativeness of Maine's judiciary and jury pool when it comes to racial, ethnic, and national minorities. A comprehensive study would be welcomed and could inform future policy work.

ADDITIONAL READING:

1. George, T., & Yoon, A. (2017). Measuring Justice in State Courts: The Demographics of the State Judiciary. *Vanderbilt Law Review*, 70(6). <https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1097&context=vlr>
2. *Judicial Nominations*. (n.d.). Office of Governor Janet T. Mills. Retrieved April 15, 2025, from https://www.Maine.gov/governor/mills/about/judicial_nominations
3. *Board of Overseers of the Bar*. (n.d.). Board of Overseers of the Bar. Retrieved April 5, 2023, from <https://www.mebaroverseers.org/>
4. *ABA Profile of the Legal Profession 2022 Report*. (2022). American Bar Association. <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/news/2022/07/profile-report-2022.pdf>
5. *Entering Class Profile for Class of 2027*. (n.d.). University of Maine School of Law. Retrieved April 15, 2025, from <https://mainelaw.Maine.edu/admissions/entering-class-profile/>
6. *Maine Commission on Public Defense Services*. (n.d.). Maine.gov. Retrieved April 15, 2025, <https://www.Maine.gov/pds/>
7. *Protecting the Right to Counsel*, ACLU of Maine. <https://www.aclumaine.org/en/robbinsvmaine>. Retrieved April 15, 2025.
8. Hogan, S. (2023, December 17). Maine's probate courts are ripe for reform. <https://themainemonitor.org/probate-courts-ripe-for-reform/#:~:text=Martin%20said%20lawmakers%20should%20adopt,probate%20judges%20with%20the%20same>

SOURCES

1. Allen, E. (2025, February 25). Maine's chief justice says courts are overwhelmed and underfunded. *Portland Press Herald*. Retrieved from <https://www.pressherald.com/2025/02/25/maines-chief-justice-says-courts-overwhelmed-and-underfunded/>.
2. Gordon, S. C. (2024, February 20). *Democracy Reform Primer Series: Elected vs. Appointed Judges*. Center for Effective Government. <https://effectivegov.uchicago.edu/primers/elected-vs-appointed-judges>
3. *Maine courts*. State of Maine Judicial Branch. (n.d.). <https://www.courts.Maine.gov/index.html>
4. *Sheriffs' Directory*. Maine Sheriffs' Association. (n.d.). <https://www.mainesheriffs.org/sheriff-s-directory>
5. *District Attorneys*. Maine County Commissioners Association. (n.d.). <https://www.mainecounties.org/district-attorneys.html>
6. Maine State Bar Association. (n.d.). (rep.). *Annual Report 2024*. Retrieved from https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.mainebar.org/resource/resmgr/annualreport/Annual_Report_2024_Final.pdf.
7. Umainelaw. (2024, September 3). *Maine law welcomes its largest class in nearly two decades*. MaineLaw. <https://mainelaw.Maine.edu/news/maine-law-welcomes-its-largest-class-in-nearly-two-decades/#:~:text=Maine%20Law%27s%20Class%20of%202027,incoming%20students%20are%20from%20Maine>
8. *Chief justice Valerie Stanfill's 2025 State of the judiciary speech*. News and Announcements: State of Maine Judicial Branch. (2025, February 26). <https://www.courts.Maine.gov/news/article.html?id=13151055>
9. Sandefur, R. L. (2010). The Impact of Counsel: An Analysis of Empirical Evidence. *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*, 9(1), 51-95. <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/vol9/iss1/3/>
10. Court Statistics Project. (n.d.). *Understanding State Court governance*. National Center for State Courts. <https://www.ncsc.org/resources-courts/understanding-state-court-governance>
11. *Commission to create a plan to incorporate the probate courts into the judicial branch*. Maine State Legislature. (2021). <https://legislature.Maine.gov/commission-to-create-a-plan-to-incorporate-the-probate-courts-into-the-judicial-branch>

CHAPTER TWELVE

County Government

KEY INDICATORS



Indicator #1 | *Competitiveness of County Elections*

The majority of Maine county elections are uncontested. In the last decade, only 35% of District Attorney races had more than one candidate on the ballot. In Sheriff races, only 28% were contested. In the last three elections, only 40% of County Commission races were contested, and three races had no candidate on the ballot. District attorney, sheriff, and county commissioner races are majority self-funded. In the last eight years, DA races have drastically increased in spending.



Indicator #2 | *Accessible Information*

Maine counties' websites often lack important information for citizens about elections, public meetings, and services.



Indicator #3 | *Financial Transparency*

Counties are required by law to have up-to-date audits of their finances. These audits are far behind in most counties.



Indicator #4 | *Gender Representation*

Currently, only 17% of Maine's 60 county commissioners are women. In 71% of the races over the last three elections, only men were on the ballot. None of the current county Sheriffs are women. Half of Maine's District Attorneys are women.



Indicator #5 | *Citizen Participation is Encouraged*

Maine law requires public meetings, but many counties don't make it easy for citizens to participate, attend meetings, run for office or put themselves forward for appointed positions.

WHY IT MATTERS:

Maine counties are responsible for establishing emergency management systems, electing our leading law enforcement positions across the state, and often overseeing the disbursement of federal funds, such as the American Rescue Plan funds and some of the Opioid settlement funds. Other responsibilities can include public health, infrastructure maintenance, economic development, and recycling. Some counties are responsible for a regional airport. Counties are governed by elected County Commissioners, which are often uncontested races. Maine counties employ over 2,100 staff members for public safety and administrative roles. Understanding how county government operates is critical to ensuring these vital services are efficient and effective.

Maine is a large state with many small municipalities. Having a layer of elected government at an intermediate level could be important in bridging the gap, however they need strong governance to do so. County government needs to be representative of its constituents, well run and ethically and transparently managed, with the high caliber representatives that only competitive elections can deliver.

SITUATION IN MAINE 2025:

Maine’s county government could be significantly improved. The majority of county commissioners are elected with no competition. Websites are poor and missing vital information. Audits of finances are years behind.

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) provided Maine with \$261 million to be dispersed through the counties, a sum greater than their collective budgets. ARPA specifically mentioned that its funds should help governments “respond to the public health emergency and provide support for a recovery — including through assistance to households, small businesses and nonprofits, aid to impacted industries, and support for essential workers.” Yet according to the Maine Monitor, a significant portion of this money went to public safety, jails and sheriff’s offices.² Tasers, Glockes, and night vision goggles were not what the act envisioned. Part of the reason for this is that constituents may not be well represented in county government.

DISCUSSION:

One issue for county government in Maine is that constituents may have a hard time finding out what county government is doing. Information about county government is hard to get online. Website quality is often poor. Few websites are regularly updated or maintained.

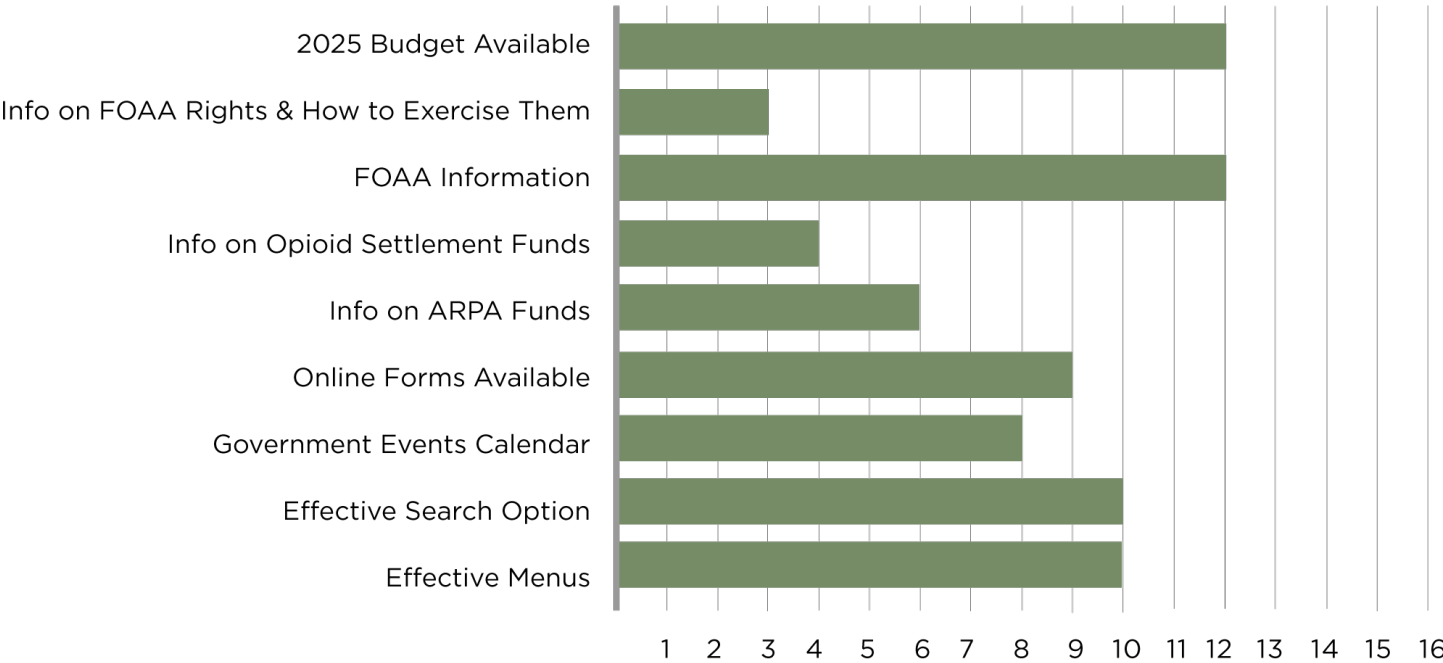


FIGURE 1 | Number of Counties that Provide Accessible Website Information

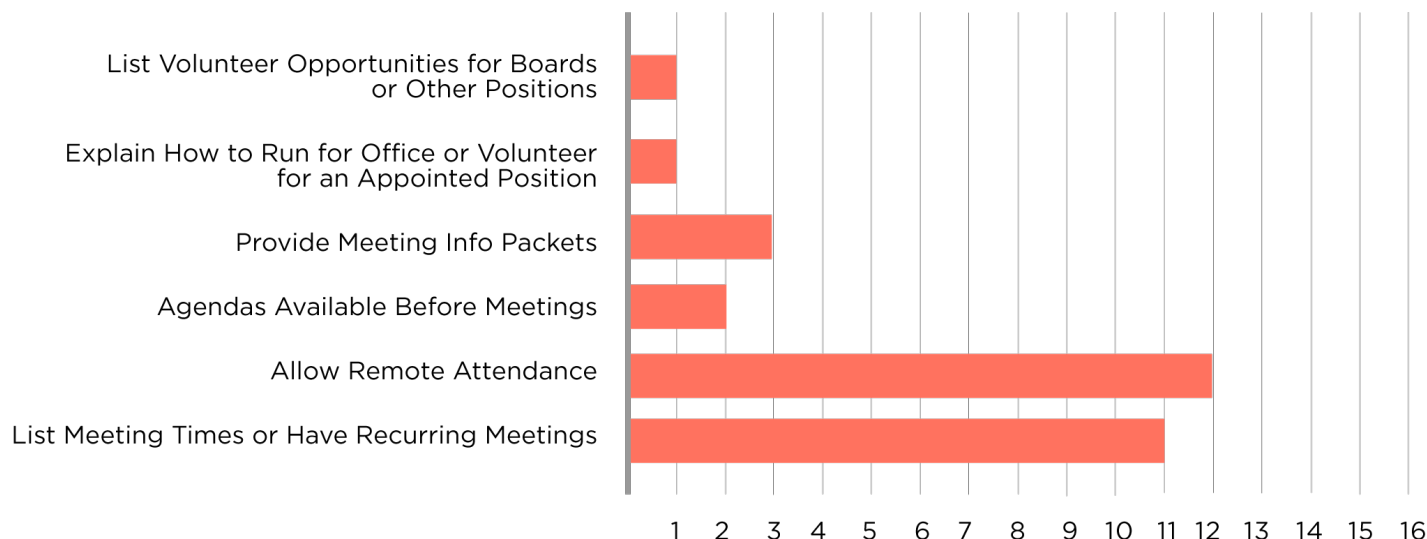


FIGURE 2 | Number of County Websites that Provide Important Information for Citizen Participation

One has not been updated since 2019. Menu structures can be poor. Not all websites have search options at all, and some have search options that do not work. Even otherwise excellent websites include outdated material. Maine’s Freedom of Access Act (FOAA) requires public record access, but the majority of the counties have no or inadequate FOAA information. Only three offer comprehensive information including how to submit requests, exclusions, and the role of Maine’s FOAA Ombudsman. See Chapter 8 for more on FOAA.

Many Maine counties do not make it easy for citizens to participate. While Maine law mandates public meetings, many counties do not publish necessary information about County Commissioner meetings. Meeting agendas are rarely available online before the meeting, and information packets are rarely available. Not all counties allow remote attendance. Several neither have recurring meetings nor list meeting times. Only one county’s website explains how to run for office or volunteer for an appointed position. Only one lists available positions on boards or other bodies. Figure 2 shows how many of Maine’s county websites have important information to enable citizen participation and oversight of county government.

In addition, not all county websites provide information on budgets, audits or other financial information. Most provide no information on ARPA or opioid settlement funds. One county website provides no financial information and several are missing their 2025 budgets. In 2025, Maine’s county budgets total \$244 million. County commissioners need to be careful

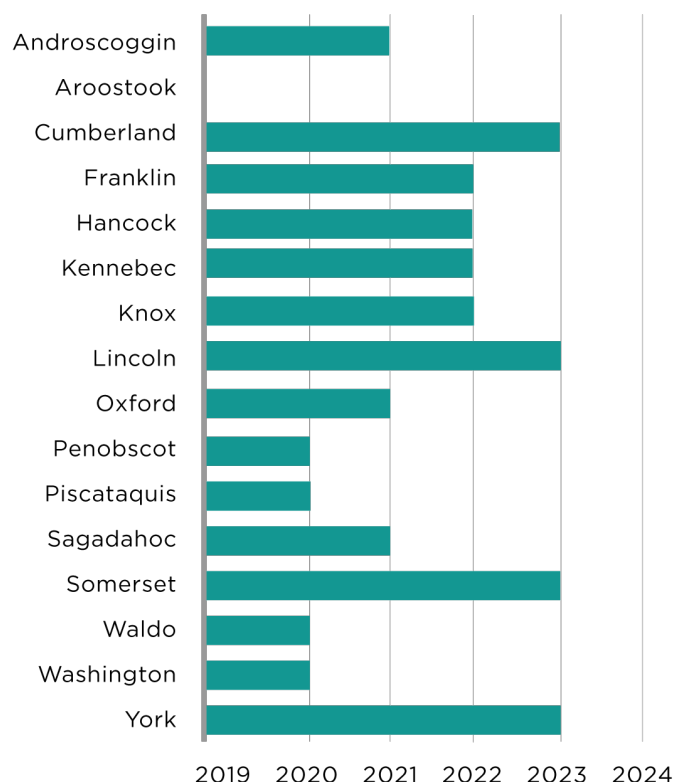


FIGURE 3 | Latest Year of Audited Financial Statements by County

stewards of taxpayer dollars. Unfortunately, it is difficult to assess whether they are. Maine law states that “Every county shall have an annual audit made of its accounts annually covering the last complete fiscal year.” As of mid-January, only four of Maine’s counties had completed audits for 2023 (see Figure 3). One county did not have a full audit completed for 2020. The remaining 11 counties have audits that are one to three years behind.

Competitive elections are important for a vibrant democracy. In the 97 county commissioner elections in the last three cycles, the majority of

Number of Candidates on the Ballot
County Commissioner 2020, 2022, & 2024

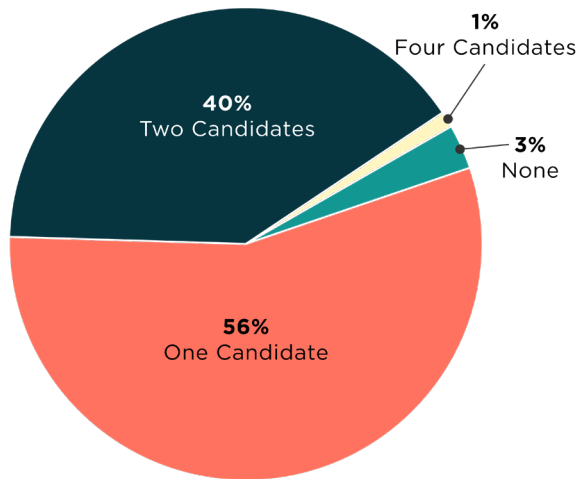


FIGURE 4 | Number of Candidates in County Commissioner Elections

the ballots had only one candidate. Only one race had more than two candidates on the ballot, and three races had no candidate on the ballot. Of the races with only one candidate on the ballot, a mere handful had a contested primary. In other words, over half of Maine’s county commissioners are elected with no opposition. Voters are offered no choice. In two of the races with no candidate on the ballot, the winning write-in candidates won with 2% of the vote; 98% of the voters left their ballots blank. See Figure 4.

Over the last three campaign cycles, less than half of the District Attorney general elections were contested. In the races that were contested, campaign spending from lawyers and out-of-state donors skyrocketed. For Sheriff elections, less than a third of the elections were contested. Over the last three election cycles, none of the 21 Sheriff races with only one candidate on the ballot had a contested primary. For county commission races, a little less than a third of the candidates had contributions of \$1,000 or more, meaning $\frac{2}{3}$ did not show evidence of an active campaign. Thirteen candidates (10%) had donations of over \$5,000 and, of those, the majority were mostly self-financed.

Currently, only 17% of Maine’s 60 county commissioners are women and more than half of Maine’s counties are represented only by men. In 71% of the elections for county commissioner over

the last three elections, only men were on the ballot. As John Adams said in 1776, the elected body “should be an exact Portrait, in Miniature, of the People at large, as it should think, feel, reason and act like them.”

Female representation on the law enforcement side is mixed. Maine currently has four female district attorneys and four male. For comparison, according to the most recent report of the Maine Bar Association, 34% of licensed attorneys in Maine reported as female, 55% reported as male, 11% did not answer, and less than one percent identify as non-binary or transgender.⁵

But none of Maine’s sixteen elected county sheriffs are women. There have only been two female sheriffs in Maine’s history — one of them, Donna Dennison of York County — retired in 2018.⁴ Undoubtedly women are underrepresented among Maine’s law enforcement officers.³ While the gender imbalance of Maine’s sheriffs is not uncommon — just 2% of America’s sheriffs are women⁴ — research has shown that women

Number of Candidates on the Ballot
Sheriff 2020, 2022, & 2024

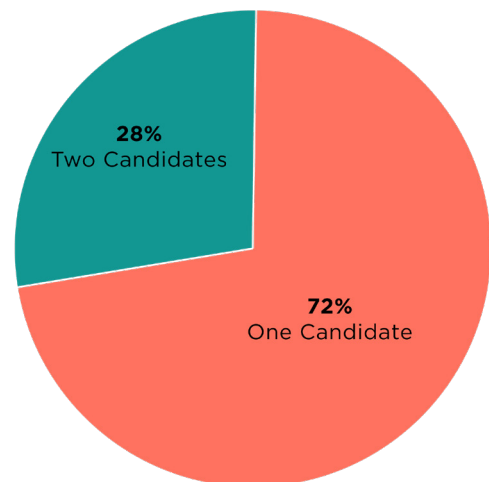


FIGURE 5 | Number of Candidates in Sheriff Elections

police officers increase community trust and public safety outcomes.⁵ Maine has few women in county law enforcement and women in leadership roles, like county Sheriff, would help recruit more women to county law enforcement. Further research would be required to determine the percentage of law enforcement officers who are female. See Figure 5 for number of candidates that appear on the ballot.

METHODS:

For election indicators, we analyzed data from the Secretary of State's office to understand how many elections were uncontested. Then, we reviewed candidates in the Maine Campaign Finance database from the Maine Ethics Commission to understand spending and contributions. For transparency and audit indicators, we reviewed all county websites and contacted county clerks directly. For audit data, we got audits from the State Auditor, from County websites, and, where data was missing, by calling or emailing the county.

FURTHER RESEARCH:

Researching county governance practices in New England and across the U.S. could identify suggestions for improving county government in Maine. In addition, determining whether the process of running for county office is sufficiently transparent lead to the recruitment of more candidates and make elections more competitive. More research is required on campaign competitiveness for county government in New England.

ADDITIONAL READING:

Vermont has a county structure that is similar to Maine. The state government there has recently convened a commission to look at county governance and whether counties should play a larger role in the government of Vermont. The findings of this commission could be of interest here in Maine.

1. *County and Regional Governance Study Committee*. State House Dome. (n.d.). <https://legislature.vermont.gov/committee/detail/2026/391>

SOURCES:

1. Election results/data. Election Results/Data | Sos. (n.d.). <https://www.Maine.gov/sos/elections-voting/election-results-data>
2. Civix. (n.d.). Maine Ethics Commission. <https://mainecampaignfinance.com/#/index>
3. Maine County Commissioners Association. (n.d.). <https://www.maine counties.org/>
4. National Association of Counties. (n.d.). (publication). *Maine County Government Overview*. Retrieved from https://ce.naco.org/app/profiles/CountyGov/CountyGov_23000.pdf.
5. *County*. Office of the State Auditor. (n.d.). <https://www.Maine.gov/audit/county/index.html>



CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this report is to assess the state of democracy in Maine using broad indicators representing the basic values of democratic political systems: representative government, broad voter and civic participation, no undue influence of money in politics, voting rights for all citizens, free and fair elections, freedom of information, free and unbiased reporting by local press and other media, equitable access to information, and an independent, representative and accessible judicial system. Future editions of this report might look at additional factors, such as governmental ethics and a professional, nonpartisan civil service.

Overall, we find that Maine ranks high as a democratically governed state, and we should be justifiably proud of our record. But there are still some areas that bear watching or where we need to improve.

Appendix A covers the uncertain future of tech and AI on our democracy. Since 2021, the League of Women Voters of Maine has led conversations around disinformation, conspiracy theories, extremism, and surveillance. These toxic online forces threaten the overall health of our democracy. See page 60.

Appendix B provides an overview of the indicators used in this report and whether the trends were positive, negative, or hard to judge, with respect to their effects on the state of democracy in Maine. See page 62

Our Findings:

- Maine's 2025 Legislature again has a higher percentage of women at 41% than has been true historically, a little lower than it was two years ago, but still significantly higher compared to 20 years ago.
- Maine also has a very low efficiency gap, indicating that the partisan makeup of our legislature reflects the partisan composition of the voters who turned out and an absence of extreme, partisan gerrymandering.
- Maine has a comparatively high voter registration rate and turnout rate. Maine has consistently been in the top 10% of states in terms of voter turnout over the last 20 years — leading the nation in voter turnout in 2016 and 2018 according to the Census, and ranking third in 2024 with 74.8% of the electorate voting in the general election. While voting among younger people has historically been low, Maine ranked second for youth electoral significance in 2024.
- Maine leads the nation in protecting voting rights with same-day registration, no photo identification requirement, and no felony disenfranchisement (for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people). Full implementation of automatic voter registration in 2022 and online voter registration in 2024 are removing further barriers to voter registration and participation. Some of these measures are threatened by pending state and federal action.
- Although we are still working for full implementation of Ranked Choice Voting (RCV), Maine has led the nation in the use of RCV for state and federal elections. Maine also joined a growing super-majority of states in abandoning presidential caucuses in favor of presidential primaries. Semi-open primaries were available to Maine voters for the first time in 2024, and 17% of primary voters were unenrolled.
- Maine is fortunate to enjoy well-run elections overall, having experienced few serious election issues in the last 20 years, including in the very challenging COVID-19 election of 2020. Maine continues to use paper ballots in all elections, ensures security of the ballots during storage and transportation, allows for public monitoring of critical ballot processing activities, has strong recount protocols, and has a high rate of valid cast ballots absentee voting, despite a continuing increase in the number of absentee ballots cast. A post-election ballot audit system that piloted in 2025 will help ensure that systemic tabulation and process errors are detected and corrected.
- Maine has made great progress combating the corrosive effect of money in politics. It passed the Maine Clean Election Act (MCEA) in 2000, and since then, participation (especially among women) in this public funding option remains the first choice for a majority of candidates. When it comes to campaign finance transparency, Maine's new gubernatorial transition funding disclosure requirement plugs a hole in the previous disclosure structure.
- However, Maine's campaign finance landscape (like that of many other states in the post-*Citizens United* reality) is awash in dark money, including money from corporate and commercial sources.
- Maine has a strong Freedom of Access Act (FOAA), and more than half of the FOAA requests were responded to within five days, an improvement over the prior year. However, there has been a recent rise in burdensome requests. Though hard to define, these are requests whose purpose is not to foster transparency but rather to bog down governmental agencies and tie up critical resources. This is a trend worth watching.
- Maine has a healthy number of local newspapers for a state our size, but it's fewer than it was even two years ago. Maine is also at the leading edge of a national experiment with non-profit journalism.
- However, Maine is not immune from the national trend: social media has become the dominant delivery platform for "news," which increasingly means exposure to inaccurate or misleading content.
- Maine has made progress in closing the digital divide by increasing both broadband coverage and remote access to public meetings.
- Maine's state court judges are appointed by the governor through a public process, rather than popularly elected, fostering judicial independence. However, our probate courts operate outside the judicial system, being elected rather than appointed, and facing pervasive conflicts of interest.
- Our judicial system is also chronically under-resourced, both as to the number of vacancies on the court as well as the availability of legal services for indigent parties.
- County government in Maine is a backwater of poor visibility, low citizen engagement, uncertain transparency, and sub-standard representation.



Areas For Improvement or Vigilance:

REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT:

While the percentage of women in the Legislature is still quite high historically, at 41%, it is lower than it was even two years ago, and it is still not reflective of the general population where women make up 51%. The percentage of baby boomers in the Legislature is also very high (58%) relative to the general population (36%). To put it bluntly, the Legislature is and has been dominated by older white men. Barriers to legislative service are real for women and younger adults.

VOTER PARTICIPATION:

Although Maine is among the highest turnout states, a significant percentage of registered voters still do not participate in each election, and this has historically been especially true in the districts with the highest poverty rates or lowest rates of owner-occupied housing.

VOTING RIGHTS:

Attacks on voting rights have accelerated since 2020, with 150 new restrictive voting bills being considered in 32 states, including Maine. Federal action on the SAVE Act threatens voter participation in Maine. And a new voter suppression referendum will be on the Maine ballot in November. These two measures combined could affect women voters, rural voters, those with disabilities, and many others, shaving a significant number of otherwise eligible voters from participant rolls for years to come.

CONDUCT OF ELECTIONS:

The lack of centralized reporting to the chief election official in Maine hampers efforts to modernize and standardize our system. Moreover, there is a need for better transparency and more uniformity in how local election officials track and report: professional training and certification, when and where election activities take place, and problems that occur at polling places.

ELECTION METHODS:

We should extend the use of RCV to gubernatorial and state legislative elections. RCV is critical for ensuring the people get the most out of their vote and the candidates with the broadest possible support are elected, thus upholding the true will of the voters.

MONEY IN POLITICS:

From the 2016 to the 2024 election cycle, MCEA participation among all general election candidates declined from 64% to 55%. The health of the Maine Clean Election Fund also remains uncertain: on the one hand, a steady level of funding continues, but at the same time a large amount of funding was removed by previous Legislators. In addition, unaccountable “dark money” and undemocratic funding continues to play an outsized role in determining our policies and those who run our government.



FREEDOM OF INFORMATION:

Significant issues loom for those concerned about freedom of information. The federal FOIA is threatened by staffing cuts in responding agencies. Here in Maine, our FOAA lacks public awareness or uniform tracking. Additionally, there is some evidence that the FOAA is being weaponized by bad-faith actors to harass public officials.

NEWSPAPER AND MEDIA ACCESS:

Like many states, Maine has seen a drastic decline over the years in the number of local newspapers and newspaper circulation. Threatened budget cuts to NPR and PBS would have a dramatic effect in Maine, where Maine Public owns ten radio stations and five TV stations. Community radio outlets like WMPG and WERU would also be affected, leaving Maine people more dependent than ever on social media as a sometimes questionable source for their news.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE:

Although significant progress has been made, 10% of Maine's "serviceable locations" are underserved by broadband (i.e. without high-speed Internet access), which is critical for voters to access candidate information, learn about when and where to vote and what will be on the ballot, and make requests for absentee ballots. Only 33% of towns allow remote access to public meetings.

THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM:

Under-resourcing in the judicial system is jeopardizing access to due process in Maine. Judicial vacancies and a dearth of legal services for indigent parties mean long wait time and poor representation for litigants. In addition, the probate system, which operates outside the rest of the Judicial Branch, is vulnerable to poorly qualified judges who may also have conflicts of interest.

COUNTY GOVERNMENT:

County government in Maine, which deals with the vital issues of emergency management, law enforcement, and public health, among others, suffers from an almost catastrophic lack of visibility: constituents don't know what county government does. As a result, they do not insist on financial transparency — or well qualified candidates delivering top quality services.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Maine has a strong and proud tradition of upholding the principles of democracy, but some work remains unfinished. Over the two centuries since Maine's founding as a state, we have managed to preserve essential principles of democracy and representative government embodied in our State Constitution. At the same time, we have adopted reforms over the years that advance civic participation and representative government and adapt to the evolving needs of our citizens. These reforms, which serve the broad public interest, must be defended and preserved; and we must continue to find new ways to engage all of our people in the work of self-government, for only then can we claim to be a true democracy.

APPENDIX A: DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

Some chapters within this report have been informed, in part, by the League of Women Voters of Maine's work on Digital Democracy.¹ Each month the League hosts a discussion to explore a different facet of this crisis that involves disinformation, conspiracy theories, extremism, and surveillance, all working together to threaten democracy with toxic online content. Does Big Tech endanger civil society, our civil rights, and our privacy?

Wherever you look, bad actors are taking advantage of technology in order to dismantle democracy and civic society. This "technology" includes social media platforms, apps, algorithms, and artificial intelligence (AI). Social media sites are not able to keep up with spam bots, nor are states keeping up with regulation and data privacy laws, which are difficult to craft without robust standardization at the federal level. Such a federal framework is not forthcoming. Soon, we could live in a "technocracy."²

The reality is that data privacy laws lag behind in protecting users,³ and federal and state governments are slow to incorporate regulations of emerging technologies. Maine now recognizes the possibility of new threats, especially as foreign nations race to capture data and app usage. In 2023, a law was passed to increase cybersecurity for Maine state agencies and included a list of prohibited technologies.⁴

The monetization of social media apps and the algorithms that run them have enabled the rise of what could be considered "techo-fascism."⁵ Anyone can boost a post to be seen by millions if they have the funds. Techno-fascism can spread digitally during times of uncertainty and prevent a viewer's access to unbiased and accurate

information. Techno-fascism can also spread digitally when there is no meaningful content moderation, which is not a matter of censorship but should work to prevent the spread of mis- and disinformation.

Disinformation can lead to an increase in political and physical violence,⁶ as was witnessed during the January 6 Capitol Insurrection, and by the assassinations of Minnesota lawmakers in June; however, there is no better tragic example than the Rohingya massacre in Myanmar in 2016, that is still ongoing, and that was promoted by hate speech and disinformation on Facebook.⁷ In 2018 the Senate commerce and judiciary committees grilled Mark Zuckerberg on various complex topics that included selling user's data, foreign influence on elections, and hate speech and propaganda.⁸ Simply put, at that time, Zuckerberg promised to do better.

Since its acquisition by Elon Musk, Twitter/X, has dramatically rolled back its content moderation policies, cut staff, and no longer flags disinformation. However, Musk has blocked and suspended millions of users with whom he disagrees. Within the last year alone, he suspended more users than Twitter ever did during its entire tenure.⁹ TikTok also has poor content moderation, especially when it comes to election misinformation and conspiracy theories. In February 2025, Mark Zuckerberg announced Meta's plans to eliminate content moderation policies on all of its platforms, replacing fact-checkers with a community notes system similar to that used by X, and weakening policies on hate speech. The research on community-led content moderation proves to be mixed, and it's only going to get worse with AI.¹⁰

AI could be especially dangerous to democracy. It could “supercharge” hacking, allowing the rich and powerful to exploit an exponentially growing list of loopholes. Democracy needs an information system that relies on collective feedback, and it should evolve as technology evolves. AI can be good at summarizing ideas and explaining things that can help humans reach consensus, spitting out results at conveniently high speeds. However, it could also be used for pervasive propaganda, and in the future, could allow politicians to connect “directly” with their voters via chatbots, without having to actually interact with them in person.


Even more alarming is the rate at which “DOGE” is implementing AI within the federal workforce.¹¹ DOGE, once unofficially led by Elon Musk, reportedly wants to replace the entire federal workforce with “machines,” which would then be responsible for decision making and the handling of billions of dollars. To accomplish this, sensitive data may be fed to AI, which is already an inherent cybersecurity risk.¹² It could be used for mass surveillance,¹³ and AI could also be used to replace human-based collective decision making.

As the second Trump administration unfolds, it seems that American tech companies can expect an enormous boon. We could enter a platinum age where the tech oligarchy rule their domains and evade any regulation or accountability. We do not yet know the unintended consequences of streamlining AI and deregulating tech. We also do not know what fallout could come to Maine, a rural state still lagging behind in its broadband access. But the rise of political and physical violence fed by disinformation and algorithms are dangerous bellwethers.




SOURCES:

1. League of Women Voters of Maine. (n.d.). Digital Democracy. <https://www.lwvme.org/digitaldemocracy>
2. Gibson, L. (2024, October 16). *How technology shapes elections, privacy, and democracy*. Harvard Magazine. <https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2024/11/technology-election-impact-harvard-latanya-sweeney-research>
3. Shavell, R. (2024, August 13). *Why data privacy measures fall short*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbestechcouncil/2024/06/12/why-data-privacy-measures-fall-short/>
4. Prohibited Technologies | Maine IT. (n.d.). <https://www.Maine.gov/oit/prohibited-technologies>
5. Chayka, K. (2025, February 26). *Techno-fascism comes to America*. The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/techno-fascism-comes-to-america-elon-musk>
6. Kurten, M. (2025, January 9). *Why we fight for fractured truths – how misinformation fuels political violence in democracies*. MediaWell. <https://mediawell.ssrc.org/research-reviews/why-we-fight-for-fractured-truths-how-misinformation-fuels-political-violence-in-democracies/>
7. Zaleznik, D. (2022, March 8). *Facebook and genocide: How Facebook contributed to genocide in Myanmar and why it will not be held accountable*. Harvard Law School | Systemic Justice Project. <https://systemicjustice.org/article/facebook-and-genocide-how-facebook-contributed-to-genocide-in-myanmar-and-why-it-will-not-be-held-accountable/>
8. Domonoske, C. (2018, April 10). *Mark Zuckerberg tells Senate: Election security is an “arms race.”* NPR. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/04/10/599808766/i-m-responsible-for-what-happens-at-facebook-mark-zuckerberg-will-tell-senate>
9. Balevic, K. (2024, September 26). *Elon Musk talks a lot about free speech. but account suspensions on X have skyrocketed*. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musk-x-twitter-account-suspensions-rising-2024-9>
10. Katz, E. (2025, January 27). *Ask the expert: What Meta’s new fact-checking policies mean for misinformation and hate speech*. MSUToday. <https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2025/ask-the-expert-what-meta-new-fact-checking-policies-mean-for-misinformation-and-hate-speech>
11. Wong, M. (2025, March 10). *Doge’s plans to replace humans with AI are already under way*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2025/03/gsa-chat-doge-ai/681987/>
12. Natanson, H., De Vynck, G., Dwoskin, E., & Douglas-Gabriel, D. (2025, February 6). *Elon Musk’s doge feeds AI sensitive federal data to target cuts*. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2025/02/06/elon-musk-doge-ai-department-education/>
13. Stanley, J. (2025, March 21). *Machine surveillance is being super-charged by large AI models*. ACLU. <https://www.aclumaine.org/en/news/machine-surveillance-being-super-charged-large-ai-models>

APPENDIX B: SUMMARY OF REPORT INDICATORS

	 Positive Findings & Trends	 Negative Findings & Trends	 Mixed News or Hard to Judge
Chapter One Representative Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage of Women in the Legislature in 2025 vs. in Earlier Years Percentage of Women in Executive Branch Leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage Aged 55-74 in the Legislature vs. Maine Population Percentage of Women in the Legislature vs. Maine Population 	
Chapter Two Voter Participation and Individual Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maine's Voter Turnout States with the Highest Voter Turnout Voter Turnout by Gender Voter Turnout by Age 		
Chapter Three Voter Participation and District Demographics		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poverty and Voter Participation Housing Type and Voter Participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Race and Voter Participation
Chapter Four Voting Rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Same-day Registration No Photo ID Requirement No Felony Disenfranchisement Reducing Barriers to Voting 		
Chapter Five Election Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Popular Vote (NPV) Interstate Compact Semi-Open Primaries Presidential Primaries Redistricting 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ranked Choice Voting (RCV)
Chapter Six Conduct of Elections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of Paper Ballots Security of Ballots Public Monitoring of Elections Recount Protocols Rejection Rate for Absentee Ballots Wait Time to Vote Modern Voter List Procedures 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training for local election officials

SUMMARY OF REPORT INDICATORS *continued*

	 Positive Findings & Trends <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage of Eligible Candidates Who Use the Clean Elections 	 Negative Findings & Trends <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Corporate Contribution 	 Mixed News or Hard to Judge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health of the Clean Election Fund Campaign Finance Transparency
Chapter Seven Money in Politics			
Chapter Eight Freedom of Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of Reported FOAA Requests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Budget Transparency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FOAA implementation, enforcement and Ombudsman role Rise in Burdensome Requests
Chapter Nine Newspaper and Media Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concentration of Ownership of Print and Broadcast Media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> News Deserts Decline in Number of Newsroom and Broadcast Staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of Newspapers Newspaper Circulation
Chapter Ten The Digital Divide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broadband Coverage 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remote Access to Public Meetings
Chapter Eleven The Judiciary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Selection of State Court Judges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> County Probate Courts Judicial Vacancies and Staffing Gender in the Judiciary Legal Services for Indigent Parties 	
Chapter Twelve County Government		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competitiveness of County Elections Accessible Information Financial Transparency Gender Representation Citizen Participation is Encouraged 	

**WE'RE LIVING
THROUGH A
TUMULTUOUS TIME
IN AMERICAN
POLITICS.**

DEMOCRACY ME

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF MAINE
MAINE CITIZENS FOR CLEAN ELECTIONS
MAINE STUDENTS VOTE

PO BOX 18187

Portland, ME 04112

info@democracymaine.org

democracymaine.org

