



Meghana Kotraiah, DoTheMostGood Elections Team

Committee: Ways and Means

Testimony on: HB0156 -- Student and Military Voter Empowerment Act

Position: Favorable

Hearing Date: January 26, 2021

Bill Contact: Delegates Luedtke and Griffith

DoTheMostGood (DTMG) is a progressive grass-roots organization with more than 2000 members who live in a wide range of communities in Montgomery and Frederick Counties, from Bethesda near the DC line north to Frederick and from Potomac east to Silver Spring and Olney. DTMG supports legislation and activities that support and uplift all members of its communities. DTMG strongly supports HB0156 because it empowers groups of low-propensity voters to participate in, and be informed of, their democracy.

According to the Washington Post, during the early voting period in Maryland for the 2020 General Election “more than 160,000 people voted in person Monday, exceeding the previous single-day record of 143,000 that was set on the last day of early voting in 2016.” This resulted in extremely long lines. Citizens waited for hours to cast their ballot. While their determination is admirable, long wait times are a form of voter suppression. Research conducted by Wharton found “in various cases, using different kinds of data, that non-whites end up waiting longer to vote than whites do.” This is further marginalization of communities of color.

HB0156 addresses this problem. HB0156 will require a local board of elections to contact and obtain input from several types of large residential institutional communities when establishing precinct boundaries and designating the location of polling places. The listed institutions - institutions of higher education, continuing care retirement communities, senior communities, and military installations - include groups of very low propensity voters. In 2016, the country wide voter turnout was 54.8%, but voter turnout for college students was 48.3% and for active-duty military 43%. While voter turnout tends to be high for senior citizens, they can be disenfranchised just as well by long lines.

Local boards of elections will use the data they collect to draw boundaries and set voting locations that accommodate these populations. With these populations already having below average voter turnout, it is important that we support their civic engagement - by reducing all barriers to voting and taking their input into account while we build our voting systems.

HB0156 further uplifts student voters with provisions that establish a website page with pertinent information, designate a student voting coordinator at institutions of higher education, create student voting plans, disseminate resources to student bodies, excuse students from class to vote, and additionally, hold educational institutions accountable to these requirements. These provisions are *vital* to increasing student voter turnout. Many students are first time voters - and lack the experience and information that comes with years of voting. The formation and distribution of resources will guide and encourage this underrepresented community to vote and participate in our democracy.

In summary, this bill is a strong plan to empower groups of low propensity voters. It is important that these communities be considered in the establishment of voting systems - precinct boundaries and location decisions - as well as empowered by the availability of resources.

For all of these reasons, DTMG strongly supports HB0156 and urges a **FAVORABLE** report on this bill.

Respectfully submitted,

Meghana Kotraiah

Co-lead, DoTheMostGood Elections Team

Meghana.kot55@gmail.com

240-342-1856