



TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

HB 655 Local Government – County Commissioner Elections – District Voting

POSITION: Support

DATE: February 9, 2021

The League of Women Voters supports standards that not only protect the right of all citizens to vote but also encourage all citizens to vote. To that end, we support standards that promote fair and effective representation at all levels of government with maximum opportunity for public participation.

As the law currently stands, five Maryland counties are divided into districts, yet the District Commissioners are elected at-large. This can, and has, resulted in voters being represented by a commissioner who was elected by a minority of voters in that particular district. This is unfair and ineffective representation and discourages voter engagement both in the voting process and with their commissioner.

In 1985, a similar situation in Dorchester County was challenged in the federal courts as a violation of the Voting Rights Act and forced a change to the Maryland Constitution. The text on the Hurlock Historical Marker says: “**Lest we forget** 1851 - The Maryland Constitution was written requiring voting at large to assure control of minorities.” Another lawsuit in 1992 showed another judge's concern for "effective political representation" in Dorchester County. There appears to be an ongoing pattern of discrimination in the rural counties of Maryland that needs to be addressed by legislation.

We are all aware of the growing apathy or civil unrest of voters because they believe that the system is rigged, and that their vote will not matter. We believe that requiring that the voters in a particular district be represented by a District Commissioner elected by a plurality of the voters in that district would help to restore the faith of voters in their elected officials.

We urge a favorable report on HB 655