

EDUCATION, ENERGY, ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE**February 14, 2023****SB 39 – Ballot Access - Affiliating With a Party - Unaffiliated Voters****Position: SUPPORT**

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM – formerly Maryland Disability Law Center) is the Protection & Advocacy agency in Maryland, mandated to advance the civil rights of people with disabilities. DRM works to increase opportunities for Marylanders with disabilities to be part of their communities through voting by advocating for equal and equitable access to the ballot.

DRM supports SB 39 which will require a local board of elections to change a voter's registration from a decline to affiliate with a political party when voter registration is closed if the request to affiliate is received by the local board by 5 p.m. on the day before early voting begins; and providing that the change is effective for the next election. Currently, voters only have until the voter registration deadline to change any voter information, including their party affiliation. Allowing voters who originally declined to affiliate with a political party to change their party affiliation prior to the start of early voting is vital, especially for participation in the closed primary elections in Maryland. This will greatly enhance opportunities for more individuals to participate in the electoral process in Maryland. This will also benefit voters with disabilities who may have not been ready to affiliate with a political party at the time of their voter registration, particularly those residing in institutions such as state psychiatric hospitals.

During the 2022 election cycle, Disability Rights Maryland conducted voter outreach to patients residing in two state hospitals. During our outreach for the primary election, some voters declined to affiliate with a political party when registering indicating they would need more time to determine which party they would like to identify with. Without affiliating with a political party, they were unable to participate in the primary election. Additionally, their residence in an institution prevents easy access to the local boards of elections to update their voter registration and affiliate with a party once they decide about which party, they would like to affiliate with prior to the voter registration deadline.

Extending the deadline to allow voters who previously declined to affiliate with a political party to update their party affiliation will greatly increase participation in the election cycle, especially the primary election. This should increase voter turnout during primary election which have seen historically low turnout in the past compared to the general election. SB 39 helps increase access to the ballot particularly for voters with disabilities residing in the community and institutions which is vital to having their voice heard in our society.

For these reasons DRM urges a favorable report on **SB 39**.



Empowerment. Integration. Equality.

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