



TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION, AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

SB 39 Ballot Access – Voter Registration – Affiliating With a Party

POSITION – Support

BY: Nancy Soreng President

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The League of Women Voters of the United States believes that democratic government depends upon informed and active citizen participation, and that voting is a fundamental citizen right that must be guaranteed.

SB 39 would allow unaffiliated voters (a voter who has registered to vote but declined to affiliate with a political party) to affiliate with a political party during the 21 days before an election when voter registration is closed if the local board receives the request by 5 p.m. on the day before early voting begins. The current proposed bill language says that the party affiliation would be effective for the next election. We would suggest clarifying language so it would say *beginning on the first day of early voting*.

As of December 2022, there were 840,401 unaffiliated voters in the state of Maryland. The majority of unaffiliated voters are new citizens, young voters, or first-time voters. There are many reasons why people don't register with a party. They may not be aware that Maryland is a closed primary state dramatically limiting the choices on their ballot. They may not be prepared to select a party when they show up to get a driver's license and find out they have been registered to vote. They may be excited about becoming a citizen and register at a naturalization ceremony but feel they don't know enough about the political parties to make a choice that day.

During every primary election thousands of voters vote provisionally because they had no idea, when showing up at the polling place that they could only vote in non-partisan elections. These provisional ballots cannot be counted which is a shame. Since 2017, the League has been supporting legislation allowing unaffiliated voters the opportunity to choose a party at early voting or on election day because we already have mechanisms in place to register voters on those occasions. Since passage of that common sense approach has not been achievable, we support this bill as it does at least expand the window of opportunity for more Marylanders to exercise their right to vote in primary elections.

We urge a favorable report on SB 39.