

February 21, 2024

Testimony on SB 495
Election Law – Petitions and Ballot Questions – Plain Language Requirement
Education, Energy, and the Environment

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland is in support of SB 495, which would require that all Ballot Questions be written in a way that they could be reasonably understood by a voter with a 6th grade level of reading comprehension. Voting should be accessible to all eligible citizens, and that necessitates breaking down any intellectual barriers to voting in elections.

Regardless of the intent, ballot measures that are hard to understand are a big problem in elections. Voters often leave the polling booth unsure of how they voted on a question, or they may have even avoided voting on certain questions altogether because they are just not sure what they are being asked. It is important that voters are conscious of the decisions they are making. It is also important that voters don't feel left out of policymaking by intimidating ballot language.

Ballot measures still favor the college-educated who represent a minority of the U.S. population. According to the Census Bureau, only 31 percent of people 25 or older have a bachelor's degree or higher education level. Specifically, in Maryland only 47% of people are college educated. Meaning that at least 53% of people are in jeopardy of not being able to understand what is written in a ballot question. While the ability to comprehend the complicated language used in ballot measures is becoming more widespread, it still does not reflect the education level of the average American voter.

This bill is not meant to question the intelligence of Marylanders, this bill simply acknowledges the realities of the educational make-up of our state and country and makes necessary accommodations. We believe that measures should be taken to make voting on ballot measures more equitable for everyone. SB 495 would make voting more accessible, and for that reason we urge a favorable report.