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President and General Counsel

Testimony in Favor of Senate Bill 660: Maryland Voting Rights Act of 2024

February 21, 2024

Good afternoon, Honorable Chair Brian J. Feldman, Vice Chair Cheryl C. Kagan, and Esteemed Members of the Education, Energy and the Environment Committee,

My name is Isabelle C. Muhlbauer, and I am the Voting Rights Advocacy Manager at LatinoJustice PRLDEF. LatinoJustice PRLDEF uses and challenges laws to create a more just and equitable society. We transform harmful systems, empower our communities, fight for racial justice, and grow the next generation of líderes. I am here to testify in strong support of S.B. 660, the Maryland State Voting Rights Act of 2024.

S.B. 660 will strengthen democracy in Maryland by ensuring all voters have equal access to the ballot box. Unfortunately, voting rights are under attack across the country in ways that disproportionately impact black and brown voters. Court decisions have stripped away many of the protections in the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, leaving communities of Black and Brown voters vulnerable to voter suppression and discrimination. Maryland is no exception to such practices, which is why it is crucial that this legislature pass S.B. 660. Successful passage ensures Maryland can be a leader in revitalizing democracy in America and ensure access to the ballot is not curtailed by discriminatory policies and practices.

For decades, LatinoJustice PRLDEF has championed the expansion of language access rights, driven by the vision that every member of the Latinx and allied communities deserves unfettered access to voting. This dedication is rooted in an understanding of the multifaceted nature of America's demographic fabric, recognizing how language barriers disenfranchise minority



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groups. Through comprehensive efforts including litigation, advocacy for policy changes, and educational outreach, LatinoJustice works to remove these obstacles. This ensures voting processes are accessible to all, embodying our commitment to fostering a democratic environment where language limitations do not limit civic engagement.

We enthusiastically support S.B. 660 as it extends language access beyond what is required by the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA). Under the VRA, only two counties in Maryland are required to have language assistance for Limited English Proficient (LEP) voters, but according to the most recent census data, more than 425,000 Maryland residents *statewide* have limited English proficiency. We can and should do more to improve language access for our communities and make voting easier for minority populations speaking other languages. Language barriers must not continue to be an impediment to LEP communities that seek to exercise their constitutional right to vote.

S.B. 660 expands language access by lowering the population threshold requirements for municipalities to provide language translation. Not only does the bill require assistance at the polls, but it will also guarantee that translated materials are available for voters, including voter registration notices and forms, ballots, election instructions and all other materials related to the electoral process. It is critically important that Maryland, as the most diverse state on the East Coast, meet the needs of language minority voters. Every voter has the right to be heard, regardless of their English proficiency.

S.B. 660 is supported by a strong coalition of racial justice and civil rights organizations. Central to the bill is the introduction of a preclearance provision, a preventative measure requiring



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local jurisdictions with documented histories of discrimination to seek approval before implementing any changes to voting procedures. This critical step aims to proactively protect Black and Brown communities from policies or practices that could diminish their voting power or infringe upon their rights, addressing potential issues at their root before they can cause harm.

Furthermore, S.B. 660 strengthens voter protections on several fronts, offering expanded safeguards against harassment and intimidation at the polls and equips advocates with enhanced tools to challenge and combat discriminatory voting practices in court. This comprehensive approach not only fortifies the legal framework supporting voters' rights, but also empowers communities and advocates by actively safeguarding the integrity of the democratic process in Maryland.

Unhindered access to the ballot is at the core of a representative democracy. As such, we must continue to ensure that all voters, including historically marginalized communities, are able to freely have their voices heard through their vote. LatinoJustice calls on the Maryland legislature to pass S.B. 660, the Maryland Voting Rights Act of 2024 to codify state-level protections for voting rights that are under attack nationwide.

Thank you for your time.