Simplified language for ballot questions in Maryland

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Thank you for the opportunity to add our perspective to the value of plain language on ballots. Plain language is a key to helping voters participate in elections with confidence.

My name is Whitney Quesenbery. I'm a proud resident of Maryland. But I'm here as the cofounder and director of the Center for Civic Design. We are a Maryland-based nonprofit organization focused on democracy as a design problem. We work with elections across the country. We have worked with the Maryland State Board of Elections on projects from forms to voter guides. We helped New York State pass a similar law to require ballot questions to be written in clear language.

Many states use direct democracy in the form of questions on a ballot. But, if voters cannot understand the text—or the implications of the question—they cannot participate effectively.

The problem with the way we do it now is that:
- Too many ballot questions are in legal language that hides the real question.
- They focus on the mechanism of change rather than the outcome. That is, what will happen, not the legal changes needed to make it happen.
- As a result, they make voters feel that this is a deliberate attempt to confuse or trick them. As a result, they make voters feel that this is a deliberate attempt to confuse or trick them. This is especially true for the 43% of literate adults who read at basic or below-basic levels, according to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

The solution is writing ballot questions in plain language.

According to the federal resource, plainlanguage.gov, language is plain when people can:
- find what they need
- understand what they find
- use it to meet their goals.

People want to be confident that their vote matches their opinion. To do this, they have to understand the outcomes of voting "yes" or "no."

Writing for voters with no more than a 6th-grade education is an important step. There are ways to measure how easy text is to read. These readability scores measure the length and complexity of the text. Tools developed for adult readers are appropriate for evaluating ballot questions. One of them is the [Automated Readability Index (ARI)](). The military developed the ARI or technical manuals. It also has a scoring formula that is easy to use, so that scores are consistent.

But plain language is more than a score. The League of Women Voter's [Easy Voter Guide]() uses a simple structure to explain ballot questions. It makes a difference They start with "the way it is now" and "what will change." After reading the explanations, people asked if questions on the ballot could be written the same way.

A question that will help voters:
- Describes what change the question will bring about, not the mechanism for change.
- Avoids double negatives that confuse. Speaks in active voice that makes the action clear.
- Providing a clear statement of what voting Yes or No means.

Many voters in Maryland already get county voter guides. These guides can add more detail about ballot questions. They can explain how things work now and how they will work if the question passes. They can also define words that might not be familiar to many voters.

Senate Bill 495 and House Bill 1343 asks the State Board of Elections to create guidelines. This is an opportunity to provide before-and-after examples of questions in simpler language.

Writing in legalese is a habit we can break.

This statement has a 6th-grade reading level, according to the Hemingway App.