



March 21, 2025

## **Testimony on S.B. 342**

### **Voting Rights Act of 2025 - Counties and Municipalities**

#### **Ways and Means Committee**

#### **Position: Favorable**

My name is Celina Stewart, and I am the CEO of the League of Women Voters of the United States. I am also a proud resident of Laurel, Maryland and live in State District 21. On behalf of the League and our thousands of members across the state, I strongly urge you to pass SB 342 to enact essential protections against racial vote dilution in Maryland.

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering voters and defending democracy. Since our founding over a century ago, we have fought for fair elections and equitable representation. Central to our mission is the belief that every citizen deserves an equal opportunity to participate in the political process and elect candidates of their choice.

SB 342 will establish the strongest possible protections against election systems that drown out the voices of voters of color, preventing them from electing their preferred representatives (also known as racial vote dilution). This legislation will build on the existing federal protections included in the *Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA)* by providing a framework for both voters and local governments in Maryland to efficiently and cost-effectively identify and eliminate racial vote dilution. When electoral practices, such as at-large elections or unfair district maps, diminish the voting strength of communities of color, these voters are denied meaningful political representation. SB 342 addresses these harmful practices and strengthens Maryland's commitment to fair elections.

The VRA is one of the most transformative civil rights laws in our nation's history, dismantling discriminatory practices that excluded Black and brown voters. However, recent rulings by federal courts, including *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) and *Brnovich v. DNC* (2021), have severely weakened the federal VRA's protections. In this void, state-level legislation like SB 342 is crucial to safeguarding the right to vote.

We at the League have consistently advocated in favor of strengthening the protections of the federal VRA and played a role in every major reauthorization. Following the devastating *Shelby* decision, the League joined coalition partners in advocating for the restoration of the VRA. Through



our People Powered Fair Maps™ initiative, we have fought for fair redistricting processes and opposed gerrymandering across the country. Despite these efforts, the federal government has failed to protect against racial vote dilution, making state-level action like SB 342 crucial.

SB 342 builds on these protections by implementing streamlined standards and procedures that both protect the freedom to vote and make this type of litigation less time-intensive and costly than litigation under the federal VRA. It also builds on the VRA's legacy by establishing clear standards and accessible procedures for addressing racial vote dilution. Unlike federal litigation, which can be prohibitively expensive and time-consuming, this bill ensures that Maryland voters have a fair and efficient means of challenging discriminatory practices. By implementing these protections, Maryland has the opportunity to become a national leader in defending the rights of all voters.

Recent challenges in the town of Federalsburg and Baltimore County underscore the urgency of this legislation. These cases highlight the persistent barriers that voters of color face in achieving fair representation. Maryland must take proactive steps to prevent further disenfranchisement and ensure that every voice is heard.

It is also worth noting that protections against vote dilution are overwhelmingly popular. More than three-quarters of Maryland voters (77%) support these measures<sup>1</sup>. Voters understand that a fair and representative democracy benefits everyone.

The League of Women Voters remains committed to ensuring that our democracy is accessible, representative, and just. We believe SB 342 is a vital step in achieving that goal. For these reasons, we respectfully urge a favorable report on this bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. Should you require additional information please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/IMPACT-LDF-MDVRA-Key-Findings.pdf>