

## **Testimony in Support of Maryland Senate Bill 615 (SB615)**

Submitted to the Maryland House of Delegates Committee on Ways and Means

March 22, 2025

Maryland House of Delegates

Ways and Means Committee

House Office Building, Room 130

Annapolis, MD 21401

### **Re: Favorable Report for Senate Bill 615 - Election Law - Petitions and Ballot Questions**

Dear Chair Atterbeary and Members of the Committee:

My name is Eamonn Donovan, and I currently serve as the Acting Political Affairs Coordinator for the Maryland Forward Party. Our organization is committed to fostering transparent, inclusive, and participatory governance. I write today to express our strong support for Senate Bill 615 (SB615), which offers much-needed reforms to Maryland's process for ballot questions and petition language.

At its core, SB615 aligns with the guiding principle famously articulated by Justice Louis Brandeis:

"Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman."

This bill brings sunlight to our democratic processes through transparency and shines "electric light" on complex ballot issues by making them more understandable to the average voter. In doing so, SB615 affirms the foundational democratic value that voters should be informed, empowered, and respected as decision-makers.

### **What Senate Bill 615 Does**

SB615 proposes targeted, practical reforms that enhance clarity and accessibility in the ballot question process:

#### **- Plain-Language Titles and Summaries:**

Each petition signature page and ballot question must include a concise title and a summary that uses everyday language avoiding legal jargon, double negatives, and unnecessarily complex structures.

#### **- Explanation of Consequences:**

Voters deserve to know what their choices mean. SB615 ensures that the practical effects of both "yes" and "no" votes are explained in clear, understandable terms.

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### **- Improved Timelines and Public Access:**

The bill moves certification deadlines to July 1, introduces a 15-day public comment period, and requires the full text of ballot questions to be made available online no later than 65 days before Election Day.

### **Why This Bill Matters to the Maryland Forward Party**

As a movement devoted to strengthening democracy from the ground up, the Maryland Forward Party champions the same values that SB615 enshrines:

- **Transparency:** Requiring accessible and publicly reviewed language brings sunlight to a process that too often happens behind closed doors.
- **Accessibility:** Jargon-free summaries illuminate complex issues with the "electric light" of clarity, enabling all voters not just lawyers or political insiders to make informed decisions.
- **Empowerment:** Extended timelines and a mandated comment period give citizens more meaningful ways to shape their government.

### **The Tangible Benefits of SB615**

The benefits of this bill are not abstract—they are real, measurable, and backed by data:

- **Higher Voter Participation:** When ballot language is simple and clear, more voters engage and fewer skip ballot questions.
- **Greater Public Trust:** Transparency in the ballot process builds trust in election outcomes and democratic institutions.
- **Fewer Legal Disputes:** Clear, unambiguous language reduces costly and time-consuming legal challenges after elections.

### **A Proven Track Record: Lessons from Other Jurisdictions**

Other states and countries that have adopted similar reforms have seen clear gains:

- **\*\_Oregon\_\*:** Since introducing plain-language requirements and public comment periods in 2011, voter participation in ballot measures has increased by up to 5% in some elections.
- **\*\_Colorado\_\*:** Implementing concise ballot titles in 1998 helped reduce voter drop-off on ballot

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measures by nearly 10%.

- \*\_California\_\*: Plain-language reform efforts since 2014 have improved voter comprehension and confidence, according to independent surveys.
- \*\_Ireland\_\*: Referendum summaries written in plain language have helped sustain turnout above 60%, even on complex constitutional issues.
- \*\_Sweden\_\* and \*\_Uruguay\_\*: Clear ballot communications consistently support turnout above 80% and 90%, respectively, in key referendums.
- \*\_Chile\_\*: Reforms to simplify ballot language and timelines led to a significant increase in turnout, reaching 50% in 2021.

### Addressing Concerns About Oversimplification

Some may worry that simplifying ballot language risks losing critical nuance. SB615 addresses this concern by incorporating federal plain-language guidelines that require summaries to be accurate, nonpartisan, and complete. The bill does not trade substance for simplicity; it translates substance into terms that empower every voter to engage with confidence.

### Conclusion

Senate Bill 615 is a thoughtfully crafted, impactful piece of legislation that strengthens Maryland's democracy by making ballot measures more transparent, more accessible, and more participatory. It advances the values of clarity, inclusion, and civic trust.

On behalf of the Maryland Forward Party and our supporters across the state, I respectfully urge the Committee to give SB615 a favorable report. By doing so, you will affirm Maryland's commitment to open, honest, and informed democracy lit by the bright lights of transparency and civic engagement.



Eamonn J Donovan  
Acting Political Affairs Coordinator  
Maryland Forward Party