



March 20, 2025

Testimony on SB 342

Voting Rights Act of 2025 – Counties and Municipalities

Ways & Means Committee

Position: Favorable

I am writing on behalf of Dēmos to express our strong support for SB 342, a transformative bill that would help ensure all Marylanders, especially those from historically marginalized communities, have an equal opportunity to elect representatives of their choice.

Dēmos is a non-profit public policy organization working to build a just, inclusive multiracial democracy and economy. We build power with and for Black and brown communities through our strategic partnerships with state-based and grassroots organizations, leveraging more than two decades of experience advancing policy solutions, research, legal advocacy, and narrative strategies. Since our founding in 2000, we have worked with our partners to put pro-democracy and economic justice narratives at the center of the national conversation and shift law and policy closer toward a just, multiracial democracy.

Building a just, multiracial democracy requires government at all levels to address racially discriminatory practices that deny voters of color full political power – such as racial vote dilution. Racial vote dilution occurs when electoral practices, such as at-large elections or unfair district maps, weaken the voting strength of voters of color, effectively denying them meaningful political representation.

While the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) has historically helped protect voters from racial vote dilution and others forms of discrimination in voting, the U.S. Supreme Court and other federal courts have, in recent years, severely weakened the VRA’s protections in cases like *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) and *Brnovich v. DNC* (2021). Meanwhile, Congress has failed to pass any legislation that strengthens or restores the VRA or that otherwise increases voting access for voters of color. In the face of weakened federal protections, a growing number of states have begun to pass state-level voting rights acts to protect their constituents from racial discrimination in voting. These state voting rights acts not only include voter protections modeled after the VRA but also, in many cases, enact new measures that expand access to the ballot even further.

Maryland has the opportunity to join other states leading on state-level voter protections by passing SB 342. SB 342 builds on the protections provided in the federal VRA 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. Although Maryland law features

important pro-voter policies, it contains no protection against racial vote dilution, and recent challenges to racially dilutive voting systems in Federalsburg and Baltimore County underscore the crucial need for these kinds of protections.

In addition to protecting access to the ballot box, prohibiting vote dilution helps create a more inclusive and accountable democracy. When voters of color are systematically prevented from electing their preferred candidates, entire communities are left without a voice in decisions that directly impact their lives. Combatting vote dilution is a necessary step toward making the vision of a government that is truly of, by, and for the people a reality. Indeed, more than three-quarters of Maryland voters (77%) support protections against racial vote dilution. The protections provided in this bill are essential to ensuring that all Marylanders, particularly those from historically disenfranchised communities, have an equal opportunity to elect representatives of their choice.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on HB 983.

Submitted by:

Phi Nguyen

Director of Democracy, Demos