

Testimony on SB 255/ HB 350
Voting Rights Act of 2026 – Counties and Municipal Corporations
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Position: Favorable

[Civil Rights Organization]

[St. Mary's County NAACP] We strongly urge the Committee to pass SB 255 to enact protections against racial vote dilution in Maryland. Racial vote dilution happens when electoral practices, such as at-large elections or unfair district maps, weaken the voting strength of voters of color, effectively denying them and their communities' meaningful political participation.

The protections outlined in SB 255 are necessary to ensuring that all Marylanders, particularly those from historically disenfranchised communities, have the equal opportunity to elect representatives of their choice. A change in the process would positively impact many of the people in the Lexington Park and Great Mills voting areas in St. Mary's county's Fourth Commissioner District. The majority of the people in the county live in this district, many in these areas. It comprises more people of color than in other districts; more live below the poverty line and receive public assistance. There has not been a county commissioner of color in our county since the 1990s. And we have had the same person of color on the school board assigned to the same district for about 20 years.

For over sixty years, the federal Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 served as the nation's most effective tool for tackling discriminatory voting practices. At its height, Section 2 of the federal VRA addressed the long history of discrimination in voting by prohibiting racial vote dilution and voter suppression and Section 5 of the federal VRA stopped discriminatory practices before they occurred through preclearance. However, federal courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, have severely limited the federal VRA's protections.

The federal government is not only failing to protect against intimidation and discrimination in our voting processes, but is actively advancing anti-voter policies. At a time when federal voting rights protections have been weakened and enforcement has become increasingly uncertain; Maryland legislators can ensure the voting rights of our citizens and have both the authority and the responsibility to safeguard fair and equal access to the ballot.

SB 255 meets this perilous moment by building on the protections provided in the federal VRA with streamlined standards and procedures designed to both protect the freedom to vote and to make this type of litigation less time-intensive and costly than similar litigation under the federal VRA. Maryland law currently contains no protection against racial vote dilution. This must change. There is a crucial need for these protections in all areas of our state.

SB 255 strengthens Maryland's democratic institutions, honors the legacy of the federal Voting Rights Act, and helps ensure that every eligible voter has an equal opportunity to participate in choosing who represents them within their local government. For these reasons, we respectfully urge a favorable report on SB 255.

Dr. Janice Talbert Walthour
20493 Partin's La
Lexington Park, MD 20653