

Testimony on SB 255/ HB 350

Voting Rights Act of 2026 – Counties and Municipal Corporations

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Position: Favorable

My name is Julia Nichols, and as a citizen of St. Mary's County, I 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 essential to ensuring that all Marylanders, particularly those from historically disenfranchised communities, have the equal opportunity to elect representatives of their choice.

Federal courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, have severely limited the federal Voting Rights Act's protections through cases like *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), which gutted the coverage formula in the preclearance program, and *Brnovich v. DNC* (2021), which made it difficult—if not impossible—to challenge discriminatory voter suppression. **It is imperative that we protect the voting rights of Marylanders.**

Meanwhile, 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 have both the authority and the responsibility to safeguard fair and equal access to the ballot.**

Maryland law currently 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 our state. In St. Mary's County, we have seen how at-large voting for our local elected officials has prevented our minority populations from equal representation.

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, I respectfully urge a favorable report on SB 255.