

Chair Wells, Vice Chair Kerr, and Distinguished Members of the Committee,

My name is Brandon Russell, and I am a resident of Maryland. I am writing in support of HB156, legislation that would allow unaffiliated voters to identify with a political party for the purpose of voting in that party's primary election. **I urge a favorable report on this bill.**

Maryland's electorate is changing. A growing number of voters are choosing to register as unaffiliated—not because they are disengaged, but because they value independence and do not wish to formally align with a political party. Despite this, these voters are currently excluded from primary elections, even though primaries often determine the outcome of local and statewide races in our state.

In many Maryland jurisdictions, the primary election is the decisive contest. Excluding unaffiliated voters from this stage of the process effectively disenfranchises a significant portion of the electorate and limits meaningful participation in our democracy. Look at the election of Circuit Court Judges—these candidates appear on both the Republican and Democratic primary ballots. If one candidate wins both ballots, that candidate moves on to the general election. Unaffiliated voters are prohibited from electing those judging them in a court of law. This very situation played out in St. Mary's County in 2022.

Allowing unaffiliated voters to choose a party ballot for a primary election strikes a reasonable balance. It preserves party autonomy while expanding access, increasing participation, and ensuring that candidates selected in primaries better reflect the broader electorate they will ultimately serve. This reform does not force party affiliation, nor does it undermine party identity—it simply recognizes the reality of how many Marylanders choose to engage civically.

Encouraging participation strengthens public trust in our electoral system and leads to more representative outcomes. Maryland has long positioned itself as a leader in expanding access to democracy, and this change would be a meaningful step in that tradition.

For these reasons, **I respectfully urge the committee to issue a favorable report on this legislation.**

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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