

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2025 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

House Bill 1280
Ways and Means

(Delegate Qi, *et al.*)

Election Law - Affiliating With a Party and Voting - Unaffiliated Voters

This bill authorizes an unaffiliated voter to apply to change the voter's existing voter registration to affiliate with a political party during early voting before a primary election. If an election judge at the early voting center determines that the voter resides in the county, the voter may vote (and have counted) the ballot for the political party.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: General fund expenditures are expected to increase by an indeterminate amount in FY 2026 and future years in which a primary election occurs, as discussed below. Under one (illustrative) set of assumptions, general fund expenditures increase by \$66,000 in FY 2026. Revenues are not affected.

Local Effect: Local government expenditures are expected to increase by an indeterminate amount in FY 2026 and future years in which a primary election occurs, as discussed below. Under one (illustrative) set of assumptions, local government expenditures increase, collectively, by \$114,000 in FY 2026. Revenues are not affected. **This bill may impose a mandate on a unit of local government.**

Small Business Effect: Minimal.

Analysis

Current Law: Party affiliation changes can be made at any time that voter registration is open. Voter registration is only closed beginning on the twenty-first day preceding an election until the eleventh day after the election. There are certain exceptions to the close of registration during that time period: (1) during early voting, an individual may appear

in person at an early voting center in the individual's county of residence and apply to register to vote or change the voter's address on an existing voter registration, then subsequently vote the appropriate ballot; and (2) on election day, an individual may appear at a precinct polling place in the individual's county of residence and apply to register to vote, and then vote.

State and Local Fiscal Effect: State and local government expenditures are expected to increase to implement the bill in fiscal years in which a primary election occurs; however, the extent of additional costs cannot be reliably estimated at this time primarily for two reasons:

- *Uncertain Method of Implementation* – It is unclear whether unaffiliated voters who choose to change their voter registration to affiliate with a political party at an early voting center can be allowed to vote a regular ballot. The State Board of Elections (SBE) indicates that they cannot and will need to vote a provisional ballot.
- *Uncertain Amount of Unaffiliated Voters Who Will Apply to Affiliate with a Political Party* – It is uncertain how many unaffiliated voters choose, under the bill, to change their voter registration to affiliate with a political party.

For illustrative purposes only, general fund expenditures increase by \$66,000 and local government expenditures increase by \$114,000 in fiscal 2026, if certain assumptions are made, including that unaffiliated voters who change their voter registration to affiliate with a political party vote a provisional ballot. This illustrative estimate accounts for costs of additional paper ballots and additional provisional ballot election judges, as well as costs identified by SBE for voter education and revision of the provisional ballot application. This estimate is based on the following assumptions/information:

- *Additional Ballots (State – \$16,000; local – \$16,000)* – additional ballots are ordered (at \$0.23 per ballot), to be prepared for up to 5% of unaffiliated registered voters who apply to affiliate with a political party pursuant to the bill. Paper ballot costs are shared by SBE and the local boards.
- *Additional Provisional Judges (State – \$10,000; local – \$58,000)* – a minimum of 25% of early voting centers do not have existing capacity to absorb the additional provisional voters and need an additional election judge. Costs of election judges are largely borne by the local boards, with the exception of the additional \$100 paid to returning election judges, of which SBE pays half.
- *Voter Education and Revision of the Provisional Ballot Application (State – \$40,000; local – \$40,000)* – These are estimated costs provided by SBE, assumed to be shared costs.

Additional costs, not accounted for in the above illustrative estimate, include costs of additional provisional ballot canvassing staff and provisional ballot applications.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has been introduced within the last three years. See SB 99 and HB 257 of 2024.

Designated Cross File: None.

Information Source(s): Baltimore, Cecil, Frederick, and Montgomery counties; Maryland State Board of Elections; Department of Legislative Services

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