



**Testimony for the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental
Affairs Committee
February 20, 2020**

**SB 647 - Election Law - Institutions of Higher Education - Voter
Registration and Voting by Students (Student Voter Empowerment
Act of 2020)**

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SUPPORT

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The ACLU of Maryland supports SB 647, which provides convenient access to the voting process on institutions of higher education in the State. This would include a coordinator to guide students through the process, links for voter registration in the same websites for class registration, and polling on campus.

Civic engagement and political activism are perhaps most acute on the college campus, as young people gain access to the franchise, become engaged within their communities and grow passionate about social, economic, and political issues. In *Symm vs. United States*, the Supreme Court upheld students' rights to register and vote in their college town, if they consider it to be their primary residence. *Symm v. United States*, 439 U.S. 1105 (1979).

Almost four decades since that decision, college students continue to face hurdles in accessing the ballot, through burdensome voter restriction rules, new voter ID laws, or the absence of voting booths on campus. HB 245 would make more meaningful the Supreme Court's decision in *Symm* by allowing students to more practically access voter polls on college campuses. Moreover, ease of access to the ballot encourages students to engage in the political discourse.

In the 2012 Maryland general election, 38.3% of eligible young voters (ages 18-24) did not vote.¹ On the national scale, young voters continue to have the

¹ Maryland State Board of Elections, Voter Turnout by Age Group, Maryland 2012 General Election. Available at http://www.elections.state.md.us/press_room/2012_stats_general/2012_general_voter_turnout_byage.pdf.



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lowest turnout, in the 2018 midterms, roughly 36% voted; the lowest rate compared to the other age groups.²

Mobility is a major barrier to voting among college students.

Studies show that lack of access to transportation as well as lack of time for long distance travel is a major factor deciding voter turnout.³ This disproportionately affects working students. Nationally, less than half of college students have cars on campus, but this number varies greatly by college - such as Johns Hopkins in Baltimore with 0%.⁴ Many colleges also have restrictions on having vehicles on campus, often geared towards freshmen and sophomores. Without transportation, students would turn to the absentee ballot, but often do not because of a confusing campus mailing system and lack of understanding of the process. Thus, students need guidance and on-campus access.

These statistics demonstrate a clear barrier in access to the ballot for young people and HB 245 has the potential to remedy it. For the foregoing reasons, the ACLU of Maryland supports SB 647.

² Census Bureau, Change in Voter Turnout By Characteristic: 2014 to 2018. Available at <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/04/behind-2018-united-states-midterm-election-turnout.html>

³ Niemi, R. G., & Hanmer, M. J. (2010). Voter Turnout Among College Students: New Data and a Rethinking of Traditional Theories. *Social Science Quarterly*, 91(2), 301–323.

⁴ <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/the-short-list-college/articles/2018-03-06/11-national-universities-where-students-rarely-bring-cars>