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February 14, 2020

Testimony on HB 881

Election Law- Voting by Absentee Ballot – Prepaid for Return of Ballots Ways and Means

Member organizations of the Democracy Initiative write to express our strong support for HB 881, which would require that absentee ballots be accompanied with prepaid postage, as well as instructions for their return.

We are 72 partners from the labor, environment, civil rights and good governance movements representing 45 million members—thousands of whom live and advocate for issues that impact everyday people in Maryland. Our shared vision for a 21st-century democracy is clear: reduce the power of big money in politics, expand voting rights, and ensure fair representation.

The Democracy Initiative has mobilized and organized members across the country to stand up for a democracy that works for all people, not just corporate or big money interests. Leveling the playing field for participation is essential for our members to be able to advocate for the kitchen table issues that matter most – from clean water to criminal justice reforms to a living wage.

Millions of people want a democracy where they can freely participate, cast a vote securely, and know that vote will be counted. Voting by mail is an important tool that can dramatically boost turnout by empowering all voters including senior citizens and people with disabilities who may have a hard time getting to the polls, single parents, students and working people who need the time flexibility, and rural voters who are far from their polling place.

Policies that reduce friction in the voting process tend as a rule to increase voter engagement and turnout. Beyond addressing what in some sense can be considered a “poll tax” by requiring voters to pay for postage to cast a ballot, we believe that any time the state can lower barriers to citizens exercising their right to vote, it should. This is a simple, secure and effective policy that encourages civic engagement, lowers barriers to accessing the vote, and ensures everyone has a seat at the governing table.

We applaud Maryland's existing efforts to accommodate those who can not vote on Election Day by providing the opportunity to sign up for absentee ballots before every election that can be mailed back with their vote. We agree that the process for using absentee ballots should be as seamless as possible so that voters can participate in the franchise with ease. However, in Maryland absentee ballots can require multiple stamps, which can be a hindrance if voters do not have stamps to return their ballots.

Pre-paid postage is convenient and easy to understand for voters. Not as many people keep first-class stamps on hand as they used to, and pre-paid postage makes it easy to fill out a ballot at home or work and simply drop it in the mail. Also, pre-paid postage eliminates the confusion of how many stamps to place on a ballot envelope, which can change year to year and varies by jurisdiction.

Allowing election officials to send ballots with postage paid streamlines administrative functions inside elections offices and lowers office costs by decreasing call volume from voters looking for assistance.

If a voter sends in a ballot without postage in the current system, it is USPS protocol to deliver the ballot and charge the local elections division for the overage. These costs can vary widely, are hard to predict, and often create more administrative work for election officials. Pre-paid postage allows for a more budget-friendly process, especially beyond the first year of implementation, after which voter behavior and absentee usage become more predictable.

We urge you to support HB 881.