

Maryland PIRG

Testimony for SB 831

Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

Wednesday, March 3, 2021

Election Reform Act of 2021

POSITION: FAVORABLE

Maryland PIRG is a state based, non-partisan, citizen funded public interest advocacy organization with grassroots members across the state and a student chapter at the University of Maryland College Park. For forty five years we've stood up to powerful interests whenever they threaten our health and safety, our financial security, or our right to fully participate in our democratic society.

We support SB831 to improve the administration of our elections systems. There are some aspects of the bill that we have not taken a position on related to party affiliation and voting.

This bill includes policies responding to increased usage of early voting and voting by mail. These include: allowing voters to fix mistakes on their mail-in ballot request forms, continuing to provide drop boxes that voters can place their mail-in ballots in, extending the operating hours of early vote centers, and creating a curing process for mail-in ballots.

This bill also increases the amount of clear and transparent information provided to voters by increasing both the amount of information the State Board of Elections provides about its meetings and by mandating more debates between candidates running for office.

Finally the bill makes adjustments to elections administration that increase voter privacy and function of our elections by expanding use of privacy sleeves, enabling early processing of ballots and requiring precinct level reporting.

Improvements to early voting and vote by mail:

More Access to Early Voting Centers: This bill increases hours of early voting centers throughout Maryland to be between at 7 AM, 3 hours earlier than their current opening time and shifts the days of early voting to be the eight days immediately preceding Election Day. For many Marylanders, early voting centers provide necessary flexibility for those who have work or other obligations on Election Day. **Expanding the hours will increase access to voting to meet the needs of voters, which makes good sense.**

Fixing mistakes on a mail-in ballot application: If a mail-in ballot application has an error on it that would invalidate the application, this bill requires local Boards of Elections to notify voters within 3

days of identifying that error. This process allows voters to then correct the error and return a fixed mail-in ballot application by the deadline. **Enabling voters to fix errors on their mail-in ballot application is common sense. An error in paperwork should not prevent a voter from participating in elections.**

Making drop boxes permanent: SB831 has local Boards of Elections designate locations to place ballot drop boxes for future elections. Ballot drop boxes should be placed throughout the state in advance of each election. They are [safe](#) and [secure](#) ways for voters to return their mail-in ballots, and they're popular with voters. [Over one million Maryland voters used dropboxes](#) in the November general election. This bill requires local boards to designate the location of drop boxes in their counties and requires each early voting site have a drop box. It also ensures anyone in line to use a drop box on Election Day by 8pm be allowed to drop their ballot. Other bills considered by this committee are mandating a minimum number of early drop boxes.

Drop boxes make sense for voters who received their mail-in ballot late, are concerned about meeting the postmark deadline, want to give their ballot directly to the BOE, or don't trust the postal system. And as an added benefit, since Maryland's mail in voting envelopes are postage paid, drop boxes also [save local governments significant amounts of money](#) because return postage is not required.

Include a Mail-In Ballot Curing Process: Ballot curing is a process when election officials reach out to voters and give them a chance to fix, or "cure," any fixable issues with their submitted mail-in ballot. This legislation establishes a procedure for curing erroneous mail-in ballots. Of all rejected mail-in ballots in Maryland during the general election, [42% of these ballots were rejected because they were not signed by the voter, totalling to 1,552 total rejected ballots](#). During the June primary, [3,290 ballots were rejected because of a lack of signature](#).

When possible, voters should be alerted to a missed signature and be given the opportunity to fix it. Nobody should lose their vote because they forgot to sign a piece of paper.

Increasing information available to the public:

More State Board of Elections Transparency: SB831 requires the State Board of Elections to post all materials - including agendas, memoranda, written testimony, and proposed minutes from previous open meetings - onto its website in advance of the meeting. **Government agencies should be as transparent as possible to members of the public. Making more information from SBE readily available and accessible to the public will enable more public engagement and participation and build faith in our elections' administration.**

Debate Requirement for Governor, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House: As amended, this legislation mandates that publicly financed candidates running for Governor, Lt. Governor, Attorney General, Comptroller, or a U.S. Congress have to engage in at least one public debate before the primary and general election, unless they're running unopposed. **With the explosion of corporate and super PAC [spending on political advertisements](#), it's more important than ever that the public has access to clean, unfiltered information about a candidate. Maryland PIRG supports debate requirements.**

Improving administration of elections.

Adding a privacy sleeve for mail in ballots makes good sense to reduce concerns of voter privacy. This bill creates the voluntary use of the sleeve, which is a smart solution to increase privacy without risking loss of votes due to voter confusion. Our ballots overall should be designed more clearly for voters, and Maryland PIRG supports legislation to improve our ballot design and instructions.

Enabling local boards of election to process ballots before Election Day is crucial as we see an increase in vote by mail both because it speeds up the timeline for results to be certified and because it enables ballot curing.

Finally, requiring precinct level reporting is smart policy because it increases transparency on our elections and strengthens our audit process.

We respectfully request a favorable report.