

Irene Kang
Testimony for SB0283
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs (EHEA) Committee
Thursday, Feb. 4, 2021
Student and Military Voter Empowerment Act
POSITION: FAVORABLE

My name is Irene Kang. I am currently a freshman studying International Studies and East Asian Studies at Johns Hopkins University. I would first like to thank Chair Pinsky and the committee for giving me the opportunity to share my perspective on why the passing of this bill matters enormously to me and my communities here in Baltimore and abroad. I would also like to thank Senator Elfreth for introducing the bill.

As both a university student and a lifelong Army brat (having spent the majority of my life on 6 different military installations, with 3 of them being overseas), I have heard and witnessed firsthand the numerous challenges that keep otherwise eligible Americans from participating in the democratic process. They can range from transportation issues and time-constraints to feelings of detachment resulting from distance, lack of community support, and difficulty in finding nonpartisan information. Only 46% of service men and women voted in the 2016 election, and I know that my own mother—now a disabled veteran—faced many of those challenges herself while stationed in South Korea. More recently, I saw many of my friends in Baltimore face several problems regarding out-of-state registration during the 2020 election. Especially with the stress and time commitments of midterm exams, several of them felt as if their choices were reduced to either compromising on their schoolwork or health, voting uninformed (due to lack of resources and/or time allocations), or just not voting at all. To me, this bill is important not only because it will improve accessibility and information to politically disenfranchised demographics, but also because it represents *support*. People, especially young adults, receive messages, both explicit and implicit, about civic participation and politics. These messages come within a household, in school, in extracurriculars, and in their communities. Whether someone is active-duty personnel deployed overseas or a student attending an out-of-state college, they retain the rights to representation and vote, but it often does not feel like it. The passing of this bill will uplift and encourage *all* Americans that their voices DO matter and that efforts to bridge gaps of accessibility are actively being made, state-by-state.

Great strides have already been made by the state of Maryland to modernize voter registration systems with automatic and same-day voting options. Rather than demobilizing past efforts and normalizing the behavior to abstain from voting within certain populations, we need to continue to make steps to overcome the physical, psychological, and social barriers that prevent people from participating. Action should not be tempered by partisan politics. There is still more work needed to ensure the full enfranchisement of any American that has worked or is working to serve our country, and this bill is a step towards it. Through the passing of this bill, we can reduce voter disengagement, increase lifelong civic participation, and uplift voices—both at home and abroad—with a promising leap towards a more legitimate and fair electoral process.

I respectfully urge a favorable report of SB0283. Thank you greatly for your time and consideration.