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Testimony for SB 283 Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee Thursday, Feb. 4th, 2021 Student and Military Voter Empowerment Act

POSITION: Favorable

Thanks to the committee for the opportunity to support this important piece of legislation for voter equity that affects Maryland's students and military men and women. And congratulations and appreciation go to Delegate Luedtke and Senator Elfreth for introducing this bill.

For democracies to function, it is essential that citizens may easily register to vote and have access to information to guide their judgements. This bill advances those efforts for two groups whose needs often go unrecognized. The Student and Military Voter Empowerment Act of 2021 targets constituencies critical to the long-term health of American democracy and I strongly support this effort to facilitate political engagement for students and military members.

I am motivated to testify based on my teaching experiences and the recent dramatic shift in how students view the political process. For the past three decades, it has been my pleasure to teach Political Science at Frostburg State University. My focus is international relations and the study of other political systems like Russia and Great Britain and themes such as democracy, human rights, and civil liberties. My service activities have emphasized experiential learning or learning by doing; students learn about politics by practicing it. This bill would sustain the recent groundswell of student political activism and I support it unreservedly.

Allow me to share an observation about my students who hail from all corners of the state: there is nothing short of a student revolution afoot in terms of political interest and activism. Students had been rather confident that the breakdown of democracy, a tragic feature of the Putin era in Russia for example, could not happen in the great United States. They were certain we had the constitutional guardrails in place to secure the will of the people. Recent events and policies raised alarm bells about our democracy. Students have reacted to those alarms in a variety of forms. Protests. Increased voter turnout. A desire to run for public office. More questions about how other countries have solved the challenges we face. This groundswell of concern, questioning, and activism is the process of democracy renewing itself.

This bill would set the stage for students to form a life-long habit of political participation and civic engagement. In-class straw polls last Spring showed most students planned on voting in the November election and they were not only Political Science majors. However, many were not well acquainted with the mechanics of voting including where to vote or how to get a mail-in ballot. Further, the pandemic raised safety and access issues. These are not insignificant concerns since many students do not have cars and public transportation is more limited here than in metro areas. This bill would make a vital difference on that score by mandating

cooperation between the local Boards of Election and institutions like universities to set the location of polling places. This would allow for often overlooked groups of voters to be accommodated.

If we want to harness greater student activism in politics, set the cornerstone of life-long engagement in the political process, and maintain awareness about issues, the Student and Military Voter Empowerment Act of 2021 is the tool to do so.

This essential legislation will positively affect the viability of American democracy for the next generation and I urge all members of the committee to support its passage.

Thank you.