

February 4, 2021

Testimony on SB 29
Election Law - Voting - Elections by Mail, Polling Places, and Early Voting Centers
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

Position: Information

Common Cause Maryland takes no position on SB 29 which would establish a vote by mail program, coupled with in-person voting options, in the state.

Currently, Maryland voters have the option of voting at an early voting center prior to Election Day or by mail-in ballot. While many have taken advantage of both programs, we agree that we should be considering vote by mail as a program to drive greater participation in our elections. Our existing process can be burdensome for many eligible voters who want to participate - most voters citing conflicting schedules, inconvenient hours, and accessibility as their reason for not voting.

A vote by mail system would help to address all of those issues. In 2019, the City of Rockville nearly doubled turnout using vote by mail system in their municipal election. We also saw the success of the program during the 2020 primary election where participation overwhelmingly increased in jurisdictions like Baltimore City. These programs provide voters with more time to research the candidates and issues and the ease of being able to vote from their place of residence. Vote by mail would also help address the lack of election resources and poll workers in the state.

While SB 29 aims to establish a working program, we need to work collectively to identify a vote by mail system that would benefit all Marylanders – ensuring we are taking into consideration how a program would impact different groups of voters, especially those with disabilities or transient communities.

We instead urge the committee to consider conducting a study of vote by mail in consultation with the State Board of Elections, Maryland Association of Election Officials, as well as a limited pool of voting rights advocates representing communities of voters that would be impacted by these changes. A study would allow us to study best practices and debunk misinformation on the impact these programs have on communities of color.

We also urge the committee to prioritize improving the existing mail-in voting process: making secure drop boxes available in all elections, improving the process for tracking ballots, creating a process for curing mail-in ballots, providing the option to opt into a permanent mail-in list, and ensuring mail-in ballots envelopes are easily recognizable and that the instructions are easy to understand.

Thank you to the sponsor for recognizing the potential of vote by mail and we look forward to working collectively to establish a program in the near future.