



**TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

**HB 655 Local Elections – County Commissioner and County Boards of Education – District Voting**

**POSITION: Support with amendments**

**DATE March 18, 2021**

The League of Women Voters supports standards that not only protect the right of all citizens to vote but also encourage all citizens to vote. To that end, we support standards that promote fair and effective representation at all levels of government with maximum opportunity for public participation.

As the law currently stands, five Maryland counties are divided into districts, yet the District Commissioners are elected at-large. In addition, six counties have Board of Election districts also elected at-large. This can, and has, resulted in voters being represented by someone who was elected by a minority of voters in that particular district. This is unfair and ineffective representation and discourages voter engagement both in the voting process and with their representative.

In 1985, a similar situation in Dorchester County was challenged in the federal courts as a violation of the Voting Rights Act and forced a change to the Maryland Constitution. The text on the Hurlock Historical Marker says: **“Lest we forget 1851 - The Maryland Constitution was written requiring voting at large to assure control of minorities.”** Another lawsuit in 1992 showed another judge's concern for "effective political representation" in Dorchester County.

We urge the Committee to amend the bill to remove the reference to “a plurality of” [the votes cast] as the election method used. The League of Women Voters supports ranked choice voting as an alternate election method. [HB767-](#) Montgomery County - Voting Methods MC 22-21 has been introduced to enable the County Council to adopt a law enabling ranked choice or approval voting for local offices. Removing the specified election method - plurality of votes cast - from HB655 does not change the intent of the bill which is to require district voting for district representatives and avoids possible conflicting language regarding election methods.

We are all aware of the growing apathy or civil unrest of voters because they believe that the system is rigged, and that their vote will not matter. We think that requiring the voters in a particular district to have a representative elected by the voters in that district would help to restore the faith of voters in their elected officials.

We urge a favorable report on HB 655 with amendments.