



Jan. 22, 2021

House Ways and Means Committee

HB 355 - Election Law - Registered Voter List Security and Electronic Signature Requirements for Petitions

Position - Favorable

Dear Chair Kaiser, Vice-Chair Washington and Members of the Committee:

In essence, the proclamation of a State of Emergency by the Governor on March 5, 2020 stopped in-person signature collection on petitions. We appreciate and support the decision by the State Board of Elections (SBE) to expeditiously institute a policy, just six weeks later, to permit the gathering of electronic signatures on April 22, 2020. At a time of crisis and upheaval in so many other aspects of our lives, the SBE policy provided a quick alternate avenue for citizens to continue to exercise their legal rights to collect petition signatures.

Set to expire on August 3, 2020, the last day to submit petitions to place a question or a candidate on the November 2020 ballot, the policy has been repeatedly extended by the SBE, first to the January 13, 2021 and most recently to May 27, 2021, resulting in very little disruption to petitioners gathering signatures towards the 2022 election. To our understanding, Maryland stands with only a handful of other states in having taken these steps during the COVID-19 crisis. It speaks to our state's commitment to uphold voting rights in every way possible.

What we have found is that electronic petitions have increased the accessibility of citizens to become aware of the existence of petitions and to sign them without having to run into a volunteer holding a clipboard. The cleaner set of signatures verified through the voter database are both administratively easier to certify and easier for petitioners to maintain a count of clean signatures. However, electronic signatures did not make signature collection a trivial exercise. Of the three citizen-driven petitions we became aware of, only one succeeded in collecting sufficient signatures to place the question on the 2020 ballot.

The current crisis has shown us many new ways to communicate and carry out business. We ask for a favorable report on this bill to codify yet another democracy good that has emerged from this crisis.

Submitted respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Suchitra C. Balachandran'.

Suchitra Balachandran

Member, ORMD State Organizing Committee