

March 2, 2021

Testimony on HB 1249
State Board of Elections and Local Boards of Elections - Membership and Staff
Ways and Means

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland supports HB 1249 which would establish the position of Racial Equity Coordinator within the State Board of Elections to assess and address systemic barriers experienced by Black and brown voters when exercising their right to vote in our elections.

Common Cause recognizes that our effort to preserve and strengthen American democracy cannot be realized without a firm commitment to dismantling white supremacy. Inequalities, specifically racial inequalities, have been created and sustained over time and that is evident in our elections where communities of color have encountered a longstanding history of racially discriminatory and oppressive laws that limit access to voting.

Since *the Shelby County v. Holder* decision, these voters have reported experiencing significant barriers to voting – many states putting restrictive voting regulations in place that target and disenfranchise Black and brown voters. While Maryland has worked to combat attempts to suppress the vote and championed a number of reforms that increase access to voter registration and voting, there are jurisdiction with some of the largest populations of Black and brown voters who still face obstacles to voting.

In 2016, jurisdictions such as Baltimore City and Montgomery County suffered various issues due to an inadequate number of trained election judges. There were reports of polls opening late, long lines, judges failing to show up on election days and a number of other incidents that could have been avoided if more Marylanders were being encouraged to serve in these roles. Both jurisdictions dealt with similar issues in the 2018 election as well. In 2018, jurisdictions like Prince George's County underestimated voter turnout, running out of paper ballots and leaving voters waiting for over six hours in line to vote - ultimately repressing votes, as citizens must return to jobs, family, or other responsibilities without being able to cast their ballot. In Charles County, an early voting sites closed entirely in 2018 leaving a number of voters with no alternative to voting that day. We also continue to disenfranchise eligible incarcerated voters, majority being Black and brown.

HB 1249 would provide us the opportunity to look at the deeper root causes and, hopefully, move toward conducting elections where all eligible Marylanders have the ability to cast their vote and have their voice heard without facing obstacles to voting.

We urge a favorable report.