

Maryland PIRG

Rishi Shah, Maryland PIRG Associate

Testimony for HB493

Ways and Means Committee, Tuesday, February 2nd, 2021

Election Law - Voting Locations - Accessibility by Public Transportation and Voters With Disabilities

POSITION: FAVORABLE

Maryland PIRG is a state based, non-partisan, citizen funded public interest advocacy organization with grassroots members across the state and a student funded, student directed chapter at the University of Maryland College Park. For forty five years we've stood up to powerful interests whenever they threaten our health and safety, our financial security, or our right to fully participate in our democratic society. That includes a long history of working to help people register and vote.

We support HB 493 to require local boards of elections to prioritize accessibility by public transportation when selecting locations for ballot drop boxes and polling locations, all else being equal. Accessing transportation to a polling location can be difficult, especially for low-income and minority communities, and it can be the difference between being able to vote on election day and not. Polling stations near bus and rail stations [can attract voters](#) as they travel to and from work or elsewhere.

HB 493 also requires local boards of elections to place ballot drop boxes in a manner accessible to voters using wheelchairs. Voters with disabilities face serious barriers when casting their ballot, leading to [increasingly lower participation rates](#). Some of these barriers are physical, including polling stations with steep ramps and poor path surfaces. Additionally, [research found that](#) poll workers are under-trained on how to assist people with disabilities and there are few resources available to elections officials. This was a real issue for voters in 2020 who physically could not place their ballots in dropboxes. Ensuring that ballot drop boxes are accessible via wheelchair will allow people to vote successfully.

Thanks to the important work of this committee, Maryland has made great strides to ensure all eligible voters are able to participate in elections. HB 493 is another key step in that direction.

We respectfully request a favorable report.