

Maryland PIRG

**Testimony for HB1047
Ways and Means Committee
Tuesday, Feb. 23, 2021
Mail-In Voting Enhancement Act**

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.

We support HB 1047 to improve the mail-in voting system based on the lessons we've learned from the 2020 elections. There are three key aspects to this legislation: improving ballot tracking for voters requesting mail-in ballots, bringing back the ballot drop boxes used during the last election cycle, and putting mail-in ballots through a curing process.

Like everything else in 2020, our elections' systems had to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure voters could safely participate in voting. The pandemic has laid bare some of the already existing barriers to voting while also demonstrating some of the smart policies at our disposal to make our elections' systems more efficient and secure while increasing participation for the long term. Our democracy works best when we all participate, so we should do everything we can to ensure all eligible voters are able to participate.

With public health concerns around voting in person, Maryland, expanded its mail-in voting systems in 2020. As a result, every registered voter was mailed a ballot for the primary, and all were mailed a request form for the general. [Well over 90 percent of voters used their mail-in ballot for the June primary](#), when ballots were sent directly to voters, and [around half of Maryland voters used a mail in ballot for the general](#).

As a result, voter turnout [was also up to nearly 75% in Maryland](#). Future elections may not see such high vote by mail participation as COVID-19 wanes. However, as many voters participated by mail for the first time this election, we will likely see an increase in vote by mail in 2022 and 2024. **We should learn from 2020 and expand on our vote by mail system to encourage continued high voter participation.** Each of the three major pieces in this bill help with this goal:

1) Improve ballot tracking. Voters should know the status of their mail-in ballot. The state currently allows Marylanders to [track the status of their ballot on the State Board of Elections website](#), but the website can take up to 2 weeks to update. We recommend that voters know where their ballot is at each step of the process, when it's been delivered and received, and when the Board of Elections has either successfully or unsuccessfully processed the ballot.

For the 2020 elections, many Marylanders received their ballots weeks after their neighbors, creating confusion and uncertainty in the process. In contrast, five states and Washington D.C. use a system called [BallotTrax](#), which allows voters to sign up and receive text and/or email updates on the status of their ballot through every stage of the process. Up-to-date tracking information about ballots helps reassure voters nervously waiting for their ballot and increases confidence in the electoral process.

2) Bring back ballot drop boxes. Ballot drop boxes should be placed throughout the state in advance of each election. They are [safe](#) and [secure](#) ways for voters to return their mail-in ballots, and they're popular with voters. [Over one million Maryland voters used dropboxes](#) in the November general election.

Drop boxes allow voters who are concerned about postmarking their ballot by the deadline to submit their ballots safely. Voters who received their mail-in ballot late, fear their ballot will be tampered with, or don't trust the postal system can use drop boxes to vote confidently. Since Maryland's mail in voting envelopes are postage paid, drop boxes also [save local governments significant amounts of money](#) because return postage is not required.

3) Mail-in ballots should go through a curing process. Ballot curing is a process when election officials reach out to voters and give them a chance to fix, or "cure," any fixable issues with their submitted mail-in ballot. Of all rejected mail-in ballots in Maryland during the general election, [42% of these ballots were rejected because they were not signed by the voter, totalling to 1,552 total rejected ballots](#). During the June primary, [3,290 ballots were rejected because of a lack of signature](#). When possible, voters should be alerted to a missed signature and be given the opportunity to fix it.

18 states [already have statutes that require voters to receive notice](#) if there is a missing signature or signature discrepancy on their mail-in ballot, and it's time for Maryland to join them. Nobody should lose their voice in our democracy because they forgot to sign a piece of paper.

All eligible voters should be able to participate in our elections. As more voters choose to vote by mail, our state leaders should make these common sense adjustments to our election system and make permanent some of the best practices learned from our 2020 elections. Our democracy is strongest when more people participate. By making these adjustments, we can make our elections more efficient, secure, and accessible and increase voter participation and civic engagement.

We respectfully request a favorable report.