

March 23, 2021

Testimony on SB0596
Election Law - Early Voting Centers - Hours of Operation
Ways and Means

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland supports HB 206, which would establish an earlier opening time for early voting centers during gubernatorial general elections, providing Marylanders maximum opportunity to participate in the democratic process and helping to increase turnout during midterm elections.

Currently, early voting centers open at 8am during presidential general elections, but only open at 10am during gubernatorial general elections providing less time for voters to cast a ballot in races that are just as important. Early voting was established to drive participation and make voting more convenient. While the program has been a success and has seen a surge in the number of Marylanders voting early, we are leaving those with tight work schedules and family obligations behind.

In a Center for American Progress report, they found that 14% of registered voters cited conflicting schedules as their reason for not voting, 2% cited inconvenient hours. Because of this, most states require polls to be open for at least 12 hours, ensuring those with workdays that start especially early and end late in the evening who are unable to take time away from work are able to participate. A study of early voting in 2008 in 117 of 159 Georgia counties concluded that “Increasing the hours of operation for early voting sites... appears to be the most cost-effective measure for boosting turnout.” Research from the Brennan Center for Justice found that in states with some of the highest rates of early voting, like New Mexico, Tennessee, and Texas, election officials chose to offer early voting for significantly more hours than the statutory minimum. In Bernalillo, New Mexico, the county provides 12 hours of early voting for all general elections. And in Travis County, Texas, one early voting “mega center” is open until 9:00 p.m., an additional two hours beyond the statutorily required 12-hour day. This 12-hour standard should be applied during early voting in all Maryland general elections.

During the 2018 gubernatorial general election, more people voted than ever before with early voting more than doubling compared to turnout in 2014. Even with the higher than usual turnout, midterm turnout is still generally lower than presidential years. Increasing the amount of time polls are open during early voting will build on the success of the program, helping to improve participation throughout the state during midterm elections.

We need to do everything we can to remove barriers to exercising the right to vote. HB 206 would help to do that by ensuring all voters are provided with ample time to vote early during gubernatorial general elections.

We urge a favorable report.