

February 23, 2022

Testimony on HB 413
Voting Rights Act of 2022 – Counties and Municipalities
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland is in favor of SB 413, which would give Marylanders a broader category of voting rights. The bill expressly empowers the state Attorney General to intervene and ensure that Marylanders' fundamental right to vote is protected in the event that local governments violate federal voting laws.

The goal of this legislation is to bolster protections for minorities by making it clear that Maryland's Attorney General has the power to apply federal voting rights laws to intervene in local government decisions concerning redistricting, polling places, early voting access if it's determined that those decisions could dilute or impair the power of minority voters. And when local governments have the authority to choose where polls and opportunities for early voting or registration are located, it's easy to see how that power could be used to diminish turnout or make it more difficult for a protected class to elect a member of their own community.

This comes in the wake of Baltimore County's redistricting process, in which County Council members violated federal voting laws by packing one district with a more than 70% Black populace and splitting Black voters among other adjacent districts - despite the fact that more than one majority-Black district clearly could have been drawn. Currently the recourse available to constituents whose rights have been violated is to sue, which is the route Common Cause Maryland, along with our partners with the Baltimore County NAACP, League of Womens Voters of Baltimore County, and the ACLU of Maryland have chosen to take. However, this is an extremely costly and time-consuming course of action, especially considering fewer than 1,000 lawyers in the U.S. specialize in voting rights laws.¹

Given the long history of minority voter disenfranchisement within the state, it is critical that we take steps to ensure that the voices of all Marylanders are heard. The Maryland Attorney General has the perfect combination of resources and clout to combat voter suppression, and SB 413 will authorize the office to apply the full weight of federal law to protect the voting rights of state residents. For those reasons, we urge a favorable report.

¹ <https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-county/bs-md-co-sydnor-voting-rights-bill-20220208-4kezaqtcwbainjklcrpimmbsy-story.html>