

Good afternoon Chair, Vice Chair and Distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Carl Snowden and I am the Convenor of the Caucus of African American Leaders. I have worked on voting rights, as well as other civil rights issues, in this State for over 50 years. I am here to lend my voice in support of the Maryland Voting Rights Act, SB878. This bill would institute vital legal protections for our system of voting as well as individual voters. Maryland has come a long way in ensuring the right to vote among all of its citizens; but where issues persist, there must be remedies. Maryland's communities need SB878 to ensure that all of the progress we've made, progress that I have physically seen in my lifetime, does not regress.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is the most effective civil rights law in American history. Due to challenges at the federal level, its effectiveness has become vulnerable. This is happening in part because judicial decisions over the last 30 years – most notably by an increasingly conservative Supreme Court – have chipped away at protections under the federal Voting Rights Act. The Shelby decision struck down the preclearance protections that required states and local governments around the country with a history of discrimination to obtain advanced approval before changing their election rules, while another made it harder for Voters of Color to protect against vote suppression. And this year the Voting Rights Act is once again before the Supreme Court.

In order to secure the voting rights of Marylanders and ensure that no citizen experiences voting rights abuses without the appropriate resources available to remedy them, Maryland needs to pass a state Voting Rights Act. Maryland has long been a state touted for its progressive reputation, yet voting rights issues still persist in parts of this state. There are jurisdictions with ever-growing minority populations that have only had all white governments for their existence, instances of voter intimidation, as well as language barriers in certain communities that can make accessing the ballot more cumbersome for minority communities.

A Maryland Voting Rights Act would institute preclearance by the Attorney General in covered jurisdictions for election changes such as redistricting, prohibit vote denial and dilution, provide voting materials for non-English speaking communities, provide a civil cause of action for Marylanders to combat voter intimidation, establish a state-wide database of election and demographic data, and ensure that efforts to challenge voting rights violations are feasible by making attorneys fees and costs recoverable by prevailing plaintiffs. The aim of this bill is not to cast Maryland as a state with rampant voting rights abuses, but rather to provide our citizens adequate legal resources to combat violations and abuses wherever, if ever, they may exist. Maryland has always been a leader on securing the rights of its citizens; let us continue to lead here and secure the voting rights of every community across the state. Maryland needs a Voting Rights Act because every single Maryland voter matters.