

## **HB1112 - "Ballot Petition Modernization Act" Testimony**

The League of Women Voters believes that every person has the desire, the right, the knowledge, and the confidence to participate in democracy. Citizens want to participate in government, but the current petition process is onerous. The Ballot Petition Modernization Act will allow people to learn about petition measures at their own pace and participate in government from their own homes.

As co-president of the Baltimore County League, I am on a steering committee to place a question on the General Election ballot in Baltimore County. This experience has shown me that publicly collecting petition signatures is burdensome for voters. I'd like to share a few examples.

In order to reach people, many signatures are collected at events. Most people do not walk around with their voter registration cards. To ensure signatures count, every person has to look up their registration information to make sure the petition signature matches it. When I was married I used my maiden and married name together legally (Hamilton Stevenson), but in practice only used my married last name for signature. Had I been in public and approached, I would have likely signed my name incorrectly. Having a signature match the voter registration exactly should not stop a name from being counted. There is enough information collected on the petition form to verify a signature belongs to a voter.

I've met people at events who support the petition effort, but wanted more time to be able to research the issue. When a person only has access to sign a petition publicly, they don't have time to research the issue before signing. The State should promote informed participation in government by allowing people to hear about an issue, then have time to research it before signing on their own schedule.

I've had people fill in the majority of blanks on the petition form but balked at providing their signature when they were asked for their birth date. This is personally identifiable information that people are taught to treat with care. Only allowing in-person collection means that people have to provide their birth date to a stranger, an average citizen. Understandably, this was a concern for more than one signer. Since this information is optional, it should be marked as such on the form.

Not everyone attends social events. These people do not have the opportunity to learn about and sign petitions unless a petitioner comes to their home. Not only is this intrusive for the resident, it is a safety concern for petition collectors.

Allowing electronic signatures expands access to the government. Marylanders with disabilities should have the right to learn about and support issues and participate with assistive technology. Deployed military members should be able to sign electronically from anywhere in the world.

The recent pandemic has changed the way people interact. Online participation in meetings is now commonplace, particularly in government. During the pandemic people were allowed to sign petitions electronically from the safety of their homes. Maryland allowed electronic petition signatures. There is no reason it should not continue to allow it.

Lifting the provisions in place during COVID-19 has taken our government backwards. Why would the State mandate the outdated method of petition collection, which also allows more people to participate in government? Electronic petition collection works.

Citizens should have access to participate in government online or in person, just as this testimony is being provided online and in person. The Maryland General Assembly exists to serve the people. I urge you to expand the use of electronic petition signature collection immediately and change the form to show optional items.

Finally, because the process is burdensome for both the signer and the collector, I ask that you allow ballot circulation committees to request a review of a random sample of at least 1,000 or more signatures from the local or State Board of Elections without the penalty of starting the two-year deadline once petitions are submitted. It would be a disservice to voters to find out their signatures are invalid, making their wishes nullified.