

To: the House Ways and Means Committee Members
Re: HB 1104 - Voting Rights Act of 2023 – Counties and Municipalities
Request: Favorable Report

My name is Peta Richkus and I live in District 42A. I am writing to ask for your support of HB 1104.

Every citizen should have equal access to the ballot as a voter or as a candidate. Maryland voters deserve political equality, equal access to the ballot for both voters and candidates, and fair districts regardless of race, ethnicity, or party affiliation.

HB 1104 seeks to protect equal access to the ballot – the most fundamental principle upon which our state, and nation, are based. I support the thesis of the bill that some classes of voters need to be protected because history provides clear evidence of past discrimination against certain communities that traditionally have faced obstacles to voting, running for office, and electing candidates of their choice.

Here are reasons I endorse HB 1104:

Its statistical approach to elections for local offices would counter possible attempts by local governments to disempower protected classes of voters. The Court should consider factors such as participation in voting and access to campaign finance, as well as evidence of discrimination in housing, transportation, education, employment, and the criminal justice system as important determinants of the communities that need to be protected.

It provides a useful compendium of possible remedies for the Court and Civil Rights Division to employ.

Mechanisms that allow communities to resolve complaints directly with local governments would save time and money, versus filing for relief with the Court or the Civil Rights Division.

Since communities seeking redress are very likely to be financially disadvantaged, the bill wisely allows for organizations representing those communities to receive compensation for expenses. Similarly, communities that comprise a substantial number of non-English-speaking members will be able to conduct business with local governments in their preferred language.

The pre-clearance mechanism in the bill has been shown to work to alleviate severe discrimination against a protected class in voting.

Creating an Election Database and Information Office would be a positive step toward objective evaluation of local government actions regarding voting rights and political equity. HB 1104 is landmark legislation that contains a toolkit of proactive provisions to ensure that voting rights and political equality are protected throughout the State of Maryland. I strongly urge a favorable report.

Thank you for your consideration,
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