

# End Voter Disenfranchisement in Rural Maryland

Submitted by  
Vice President Alonzo Gaskin  
St. Mary's County NAACP Unit #7025

The St. Mary's County Branch #7025 and the Maryland State Conference of the NAACP strongly encourage a favorable committee vote on HB447. This bill is about improving democracy at the local level. For decades, several districts in Maryland have operated under an at-large voting system for county commissioner election. Although the county commissioners are required to reside in the district they represent, the current system allows citizens, county-wide, to vote for all county commissioner candidates, county-wide, regardless of district. We believe that the citizens of each county commissioner district have the right to select who represents their interests without influence from voters outside of their district. This dilution of voting power is anti-democratic and runs counter to the spirit of the Voting Right Act. The current system silences the individual voices of voters in specific districts, replacing their voices with those of the majority of the county. It is undemocratic, as it potentially leaves voters with local representation elected by others. In the coming week, the Maryland General Assembly has the opportunity to make historic voting rights change.

We are pleased that Delegate Brian Crosby (MD 29B) has refiled this bill to rectify this injustice happening in St. Mary's County and other counties around the state. It requires that candidates for Boards of County Commissioners to win a plurality of the votes in the district they hope to represent. Every State and Federally Elected Official in Maryland has to win in the district in which they are running. The People residing in the rural counties in Maryland deserve the right to have that same rule apply to their county elections.

In St. Mary's County, Maryland, specifically, this results in the disenfranchisement of a large number of our minority voters. Votes from the rest of the county dilute the votes from their community. It is unacceptable. Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibits voting practices or procedures that result in discrimination or the abridgement of the right of any citizen to vote. Most challenges that fall under this section involve at-large voting schemes (United States of America v. Town of Lake Park, Florida and Commissioners Patricia Plasket-Osterman, Jeff Carey, Ed Daly, and Kendall Rumsey, in their official capacity as members of the Lake Park Town Commission, and DESCAR DUBOIS, in her official capacity as Mayor of Lake Park, 2009). This at-large voting essentially silences the votes of the largest community of minorities in St. Mary's County, Maryland and mirrors systems that have been changed because they violate the Voting Rights Act. MD House Bill 655 would fix that.

This unjust system is in place in Calvert County, Garrett County, and in our own county, St. Mary's. We stand in solidarity with the NAACP branches of those jurisdictions and with the Maryland State Conference of the NAACP, and we are calling for reform. Those who champion democracy and civil rights must do everything they can to strengthen it. This bill is one way the Maryland General Assembly can strengthen democracy in our state.

We strongly urge the House Ways and Means Committee to issue a favorable committee report because this is just simply unacceptable in our state.

We deserve the right to select the people that represent us at all levels, help make that a reality for us.

About NAACP:

*Founded in 1909 in response to the ongoing violence against Black people around the country, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) is the largest and most pre-eminent civil rights organization in the nation. We have over 2,200 units and branches across the nation, along with well over 2M activists. Our mission is to secure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights in order to eliminate race-based discrimination and ensure the health and well-being of all persons.*

*In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP.*

*NOTE: The Legal Defense Fund – also referred to as the NAACP-LDF was founded in 1940 as a part of the NAACP but separated in 1957 to become a completely separate entity. It is recognized as the nation's first civil and human rights law organization and shares our commitment to equal rights.*