



**HB417: General Assembly - Special Election to Fill a Vacancy in Office
Ways and Means**

February 14, 2023

Emily Scarr, Maryland PIRG

Favorable

Maryland PIRG is a state based, small donor funded public interest advocacy organization with grassroots members across the state. We work to find common ground around common sense solutions that will help ensure a healthier, safer, more secure future.

Our democracy works best when everyone has a voice and everyone is represented. Voting for our local, state and federal representatives is fundamental to this vision, and is step one in a civically-engaged electorate and responsive government.

Twenty-eight states have some sort of special elections process for replacing legislative vacancies and it is time for Maryland to join them.

Approximately one in five Maryland state legislators (17% of Delegates and 30% of Senators) were initially appointed by the Democratic or Republican Central Committee to fill seats left empty by retirements, deaths or other reasons, rather than elected by voters.

These policymakers are committed to public service and their districts. But our democracy would be stronger if we joined state legislatures across the country that hold special elections to fill vacancies. Maryland is the only state with four-year State House terms, other than North Dakota, that relies on this political party appointment process.

When the next election comes around, appointed legislators enjoy the benefit of incumbency and are generally elected to a full four-year term.

There are some benefits to this system. It saves money by avoiding the costs of a special election, and it has helped candidates who are disadvantaged in the traditional election system reach higher office, including women, people of color and young people.

But holding special elections for vacancies is a more democratic process, and there are better tools to realize the goal of ensuring we have a representative General Assembly where candidates with a diversity in gender, race, age, and socio-economic background are able to run competitive races for office. These include public financing and ranked-choice voting, both of which would reduce barriers for seeking office.

And while Central Committee members are elected by their party, independent voters and those from the other party have no say in this process.

Emily Scarr, Maryland PIRG Director emily@marylandpirg.org

Twitter: [@emilyscarr](https://twitter.com/emilyscarr) [@marylandpirg](https://twitter.com/marylandpirg)

This legislation will reform the current process by holding elections for vacant seats in the Maryland General Assembly during presidential election years along with the current quadrennial cycle. As a result, appointed members to the General Assembly could not serve for three or more years without winning an election. Holding the special elections on this second cycle would reduce the financial burden of special elections and increase voter participation in special elections since they would occur during the higher profile presidential primary.

Our state legislators make important decisions on education, health, the environment and how our tax dollars are spent. Maryland is a national leader on democracy and ballot access. It's time to democratize the process to fill vacancies and support policies that are proven effective in building a representative democracy.

We respectfully request a favorable report.