

Dear Members of the Legislature,

Please consider passing MD0022 to implement signature verification of mail-in ballots. As some of you may be aware, Maryland is currently one of only a handful of states to not require signature verification, witness, notarization, or inclusion of copy of physical ID with mail in ballots

(<https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2021/jul/30/facebook-posts/most-states-require-signature-verification-mail-ba/>). While it is understandable that our state seeks to make it as convenient as possible for residents to vote, such convenience must be accompanied by basic safeguards to ensure public confidence in election integrity, as most other states have in fact recognized.

In addition to undermining public confidence in our elections, foregoing a requirement for signature verification can potentially disenfranchise voters. Under the current rules for example, mail in ballots are counted instead of provisional (in person) ballots in the instance when Boards of Election receive both ballot types for the same voter. The obvious issue with this scenario is that it is very easy for individuals to falsify the identity of another voter by simply filling out a ballot with another individual's information and affixing their own signature, or for that matter any kind of marking, to said ballot. When the individual for whom the mail in ballot was actually intended goes to vote in person, unaware that someone has voted on their behalf, they will be given a provisional ballot that will not be counted. Under the current rules, a real voter who appears in person is considered less valid than a potentially anonymous mail in vote. The fact that this is hugely problematic should be obvious.

Having served as a provisional judge in this past election in Frederick County MD, I can attest to the fact that the vast majority of individuals who voted provisionally were doing so for the reason that they had supposedly already received a mail in ballot. Many of these voters were unaware that they had ever requested or returned a mail in ballot, and were visibly disconcerted that this was apparently the case. One voter even walked out without completing his ballot because he was so upset.

While this is only an anecdotal example, the wariness I observed as a judge without a doubt extends to other voters throughout Maryland as well, as is evidenced by the fact that midterm election turnout last year (2022) was approximately 16% lower than in 2018. If Maryland's goal is to increase voter participation, it appears that loosening the requirements around mail in/absentee ballots has failed. If voters are not confident that their elections are run securely, they will feel disenfranchised, disillusioned, and forgo voting entirely.

Further, many of our public officials have expressed concern regarding the proliferation of online misinformation and conspiracy theories around election fraud. Even if we assume that those spreading these conspiracy theories are indeed incorrect, they are the natural result of a citizenry that feels insecure in the legitimacy of their system. For Maryland to shut these conspiracy theories down for good, the most effective way would be to give the individuals spreading them less room to argue. If mail in ballots required signature verification, it would be much harder for purveyors of misinformation to claim that mail in balloting is insecure and disenfranchises legitimate voters.

Marylanders deserve a system that makes it easy to vote, but hard to cheat. At this time, it is easy to vote, but also very easy to cheat. Requiring signature verification would not put any additional obstacles in the voter's path – the burden would only be on our boards of elections, who exist to serve the needs of our voters. As 31 states have already implemented some method of signature verification, there is

plenty of model legislation to choose from after which Maryland can draft our own specifications for how this should be done.

Thank you very much for your consideration of this bill, and thank you Delegate Long for introducing it.

Very Respectfully,

Kat Harper