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**Committee:** Education, Energy, and the Environment  
**Testimony on:** SB 685 Election Law – Local Boards of Elections – Language-Related Assistance  
**Position:** Favorable  
**Hearing Date:** February 26, 2025

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club urges a favorable report on SB 685. The bill requires local boards of elections to provide election instructions, forms, signage, and ballots in a language other than English if more than 4,000 individuals or 2% of the voting age population of the county speak that language and have limited proficiency in English. The bill also requires affected counties to make reasonable efforts to recruit bilingual election judges.

The Sierra Club and its members advocate on behalf of both the natural and human environments, including promoting racial and social equity. As a grassroots organization, we believe that voting should be as accessible and convenient as possible for all individuals who are eligible to vote. To be accessible to an individual, election communications and materials need to be in a language the individual can understand.

As applied to Maryland, Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act requires a county to provide bilingual election materials if the literacy rate of citizens of a language minority group in the county is lower than the national literacy rate, and if more than 10,000 or more than 5% of the county's voting age citizens are members of a single language minority and are limited English proficient. Several states have established more inclusive criteria to more broadly provide bilingual materials. SB 685 would have Maryland use the same criteria as New York and Connecticut.

The federal criteria currently require availability of Spanish in Prince George's and Montgomery Counties. We believe the threshold in this bill would require Spanish in most Maryland counties, and some other languages in Montgomery County and possibly other counties. The bill would take effect in time to be implemented for the 2026 state election.

This bill will expand opportunities to participate in elections to citizens who have been historically underrepresented.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on SB 685.

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Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America's oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 70,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.