

February 26, 2025

Testimony on SB 685
Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language-Related Assistance
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland supports SB 685 which would expand the language translation requirements for elections and provide additional support for voters whose first language is not English.

Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act requires that counties provide election materials to specific language minorities groups that meet the populations threshold. The language minority groups in a specific county must be more than 10,000 citizens of voting age or 5% voting age population. As of now, only Montgomery and Prince George's County are required to translate to Spanish. HB 983 proposes lowering this threshold and establishes processes to ensure the accuracy of translations as well as assistance that goes beyond the translation of election related materials.

Lowers the Threshold for Required Translations

SB 685 would change the language threshold to 2% or 4,000 of the citizens voting age population - creating more inclusive elections that ensure all citizens are able to vote, regardless of English proficiency. The State Board of Elections (SBE) would determine the languages to be translated in each county and notify the local boards of elections. Once notified, the local boards are to translate all election-related materials meeting the language assistance threshold for their county. Jurisdictions would maintain the ability to voluntarily translate to other languages not currently meeting the threshold. Members of the public and organization would also have the option to recommend languages for consideration.

Allows for Public Review and Comment of Translated Materials

SB 685 would ensure the accuracy of translated materials. SBE would be required to establish a process that allows for public input and stakeholder engagement when determining covered languages and review of translated election materials before dissemination.

Encourages Recruitment of Bilingual Election Judges

SB 685 would require that local election board make a reasonable effort to recruit election judges that are fluent in the language's meetings the threshold in their jurisdiction. We recognize that many jurisdictions have trouble recruiting an inadequate number of trained election judges but believe some effort should be made to work with community leaders and trusted organizations to recruit individuals who can assist voters in these languages.

Requires Signage at Polling Places

Maryland voters are only able to take advantage of translation services if they are aware. SB 685 would require that local boards of election post signage at all vote centers and precinct polling locations during early voting and on Election Day, in languages that meet the threshold in that county. The signage would ensure voters know there are materials and judges available to assist in other languages. It also ensures they are made aware that new interpreter technology is being provided by the State Board of Elections. The new program was piloted in Prince George's County during the 2024 general election, and we believe it is a great resource that build on the provisions outlined in HB 983, especially for voters who may know how to read. This tool would also be a great resource voter who need assistance in Sign Language. We encourage the General Assembly to make adequate funding available to expand the pilot program to all jurisdictions.

Nearly four in five Maryland voters (79%) agree and support expanding language assistance for voters with a limited understanding of English.

Maryland is the most diverse state on the East Coast and is one of the ten most diverse states in the US. We also have four of the most ethnically diverse municipalities in the country. We can and should do more to improve language access for our communities and make voting easier for minority populations speaking other languages.

Several states throughout the country have taken similar actions to create more inclusive elections. New York and Connecticut have changed their translation threshold to 2% or 4,000 citizens of voting age. Colorado is at 2.5% or 2,000 citizens of voting age and California is at 3% but working towards the translation threshold proposed in this legislation. Other states that have expanded their programs to include public review, telephone interpretations while also changing their translation thresholds include Florida, Washington DC, Oregon and more.

Maryland voters only benefit if the options for voting and overall process are in a language they can understand. We should do all that we can to ensure our elections are truly accessible to all eligible voters.

We urge a favorable report on SB 685.

