



**Maryland Senate
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
February 26, 2025
Submitted February 24, 2025
SB 685 (FAV)**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of SB 685, regarding language-related assistance. Fair Elections Center is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to removing barriers to registration and voting through advocacy and impact litigation.

Democracy benefits when jurisdictions commit to and invest in holding elections in which all their citizens can participate, regardless of their ability to read or speak English. Providing high quality language assistance in elections is positively associated with both increasing voter participation by Latino, Asian American, American Indian, and Alaska Native citizens, as well as helping to increase the presence of elected representatives from language-minority communities. The federal Voting Rights Act establishes minimum requirements around language assistance and access. In expanding language accessibility beyond these minimums, Maryland joins other states and localities in increasing access to the ballot for even more voters with limited-English proficiency.

Widening the tent to cover more language-minority communities: SB 685 would lower the translation threshold for election materials from 5% to 2% (with at least 100 individuals) of the voting age population in a county or less than 2% but with at least 4,000 individuals. In counties where this threshold is met, voting materials of all types will be created in the designated languages: registration and voting notices, forms and instructions, signage at all polling places, and ballots. When available, a bilingual election judge will also be present, and local boards are required to make reasonable efforts to recruit such judges. By expanding the definition of what it means to have a “significant and substantial need for language-related assistance,” Maryland will ensure that even fewer voters get left behind simply because of their English-language abilities.

Additionally, SB 685 will correct for a gap in the federal coverage formula by not limiting its coverage to only the few language-minority groups identified in the federal Voting Rights Act coverage formula (American Indian, Asian American, Alaskan Natives, or of Spanish heritage), but rather any language-minority group that satisfies the threshold. Maryland will maximize access to its elections by increasing accessibility for all languages that are widely spoken at the local level, such as Amharic.

In summary, SB 685 would increase access to the ballot box for voters with limited-English proficiency by closing gaps in federal law. By increasing parity and deepening relationships between public officials, the communities they represent, and the voters who elect them, effective language assistance efforts increase faith and trust in government and make democracy more responsive to all community members. Fair Elections Center urges swift passage of this bill. If you would like further information, please feel free to contact Michelle Kanter Cohen, Policy Director and Senior Counsel at Fair Elections Center, at mkantercohen@fairelectionscenter.org.