

2.24 Sign On Letter.pdf

Uploaded by: Aseem Mulji

Position: FAV

February 24, 2025

Maryland Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee
Miller Senate Office Building, 2 West Wing
11 Bladen St.
Annapolis, MD 21401-1991

RE: Support for S.B. 342 and S.B. 685, part of the Maryland Voting Rights Act

Dear Committee Members,

In 2025 and beyond, the best way we can prepare for attacks on voting rights and democracy at the federal level is to pass the Maryland Voting Rights Act (MDVRA) now. Recent polling shows that the MDVRA and each of its provisions are extremely popular among Maryland voters across race and party lines. Notably, 81% of Maryland voters [support an MDVRA](#), and 80% would like their state representative to prioritize its passage.

At the national level, we are witnessing attacks, not progress, on voting rights. The Trump Administration's Project 2025 agenda includes eliminating the enforcement of protections against voting discrimination, and congressional leadership is pushing anti-voter legislation that creates additional obstacles in voting and disproportionately impacts Black voters and other voters of color. Meanwhile, increasingly hostile federal courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, have consistently eroded the protections offered by the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 over the last several decades.

While Maryland has recently implemented several measures that make voting more equitable, Maryland voters still face barriers to the ballot box and discrimination in voting, such as unfair districts or at-large systems that weaken the voting power of Black voters and other voters of color, inaccessible polling locations, and insufficient language assistance for voters who don't speak English comfortably. Recent vote dilution challenges brought against Baltimore County and Federalsburg demonstrate the persistence of these problems in Maryland.

Altogether, the MDVRA will make Maryland's democracy more inclusive by:

- Expanding language assistance in elections for voters with limited English proficiency.
- Enshrining robust protections against discriminatory vote dilution and voter suppression into state law.
- Creating a central public hub for election data and information to promote transparency.
- Preventing the implementation of discriminatory and unlawful electoral changes before they occur.

We urge you to take action immediately on two aspects of this package, and then move to consider the rest.

H.B. 983 / S.B. 685 – Expanding Language-Related Assistance

H.B. 983 / S.B. 685 will ensure that voters with limited English proficiency (LEP) are not excluded from the voting process. This bill provides more access for LEP voters by expanding election-related language assistance in the parts of Maryland where it is not already required by federal law and in languages not already covered by such federal protections.

H.B. 983 / S.B. 685 builds on the federal VRA by requiring local governments to provide voting materials in languages spoken by at least 2% of the population in a locality. This is a lower population threshold than in the federal VRA, which would extend language assistance to more Maryland communities. H.B. 983 / S.B. 685 also requires assistance in more languages that are commonly spoken in Maryland but are not included in federal law, such as Amharic. Nearly four in five Maryland voters (79%) [support](#) expanding language assistance for voters with a limited understanding of English. If enacted, this legislation would help position the Free State as a leader in protecting the right to vote.

H.B. 1043 and S.B. 342 - Combating Racial Vote Dilution

We urge you to build upon H.B. 1043 and S.B. 342 to pass the strongest possible protections against election systems that drown out the voices of voters of color and prevent them from electing their preferred representatives, known as racial vote dilution. This legislation builds on the federal Voting Rights Act by providing a framework for both voters and local governments in Maryland to efficiently and cost-effectively identify and eliminate racial vote dilution.

The strongest version of this legislation will make this type of litigation less time-intensive and less costly than litigation under the federal VRA—not only for plaintiffs but also for local governments and all parties. More than three-quarters of Maryland voters (77%) [support](#) protections against racial vote dilution. If enacted, this legislation would immediately position the Free State as a leader in protecting the right to vote.

The MDVRA builds upon successful state VRAs that have already passed in Virginia, California, Washington, Oregon, New York, Connecticut, and Minnesota. Similar bills are also actively under active consideration in New Jersey and Colorado. The MDVRA will carry this momentum forward and provide some of the most robust state-level voting protections in the country.

Now is Maryland's time to lead. We encourage you to prioritize, pass, and fully fund the

MDVRA this legislative session, and we stand ready to work with you to secure this victory for all Maryland voters.

Sincerely,

1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East, Maryland/DC
Advance Maryland
AFSCME Maryland Council 3
Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. Iota Upsilon Lambda Chapter
Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Pi Upsilon Lambda Chapter, Prince George's County
American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland
Anne Arundel County NAACP
Baltimore County Progressive Democrats Club
Baltimore Renters United
Bannockburn Reason For Action (BRA) Indivisible
CAIR Maryland
Cambridge Indivisible
Campaign for Justice Safety & Jobs (CJSJ)
CANDLE
Common Cause Maryland
Definitive Mechanical LLC
Gibson-Banks Center for Race and the Law, University of Maryland Carey Law School
Indivisible Central Maryland
Indivisible Howard County
Jews United for Justice
League of Women Voters of Maryland
Maryland League of Conservation Voters
Mid-Atlantic Association of Alpha Phi Alpha Chapters
National Council of Jewish Women, Maryland
Organizing Black
Out for Justice
Ranked Choice Voting Maryland
SEIU Local 500
Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore (SURJ)
UNITE HERE Local 7
Wilder Strategy

350.org

Advancement Project
Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc.
Asbury UMC DC
Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote (APIAVote)
Black Girls Vote
Campaign Legal Center
CT Shoreline Indivisible
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.
Demos
Fair Elections Center

FairVote
Institute for Responsive Government Action
LatinoJustice PRLDEF
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF)
Popular Democracy
Public Justice Center
State Innovation Exchange (SiX)
RepresentUs
The Workers Circle
Transformative Justice Coalition
We Choose Us

SB 685 - Maryland LCV Support - Election Law - Loc

Uploaded by: Dannielle Lipinski

Position: FAV



Kim Coble
Executive Director

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February 26, 2025

**SUPPORT: SB 685 - Election Law - Local Boards of Elections -
Language-Related Assistance**

Mr. Chair and Members of the Committee:

Maryland LCV is submitting this testimony to support SB 685 - Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language-Related Assistance. We thank Senator Augustine for his leadership on this issue. Maryland cannot have a healthy environment without an engaged and active democracy, and that begins with lowering the barriers at the ballot box.

Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act requires that counties provide election materials to specific language minority groups that include at least 10,000 citizens of voting age or 5% voting age population in that county. **Under current law, only Montgomery and Prince George's County are required to translate to Spanish.**

SB 685 would change the language threshold to 2% or 4,000 citizens of voting age in a county, creating more accessible elections that ensure all citizens are able to be more fully informed voters, regardless of their English proficiency. Once the State Board of Election has determined the languages meeting this threshold, the legislation requires translation of all election related materials, excluding ballots, and establishes a process for ensuring the accuracy of the translations. It also encourages recruitment of election judges who speak the languages meeting the threshold in each jurisdiction.

SB 685 provides more access for limited English proficiency voters by expanding election-related language assistance in the parts of Maryland where it is not already required by federal law and in languages not already covered by such federal protections.

According to the most recent census data, more than 425,000 Maryland residents statewide have limited English proficiency. We can and should do more to improve language access for our communities and make voting easier for populations speaking non-English languages. **Nearly four in five Maryland voters (79%) agree and support expanding language assistance for voters with a limited understanding of English.**

Uninhibited access to the ballot is at the core of a representative democracy. Language assistance, along with the other Maryland Voting Rights Act package bills, will help ensure no eligible voter in the state is left behind at the ballot box. Maryland LCV strongly urges a favorable report on this important bill.

Local Boards of Election - Language Related Assist

Uploaded by: Delegate Harry Bhandari

Position: FAV



MARYLAND LEGISLATIVE ASIAN AMERICAN
AND PACIFIC ISLANDER CAUCUS
MARYLAND GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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DELEGATE MARK S. CHANG
FIRST VICE CHAIR

DELEGATE LILY QI
SECOND VICE CHAIR

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TREASURER

DELEGATE DAVID MOON
CHAIR, LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY
COMMITTEE

DELEGATE KRISSELDA VALDERRAMA
CHAIR, OUTREACH COMMITTEE

DELEGATE SARAH WOLEK

February 25, 2025

**Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Distinguished Members of the
Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee,**

**SB 685: Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language-Related
Assistance**

The AAPI Caucus strongly supports SB 685, which ensures equitable access to the electoral process for Maryland residents with limited English proficiency. Many members of the AAPI community face significant language barriers when engaging with the voting process. This bill will require local election boards to assess the needs of their communities and provide crucial language assistance, including translated voting materials, bilingual election judges, and interpreter hotlines. Guaranteeing that every eligible voter can fully understand and participate in elections strengthens our democracy. The ability to access voting information in one's primary language is essential to ensuring fair participation, especially in communities where English is not the dominant language spoken at home. By promoting inclusivity in voting, SB 685 helps ensure that all Marylanders, regardless of language proficiency, have a fair and equal opportunity to make their voices heard.

Sincerely,

Delegate Harry Bhandari, PhD

Chair, Maryland Asian American Pacific Islander Caucus

Fair Elections Ctr Testimony FAV SB685 2025-02-24.

Uploaded by: Emily Davis

Position: FAV



**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.

DRM Testimony SB 685 FAV Language-Related Assistan

Uploaded by: Gillian Justice

Position: FAV

EDUCATION, ENERGY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
February 26, 2025
Senate Bill 685
Election Law – Local Boards of Elections – Language-Related Assistance
POSITION: SUPPORT

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM) is Maryland’s designated protection and advocacy organization, dedicated to advancing the rights of Marylanders with disabilities. DRM works to increase opportunities for Marylanders with disabilities to be part of their communities through voting by advocating for equal access to the ballot box.

DRM supports Senate Bill 685, which would require the State Board of Elections (SBE) to determine whether there is a need to offer assistance for voters in certain languages during an election. Local boards of election are then required to provide certain language assistance and materials, as well as make efforts to recruit election judges with language fluency, and generally increasing access to language-related support by voters. This bill targets support to people with limited English proficiency, who may need greater access to materials in a language other than English. Local boards will be held accountable by SBE, who will make its determinations on language-related access needs publicly available via the web.

Language-related access is a disability rights issue, as people with disabilities communicate in various languages and with different levels of fluency. For Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, access to multiple sign languages—not just American Sign Language—is essential for full participation in democratic processes. SB 685 recognizes this need by specifically referencing “a language that is oral or unwritten” (line 29). By passing this bill, election law would provide stronger resources for Deaf and Hard of Hearing voters. Additionally, the bill’s language allows for broader support for individuals who may have difficulties processing written information, thereby increasing access.

SB 685 recognizes the barriers faced by many Marylanders whose primary language is not spoken or written American English and strengthens voting

processes for people with disabilities by including considerations for languages that are not only spoken. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on SB 685. Please do not hesitate to contact me at GillianJ@DisabilityRightsMD.org or by phone at 443-692-2498.

Respectfully Submitted,

Gillian Justice
Community Engagement Coordinator
Disability Rights Maryland

SB 685 - Election Law - Local Boards of Elections

Uploaded by: Joanne Antoine

Position: FAV

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 minority 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.



SB 685, HB 983 Language Access in Elections (1).pd

Uploaded by: Joanne Antoine

Position: FAV

How Language Access Protects Maryland Voters

SB 685/HB 983 protects your rights as a Maryland voter.

How does SB 685/HB 983 protect voters whose first language is not English?

SB 685/HB 983 requires election-related language assistance in the parts of Maryland where it is not already required by federal law, providing more access for limited English proficient (LEP) voters.

It also requires voting materials translated into covered languages to be “of an equal quality” to the corresponding English language materials.

Why do we need this provision?

While we have worked hard to pass reforms that have made our elections more accessible, Maryland voters only benefit if the options for voting and the overall process are in a language they can understand.

- Maryland is the most diverse state on the east coast, made up of a large number of LEP voters.
- LEP voters deserve the right to vote effectively in the language they understand.

Where and when is language assistance required?

- SB 685 / HB 983 requires a county, city, or town to provide assistance in a particular language when LEP individuals who speak that language make up at least 2% of the population (and number at least 100 people) or have a total population of at least 4,000.
- The State Board of Elections will determine which places meet this requirement every two years based on Census data.
- Under current demographic data, SB 685/HB 983 is projected to expand language assistance in certain localities to include Spanish, French, Korean, Amharic, and Chinese (including Taiwanese).

What protections are required for LEP voters?

- Accurate translations of election and voting-related materials, including:
 - Voter registration notices and forms
 - Sample ballots
 - Election instructions
 - All other materials related to the voting process

- Oral assistance at polling locations where feasible.

Does SB 685/ HB 983 provide more language assistance protection than the federal Voting Rights Act?

Yes!

- The proposed population thresholds are lower than the federal VRA, so it will expand language assistance to more places. This will guarantee assistance to more LEP voters throughout the state and not just in large urban centers.

- SB 685 / HB 983 also requires assistance in more languages, such as Amharic.

MD language access testimony - Senate - 2.24.25.pd

Uploaded by: Lata Nott

Position: FAV



Brian J. Feldman, Chair
Cheryl C. Kagan, Vice Chair
Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee
Maryland Senate
February 24, 2025

Testimony of Campaign Legal Center in Support of Senate Bill 685

Campaign Legal Center (“CLC”), is pleased to offer this testimony in support of Senate Bill 685 (“SB 685”), which would require local governments to provide language assistance in elections if there are sizeable communities of voters who speak a language other than English and have limited English proficiency.

CLC is a national nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to protect and strengthen American democracy across all levels of government. The reforms contained in SB 685 would ensure that all voters, no matter what language they speak, can participate fully in elections.

Even proficient English speakers often find ballots and election materials to be complicated and confusing. For voters with limited English proficiency, it can be far more challenging to navigate the voting process, understand the candidates and issues, and make informed decisions.

Maryland has a diverse population and a growing number of naturalized citizens who have limited proficiency in English. Unfortunately, many of these eligible voters are not receiving language assistance in counties throughout the state. By expanding access to language assistance, SB 685 will not only provide vital technical assistance to voters, but also signal to new American communities that their political participation is both welcome and encouraged.

Passing SB 685 will allow Maryland to go above and beyond the language assistance requirements set by federal law. The federal Voting Rights Act requires jurisdictions within a county to provide language assistance if more than 5% or more than 10,000 of the county’s voting-age citizens belong to a single language-minority community and have limited proficiency in English, and the community’s illiteracy rate is higher than the national illiteracy rate.¹ This provision of law has been in

¹ Voting Rights Act, Section 203, 52 U.S.C. § 10503.

Commented [AM1]: Are ballots included?

Commented [AM2R1]: Fine either way, since this is a problem statement. Sorry MD legislators if the solution isn't good enough

Commented [LN3R1]: only sample ballots...just to be safe, think I should take ballots out?

Commented [AM4R1]: i think it's actually fine as is!

place for decades and represents an important first step in overcoming some of the barriers that prevent citizens from language minority groups from voting. But it is not sufficient to meet Maryland's needs. Only two Maryland jurisdictions, Montgomery County and Prince George's County, are currently required to provide language assistance under federal law.² The federal Voting Rights Act also defines a language minority group to mean "persons who are American Indian, Asian American, Alaskan Natives or of Spanish heritage."³ It therefore doesn't apply to communities that speak Arabic or African languages.

SB 685 will improve upon federal law in a number of ways. Instead of limiting language assistance to communities with certain heritages and English literacy rates below the national level, SB 685's definition of a community that needs language assistance is more streamlined, yet more expansive. Any community that speaks a common language other than English and has limited English proficiency is eligible for language assistance if it meets the population threshold.

This bill also lowers the population threshold so that language assistance must be provided for any community that constitutes more than 2% of a county or more than 4,000 people of voting age. However, a county does not have to provide language assistance if that 2% amounts to fewer than 100 people. In this way, SB 685 strikes a reasonable balance between expanding high quality language assistance and minimizing the administrative burden on election officials. In addition to providing voting and election materials in the appropriate language as well as in English, counties are required to provide bilingual election judges where they are available.

Together, these provisions will ensure that no Marylander is excluded from democratic participation based on their inability to speak or understand enough English to engage in the electoral process.

Our democracy works best when every voter can participate. Limited English proficiency should not mean limited political participation, and a lack of meaningful language assistance should not be a barrier to citizens making their voices heard. We respectfully urge you to support SB 685.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Lata Nott

Lata Nott, Senior Legal Counsel, Voting Rights
CAMPAIGN LEGAL CENTER
1101 14th St. NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20005

² Voting Rights Act Amendments of 2006, Determinations Under Section 203, 86 Fed. Reg. 69611 (Dec. 8, 2021).

³ Voting Rights Act, Section 208, 52 U.S.C. § 10508(e).

SB 685.pdf

Uploaded by: Marijane Mnck

Position: FAV

IndivisibleHoCoMD



TESTIMONY FOR SB 685

ELECTION LAW - LOCAL BOARDS OF ELECTION - LANGUAGE-RELATED ASSISTANCE

Bill Sponsors: Senator Augustine

Committee: Education, Energy, and the Environment

Organization Submitting: Indivisible Howard County

Person Submitting: Marijane Monck - Co-Facilitator, Defend Democracy Team

Position: FAVORABLE

I am submitting testimony in favor of SB 685 on behalf of Indivisible Howard County. Indivisible Howard County is a 900+ member organization comprising numerous action teams. The Defend Democracy Team works on issues involving campaign finance and election integrity.

SB 685 would require local governments to ensure that people who don't speak English comfortably are not left behind in the voting process. The bill requires that in a locality with a population of 2% or more that are a language minority, the local government or board of elections provides voting materials in that additional language.

Maryland voters only benefit if the options for voting and the overall process are in a language they can understand. Maryland is the most diverse state on the east coast, made up of a large number of Limited English Proficiency (ELP) voters. ELP voters deserve the same access as anyone else.

We support this bill and recommend a FAVORABLE report in committee.

Testimony in Support of SB0685 – Expanding Language

Uploaded by: Maureen Wambui

Position: FAV

Maureen Wambui
7827 Rolling View Ave
Nottingham, MD, 21236
Maureen.w.m.2030@gmail.com
02/24/2025

The Honorable Members of the Senate Committee
Maryland General Assembly
Annapolis, MD 21401

Subject: Testimony in Support of SB0685 – Expanding Language Assistance in Maryland Elections

Dear Chairperson and Committee Members,

My name is Maureen Wambui, and I am a proud immigrant and resident of District 6, in Maryland. I am writing to express my strong support for Senate Bill 685 (SB0685), which seeks to expand language assistance in elections to ensure all voters, regardless of their English proficiency, have equal access to the electoral process.

As an immigrant, I know firsthand the challenges that language barriers can create when trying to participate in civic life. Voting is one of the most fundamental rights of a democracy, and no one should feel excluded simply because they struggle with English. Many immigrants, including those who have lived in the U.S. for years, may still find it difficult to navigate ballots, voting instructions, and other election-related materials due to language limitations. This bill will address that gap by ensuring that necessary language assistance is provided where needed.

SB0685 will help create a more inclusive and representative democracy by requiring the State Board of Elections to assess and provide language support based on community needs. By offering translated materials and bilingual election judges, we can empower more eligible voters to participate confidently and make their voices heard. This initiative is not only about accessibility but also about fairness and equal opportunity.

I urge the committee to support SB0685 and take a crucial step toward breaking down barriers that prevent many immigrants from fully engaging in our democracy. Ensuring language access in elections strengthens our communities, encourages civic participation, and upholds the values of democracy that we all cherish.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Maureen Wambui

SB685 Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - L

Uploaded by: Nikki Tyree

Position: FAV



TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION, ENERGY, AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

SB 685 Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language-Related Assistance

BY: Linda T. Kohn, President

Date: February 26, 2025

The League of Women Voters of Maryland believes that the election system should increase voter participation, be equitable, accessible, and easy to understand, and, most importantly, ensure that minority views and interests have some influence in selecting elected officials. SB 685 seeks to lower the threshold of English proficiency needed in a district to run elections in another language.

SB 685 will ensure that voters with limited English proficiency (LEP) are not excluded from the voting process. This bill provides more access for LEP voters by expanding election-related language assistance in the parts of Maryland where it is not already required by federal law and in languages not already covered by such federal protections.

Maryland is fortunate to be a majority-minority state now. However, with that comes a responsibility to ensure that all voters have the necessary tools and information during an election cycle. SB 685 is critical to how voters process election information. Too often, the League hears stories of voters whose primary language is not English, having to rely on family members to assist them at the polls, or worse, not knowing that they can request an interpreter. Marylanders cannot participate in democracy if they are locked out due to language; if that happens, then we have lost our representative democracy.

Last year, Maryland joined 29 other states that needed to expand language access guidelines and translation services. SB 685 would expand the current federal law and allow more voters to get the assistance they need to vote. Under the federal Voting Rights Act, language access is only granted when 5% of the population needs that language. SB 685 would lower that threshold to 2%, allowing more voters to receive the information they need to be informed voters.

Maryland has an opportunity to continue being an example by leading the charge for a more inclusive, representative, and fair democracy.



LWVMD urges a favorable report on SB 685.

SB 685 NAACP.pdf

Uploaded by: Ricarra Jones

Position: FAV



February 26, 2025

Testimony on SB 685

**Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language-Related Assistance
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee**

Position: Favorable

The Maryland State Conference of the NAACP urges a favorable report on SB 685.

We urge support for SB 685 which provides more access for limited English proficient voters by expanding election-related language assistance in the parts of Maryland where it is not already required by federal law and in languages not already covered by such federal protections.

Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act requires that counties provide election materials to specific language minority groups that meet the population threshold. The language minority groups in a specific county must be more than 10,000 citizens of voting age or 5% voting age population. Under current law, only Montgomery and Prince George's County are required to translate to Spanish.

HB 983 would change the language threshold to 2% or 4,000 of the citizens voting age population - creating more accessible elections that ensure all citizens are able to vote, regardless of their English proficiency. Once the State Board of Election has determined the languages meeting this threshold, the legislation requires translation of all election related materials, excluding ballots, and establishes a process for ensuring the accuracy of the translations. It also encourages recruitment of election judges who speak the languages meeting the threshold in each jurisdiction.

According to the most recent Census data, more than 425,000 Maryland residents statewide have limited English proficiency. 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. Nearly four in five Maryland voters (79%) agree and support expanding language assistance for voters with a limited understanding of English.

Language barriers must not continue to be an impediment to communities that seek to exercise their constitutional right to vote. As such, we must continue to ensure that all voters, including historically marginalized communities, are able to freely have their voices heard through their vote.

Uninhibited access to the ballot is at the core of a representative democracy. Language assistance, along with the other Maryland Voting Rights Act package bills, will help ensure no eligible voter in the state is left behind at the ballot box. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on SB 685.

Thank you,
Ricarra Jones
Maryland State Conference of the NAACP

SB685_MDSierraClub_fav 26Feb2025.pdf

Uploaded by: Richard Norling

Position: FAV



P.O. Box 278
Riverdale, MD 20738

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.

Rich Norling
Chair, Voting Rights Committee
Rich.Norling@MDSierra.org

Josh Tulkin
Chapter Director
Josh.Tulkin@MDSierra.org

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.

SB 685_FAV_ACLU-MD.pdf

Uploaded by: Zoe Ginsberg

Position: FAV



Testimony for the Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee

February 26, 2025

SB 685 – Election Law – Local Boards of Elections – Language-Related Assistance

FAVORABLE

ZOE GINSBERG
LEGAL FELLOW

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The ACLU of Maryland supports SB 685, which seeks to provide increased access to election materials for voters with limited English proficiency. Uninhibited access to the ballot is at the core of representative democracy, and increasing language assistance will help ensure that no voter is left behind at the ballot box.

Currently, Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act requires that counties provide election materials to some language minority groups that meet a certain population threshold. Under this law, a population must comprise at least 5% or 10,000 members of the citizen voting age population in a particular area to receive voting materials in a language other than English. These thresholds only apply to populations that speak Asian, American Indian, Alaska Native, and Spanish languages.¹ In Maryland, this means that Montgomery and Prince George’s County are required to provide election materials in Spanish.² No other community is required to provide translated materials, and no community is required to provide materials in a language other than Spanish.

We can and should do more to improve language access for those who speak languages other than English. Maryland is the most diverse state on the East Coast and one of the most diverse states in the country, with 136 language and dialects spoken across the state.³ Maryland also has a substantial population of individuals with limited English proficiency. According to the most recent Census data, more than 425,000 Maryland residents have limited proficiency in English. This

¹ *Section 203 Language Determinations*, United States Census Bureau (Dec. 28, 2022), <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/about/voting-rights/voting-rights-determination-file.html>.

² *Voting*: Introduction, Maryland State Board of Elections, <https://elections.maryland.gov/voting/index.html> (last visited Feb. 13, 2025).

³ *Expand Language Access in Maryland Elections*, COMMON CAUSE, (Feb. 2023) <https://www.commoncause.org/maryland/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/MD-2023-language-access-one-pager-3.pdf>.

population has increased significantly, more than doubling in the last two decades.⁴ While some of these Marylanders speak languages currently covered by federal law, many do not. For example, African languages such as Amharic and Somali are not covered by the federal Voting Rights Act, leaving the 200,000 Marylanders who speak a language originating on the African continent without access to materials in their spoken language.⁵

If passed, SB 685 would change the language threshold to 2% or 4,000 members of the citizen voting age population who speak English “less than very well” according to the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey. By lowering these thresholds, SB 685 would create more accessible elections that ensure that all citizens are able to vote regardless of their English proficiency. SB 685 would extend to all languages that meet these numerical thresholds, rather than limiting relief to speakers of certain languages. The State Board of Elections would first determine which counties have populations meeting this threshold and then would translate all election-related materials, excluding ballots, for each election cycle. SB 685 also creates a process for ensuring the accuracy of translation and encouraging recruitment of election judges who speak the languages meeting this threshold in each jurisdiction. These reforms are extremely popular: nearly four out of five Marylanders (79%) support expanding language assistance for voters with a limited understanding of English.

No voter should be discouraged from making their voices heard because they can’t access election materials they can understand. Accordingly, we must continue working to make sure that all voters in all our communities are empowered to participate in our elections.

For the foregoing reasons, the ACLU of Maryland urges a favorable report on SB 685.

⁴ See *Maryland: Immigration Data Profile*, MIGRATION POLICY INSTITUTE, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/language/MD>.

⁵ Jessica Babb & Megan Rodgers, *Problems at polling locations, some voters turned away after location not set up*, FOX BALTIMORE (May 14, 2024), <https://foxbaltimore.com/news/local/problems-at-polling-locations-some-voters-turned-away-after-location-not-set-up>.

SB0685-EEE_MACo_SWA.pdf

Uploaded by: Kevin Kinnally

Position: FWA



Senate Bill 685

Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language-Related Assistance

MACo Position: **SUPPORT**
WITH AMENDMENTS

To: Education, Energy, and the Environment
Committee

Date: February 26, 2025

From: Kevin Kinnally

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **SUPPORTS SB 685 WITH AMENDMENTS** to enhance language access in elections while ensuring local governments have the necessary resources to meet these new requirements.

Counties support equitable access to voting and recognize the importance of language assistance in elections. However, SB 685 creates a significant unfunded mandate by requiring counties to cover the costs of translation services, bilingual printed materials, targeted voter outreach, and hiring and training bilingual election judges without providing additional resources.

SB 685 directs the State Board of Elections (SBE) to determine when local election boards must provide bilingual election materials and assistance. SBE must evaluate voter demographics and require local election offices to offer ballots, instructions, notices, and other election-related materials in additional languages where a significant portion of the population has limited English proficiency. Additionally, the bill mandates bilingual election judges at polling places, as specified.

The governor's fiscal plan shifts significant costs onto counties, which already fund the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, infrastructure, public safety, and other essential services. These additional mandates place even greater pressure on local budgets, forcing difficult trade-offs that could undermine core government functions.

As drafted, SB 685 leaves counties with no choice but to fund these new requirements, competing for limited local resources against essential services like public health, education, and roadway safety. Without dedicated State funding, counties must divert resources from other critical election functions to comply with these mandates.

As such, MACo urges an amendment to require State funding to implement these mandates. A well-resourced approach will ensure local election boards meet these obligations without compromising election operations or straining limited local resources.

Accordingly, MACo urges the Committee to issue a **FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS** report on SB 685. MACo's proposed amendments are included on the following page.

MACo PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO SB 685

AMENDMENT NO. 1

On page 3, after line 8, insert:

“ (A) THE STATE BOARD OF ELECTIONS SHALL REIMBURSE LOCAL BOARDS OF ELECTIONS FOR 100 PERCENT OF THE COSTS INCURRED TO IMPLEMENT THE LANGUAGE-RELATED ASSISTANCE REQUIREMENTS UNDER THIS SECTION, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO TRANSLATION SERVICES, BILINGUAL ELECTION MATERIALS, VOTER OUTREACH, AND THE RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING OF BILINGUAL ELECTION JUDGES.”.

Senate Bill 685 Sponsor Amendment.pdf

Uploaded by: Malcolm Augustine

Position: FWA



SB0685/403724/1

AMENDMENTS
PREPARED
BY THE
DEPT. OF LEGISLATIVE
SERVICES

20 FEB 25
10:44:10

BY: Senator Augustine
(To be offered in the Education, Energy, and the Environment
Committee)

AMENDMENT TO SENATE BILL 685

(First Reading File Bill)

On page 2, in line 17, after the first “**THE**” insert “CITIZEN”; and in line 21,
after “**THE**” insert “CITIZEN”.

Senate Bill 685 Sponsor Testimony.pdf

Uploaded by: Malcolm Augustine

Position: FWA

MALCOLM AUGUSTINE
Legislative District 47
Prince George's County

PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

Executive Nominations Committee

Education, Energy and the
Environment Committee



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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 685: Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language- Related Assistance

February 24, 2025

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and esteemed members of the Education, Energy and Environment Committee, it is my pleasure to come before you to offer testimony in favor of **Senate Bill 685: Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language- Related Assistance**. Currently, Maryland relies upon the provisions of the federal Voting Rights Act to mandate translation of election materials in our jurisdictions. However, as we enter an era of increasing uncertainty on the continuation of these federal voting rights bills, it is essential that we enshrine these protections into Maryland State law through **Senate Bill 685**.

As Maryland continues to grow as one of the nation's most diverse states – with the 2020 Census reporting 136 languages and dialects spoken within our borders and one in five Marylanders speaking a language other than English at home – it is imperative that our election system reflects and accommodates this rich diversity. **SB 685** is a necessary step to ensure that all eligible voters – regardless of language proficiency – have full and equal access to the ballot.

Under current federal guidelines, language assistance is required in jurisdictions where at least 5% or 10,000 citizens of voting age speak a language other than English. With the current threshold, only Montgomery and Prince George's County are required to translate election materials to Spanish, leaving many other diverse communities without the necessary support.

Key Provisions of Senate Bill 685

Lowering the Language Access Threshold

- **SB 685** will lower Maryland's language access threshold, triggering it when at least 2% (but in no instance fewer than 100 individuals) or 4,000 voting-age citizens in a county speak a language other than English.
- All election materials (excluding ballots) would be translated to any language that meets the threshold in each county, expanding access to voting materials for citizens.
- Based on current population estimates, several languages are expected to qualify under the proposed threshold. Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Anne Arundel County would likely join Montgomery and Prince George's in providing Spanish translations. Montgomery County will likely also

need to provide Korean and Chinese translation. These estimates are subject to the results of the immediately preceding American Community Survey.

Enhancing Language Services

Local boards shall translate: Registration and Voting Forms and Notices

Election-related materials

Sample Ballots

- Translations must be of equal quality and available at the same time as the English versions. These translations cannot solely rely on automated translation services (i.e. artificial intelligence and machine learning).
- Local boards will not be required to translate regular ballots.
- Local boards must post signs at all vote centers and precinct polling languages during early voting and on Election Day. These signs will be displayed in every language meeting the county threshold, informing voters of available language assistance and interpreter services.
- Local boards are required to make reasonable efforts to recruit election judges fluent in the required languages.

Publication of Designated Languages and Local Boards

- The State Board of Elections is required to publish, on or before January 1, 2026—and every two years thereafter—a comprehensive list on its website identifying each local board required to provide language-related assistance, along with the designated languages.
- This list will be distributed to each local board well in advance, ensuring they have the necessary information to comply.

Review Process for Language Designation

- To ensure that language assistance meets community needs, the State Board of Elections will establish a review process that allows voters, groups of voters, or organizations to request that a language be designated for assistance.
- This process will include opportunities for public comment, ensuring transparency and responsiveness to community feedback.

Enforcement Provisions

- **SB 685** empowers the Maryland Attorney General to issue subpoenas, conduct fact-finding hearings, and investigate potential violations of the language access provisions.
- An aggrieved person or organization may file an action to enforce these provisions.

Historical Context of Senate Bill 685

Historically, not every community has enjoyed equal language access in our election system. In 1975, Congress amended the Voting Rights Act to extend protections to certain racial and ethnic minorities, particularly Latinos, whose high English illiteracy rates – stemming from educational discrimination – had suppressed political participation. However, many language minority communities were excluded from these provisions, including those whose languages are of African, European, and Caribbean origin. As Maryland communities continue to diversify, **SB 685** is a necessary continuation of the effort to ensure all voters, regardless of language proficiency, have access to the ballot.

Conclusion

Voting is one of the most fundamental rights of citizenship. By ensuring that every voter can fully engage in the electoral process, regardless of language proficiency, we are strengthening the democratic foundation of our state. I respectfully urge you to support **Senate Bill 685** and help guarantee that all Marylanders have the opportunity to vote.

Sponsor Amendment

The sponsor amendment changes the baseline for calculating the limited English population threshold to "citizen" voting age population rather than just voting age population. The Census makes the citizen voting age population more readily available for jurisdictions as part of its coverage determinations for section 203 of the federal voting rights act.

I ask for a favorable report on Senate Bill 685 as amended.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Malinda Augustin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "M".

2025 SB0685 Testimony Against 2025-02-26.pdf

Uploaded by: Alan Lang

Position: UNF

Testimony Against SB0685

Honorable Senators

Please enter an unfavorable report against SB0685.

I am against:

- Requiring the State Board of Elections to determine whether there is a significant and substantial need for language-related assistance in certain languages by a local board of elections during an election, based on certain criteria;
- requiring local boards to provide certain language-related assistance and materials in voting and elections to certain voters in certain languages; and
- requiring local boards to make reasonable efforts to recruit election judges who are fluent in certain languages.

Federal law already has standards regarding language-related assistance. Under Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, States and political subdivisions that meet specified thresholds of numbers of citizens of voting age who are members of a specified single language minority and are limited-English proficient must provide any registration or voting notices, forms, instructions, assistance, or other materials or information relating to the electoral process, including ballots, in the language of the applicable minority group as well as in the English language. As long as we are compliant with Federal law, we do not need the extra burdens proposed by this bill.

This bill could be costly to the State and local boards as they may need to print instructions, signage and ballots in one or more foreign languages as well as try to hire foreign speaking judges when finding sufficient numbers of English speaking judges is often difficult. There is no fiscal review providing an estimate for the cost of these proposed requirements.

Moreover, this bill sets up a process for an individual or an ethnic group organization, such as CAIR, to sue the boards if it believes sufficient foreign language materials are not provided. The State Board could also sue the local board if it refuses to supply foreign language materials, and the local board may sue the state board to provide only English language materials.

The job of the local boards to hold the elections and obtain sufficient volunteers who speak English to be workers is daunting enough. Please do not add any more administrative burden to the boards and create a process that could potentially involve suits against these boards.

Please vote against HB0685.

Alan Lang
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Legislative District 30B
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February 26, 2025

Written Testimony for SB 685_ HB 983_ Election La

Uploaded by: Trudy Tibbals

Position: UNF

Written Testimony for **SB 685/ HB 983**: Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language-Related Assistance - Please **VOTE NO** on this bill.

Dear Ways & Means Committee:

This bill reads “Requiring the State Board of Elections to determine whether there is a significant and substantial need for language-related assistance in certain languages by a local board of elections during an election based on certain criteria; requiring local boards to provide certain language-related assistance and materials in voting and elections to certain voters in certain languages; and requiring local boards to make reasonable efforts to recruit election judges who are fluent in certain languages...”

This is a bad bill. Registered voters living in the USA should be able to speak, read and understand English. This stipulation should be exactly the same for people driving in this country. How do we expect people to be good, responsible drivers if they cannot read our street signs? How do we expect people to make **informed** decisions when voting if they cannot read, speak and understand our most widely used language? If people cannot read, speak and understand English, how can they know **what** they are voting for and **whom** they are voting for? Interpreters are not available at every polling location. So how can voters make the best decisions about whom to vote for and what questions on the ballot to vote yes or no on?

We, as a state and as a nation, should want voters to make the best decisions and most **informed** decisions possible when voting.

In that spirit, please **VOTE NO** on this bill.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

Trudy Tibbals

A Very concerned Mother of 3 and Maryland Resident

SB685.DDCouncil.LOI.pdf

Uploaded by: Rachel London

Position: INFO



Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council

CREATING CHANGE • IMPROVING LIVES

House Ways and Means Committee
SB 685: Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language-Related Assistance
February 18, 2025
Letter of Information

The Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council (Council) is an independent, public policy organization that creates change to make it possible for people with developmental disabilities to live the lives they want with the support they need. From this perspective, the Council advocates for policies and programs that make Maryland a place where everyone can effectively participate in the electoral process.

Voting is a fundamental right that Maryland's citizens with developmental disabilities want and need to access. Many voters with disabilities report they cannot participate in the electoral process due to access issues. The U.S. Election Commission found that 20% of voters with disabilities had trouble on Election Day due to accessibility at polling locations compared to 6% among voters without disabilities.

We understand the intention of this bill is to increase access for all voters with Limited English Proficiency, including voters with disabilities. If implemented, we recommend the State Board of Elections ensure that all electoral communication is accessible for communities that use Sign Language such as American Sign Language. This requires thoughtful consideration of the practical implementation of how to make materials available, especially for communication that occurs in advance of Election Day, such as registration notices, sample ballots, etc. The best way to do this is by continuing to work with disability advocates in the community.

While investments in voting equity are without question needed, including for people with disabilities, the Council believes that the amount, purpose, and timing of such efforts must take into consideration the needs of all Marylanders with disabilities. Funding for this bill should not be offset by limiting essential funding for other critical needs, most immediately the Developmental Disabilities Administration community services that thousands of Marylanders depend upon.

Contact: Dr. Stephanie Dolamore, Deputy Director, sdolamore@md-council.org