

February 18, 2025

Testimony on HB 816
Election Law – Petitions and Ballot Questions – Contents, Plain Language Requirement, and
Procedures
Ways and Means

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland is in support of HB 816, which would require that all ballot questions and petitions be written in plain language – in other words, written in a way that they could be reasonably understood by a voter regardless of their level of education. Voting should be accessible to all eligible citizens, and that necessitates breaking down any intellectual barriers to voting in elections.

Regardless of the intent, ballot measures and petition language that are hard to understand represent a big problem in our elections. Too often we see voters leaving the polling booth unsure of how they voted on a question, or having skipped over certain questions altogether because they just couldn't be sure what they were being asked. It is important that voters are conscious and informed about the decisions they are making at the ballot box. It is also important that voters don't feel left out of policymaking by unclear or intimidating ballot language.

Our current petition and ballot measure language still favors the college-educated, who represent a minority of the U.S. population. According to data from the Census Bureau, only 31% of people 25 or older have a bachelor's degree or higher education level. Specifically, in the state of Maryland only 47% of people are college educated. This means that at least 53% of people are in jeopardy of not being able to understand what is written in a ballot question.

While the ability to comprehend the complicated language used in petitions and ballot measures is becoming more widespread, it still does not reflect the education level of the average voter.

This bill is not meant to question the intelligence of Marylanders, this bill simply acknowledges the realities of the educational make-up of our state and country and makes necessary accommodations. We believe that measures should be taken to make voting on petitions and ballot measures more equitable for everyone. HB 816 would make voting more accessible, and for that reason we urge a favorable report.