

February 11, 2025

Maryland House of Delegates
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21411

Re: House Bill 710 - Voting Rights for All Act

Dear Committee Member:

We, the undersigned advocate-led organizations, urge your support for HB 710, Voting Rights for All Act. We applaud the reforms enacted to make voting safe and accessible, including expanding access to mail-in voting, early voting, and voting in correctional facilities throughout the state. We are committed to ensuring that all voters, including those in confined housing, with disabilities, and military voters overseas, can exercise their right to vote.

However, now we are presented with a new opportunity to lead the country by returning the right to vote to all Marylanders, including those who are currently incarcerated for a felony conviction. This comes in the way of the Voting Rights for All Act.

Maryland's current law allows most individuals involved in the criminal legal system to vote—except for this subjugated group of people. People in jails and prisons who are pre-trial or serving misdemeanor sentences can (and do!) vote, as can people on probation and parole. The State Board of Elections works directly with local and state correctional facilities to facilitate voting inside, and the Administrator of the State Board of Elections has participated in voter registration drives in correctional facilities. Both jail administrators and elections administrators have invested in voting for eligible incarcerated individuals because it has a positive impact. Those who are currently serving a sentence for a felony, however, are disenfranchised and unable to participate in the voting process, which only serves to further isolate them from society.

The idea that voting is not universal is nothing new to the United States or Maryland. What was once a privilege for only land-owning white men was extended as a privilege to all white men, women, and then, slowly, people of color. We now understand a universal truth: voting is a right, not a privilege. Voting rights in this country - and in Maryland - has always been a racial justice issue. We have had to push to expand the right to vote here in Maryland. At each step, we have been met with resistance and fear-mongering. When we have restored the right to vote to previously disenfranchised groups, our democracy has gotten stronger. In 2007, Maryland ended the practice of lifetime disenfranchisement of people who had certain criminal convictions. In 2016, 40,000 people on probation and parole got their right to vote back. In the last few years, Maryland pushed forward to pass the Value My Vote Act, which ensures that eligible voters in jails and prisons have access to exercise their rights. Now is the time to restore voting rights to every Marylander.

Racial disparities in the criminal legal system in Maryland are alarming: Maryland incarcerates the highest percentage of Black people in the entire country. Black men make up 14% of Maryland's population but consist of 73% of the male prison population in the state. Tying the right to vote to this same criminal legal system is wrong. Tying the right to vote to the criminal legal system results in the fundamental right to vote in Maryland being infected with all of the racial disparities of the criminal legal system.

Maryland should move away from the legacy of racist voter disenfranchisement and also acknowledge one solid truth: everyone, including those incarcerated, are all equal human beings, and each should be allowed to vote. Someone in prison is still part of society and has a voice that should be heard. Allowing and encouraging them to vote facilitates their return to life outside the prison as a participating and engaged member of society. A prison sentence metes out punishment and should not include suppressing an incarcerated person's voice.

The simple fact is that ending the current practice of disenfranchisement based on a person's conviction would eliminate all the work, errors, and costs associated with having some in jails and prisons who can vote and others who can not. Our organizations have witnessed the confusion among eligible voters and agencies that would be eliminated should universal voting be the law of Maryland.

Passing this law would clarify and streamline the work of the correctional facilities and the State Board of Elections by eliminating the confusion around who inside can vote. In addition, the Voting Rights for All Act requires that the State Board of Elections set up a hotline for voters to get information.

The Voting Rights for All Act would help Marylanders break free of the legacy of systemic racism that infects the right to vote in Maryland by restoring the right to vote to all Marylanders regardless of their conviction. We urge a favorable report on HB 710.

Respectfully submitted,

ACLU of Maryland
Advance Maryland
Advancement Project
All of Us or None Texas
Ames UMC Bel Air
Asbury UMC DC
Black Girls Vote
Blue and Gold Democratic Club
Campaign Legal Center
CASA
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist
Environmental Justice Ministry
Common Cause Maryland

Ex-Incarcerated People Organizing (EXPO)
Expand the Ballot Coalition
Fair and Just Prosecution
H.O.P.E. Baltimore
Helping Ourselves To Transform
Human Rights Watch
Illinois Alliance for Reentry and Justice
Indivisible Howard County
Institute for Responsive Government Action
Leaders of the Beautiful Struggle
League of Women Voters of Maryland
Life After Release

Life Coach Each One Teach One Reentry
Fellowship
Maryland Justice Project
Maryland NAACP
Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative
Millions for Prisoners New Mexico
National Federation of the Blind of Maryland
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational
Fund, Inc.
NAACP Prince George's County Branch
National Association of Criminal Defense
Lawyers
New Jersey Institute for Social Justice
No Boundaries Coalition

Nolef Turns Inc
Oregon Justice Resource Center
Organizing Black
Out for Justice, Inc
Parole Preparation Project
Prison Policy Initiative
Progressive Maryland
Public Justice Center
Ranked Choice Voting Maryland
RepresentUs
Showing Up for Racial Justice Annapolis
and Anne Arundel County (SURJ3A)
The Change Up: Midnight Coalition
The Sentencing Project
Voice of the Experienced (Vote)