

BILL NUMBER HB 983

BILL TITLE: Local Boards of Elections - Language-Related Assistance

POSITION: Favorable



February 18, 2025

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB983

To the Honorable Chair Vanessa Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and Members of the Ways & Means Committee:

On behalf of Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) Maryland, we support HB 983 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.

RCV Maryland is a 501(c)3 nonprofit that focuses on education and advocacy for better voting methods. We recognize that language assistance is a key part of making Maryland's elections accessible to all voters, regardless of how or when they cast their ballots.

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 Elections 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.

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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 HB 983.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michelle Whittaker".

Michelle Whittaker
Executive Director
Ranked Choice Voting Maryland

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Owen Anderson".

Owen Anderson
Deputy Director
Ranked Choice Voting Maryland