

February 11, 2025

Testimony on HB 733
Elections for County Boards of Education – Party Designation or Affiliation – Certificates of
Candidacy and Ballots
Ways & Means

Position: Unfavorable

Common Cause Maryland opposes HB 733, which allows candidates for county Board of Education to disclose their party affiliation on their certificate of candidacy and prohibits local Boards from disqualifying a candidate for doing so.

Across the U.S., school board races are non-partisan in more than 90% of public school districts.¹ School boards have a critical mission: they establish the vision, education within their district, decide how to best spend taxpayer money, and supervise the work of administrators. The quality of decisions a board can make depends on whether the members are able to work together, as well as in conjunction with parents, administrators, and other community stakeholders.

School board members who are motivated by partisan for affiliation or ideology will likely find it difficult to put party politics aside to prioritize student interests and the local challenges that their districts face. A 2022 study of Wisconsin school board elections showed how national party conflicts can trickle down to the local level and influence school board races – candidates who focused on divisive issues were more likely to win races in heavily partisan areas.² This suggests that party affiliation and ideology drove school board election outcomes in these races, rather than the tangible issues these districts face.

Another study from 2017 focused on the effects of partisan races on the quality of school board governance and deliberations. This study revealed a predictable partisan split – members were more adversarial, which reduced the overall quality of the board’s decision-making.³ A school board plagued by in-fighting and partisan conflict will find it difficult to maintain the trust of community stakeholders (parents, teachers, administrators, etc.) and makes it less likely that other citizens will want to run in that district when a seat on the board opens up.

The bill also leaves out over 900,000 unaffiliated voters within the state – including parents and teachers – who should be able to vote in school board races.

The introduction of partisan school board races will not only open the door to increased conflict between members and a decline in quality decision-making, but it will also leave a large number of

¹ <https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/education/k-12-schools/carroll-county-school-board-election-3YBHPQL5OVDA5M2CAWERR6NIPM/>

² Shah, Paru, Aaron Weinschenk, and Zach Yiannias. “Schoolhouse Rocked: Pandemic Politics and the Nationalization of School Board Elections.” *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 24.2 (2024): 207–217. Web.

³ <https://scholars.org/contribution/why-nonpartisan-versus-partisan-school-board>

voters unable to participate if they prefer to remain unaffiliated with a national party. For these reasons, we respectfully request an unfavorable report on HB 733.