



February 18, 2025

**Testimony on HB 983**  
**Election Law - Local Boards of Elections - Language-Related Assistance**  
**Ways & Means**

**Position:** Favorable

I am writing on behalf of Dēmos to express our strong support for HB 983, a transformative bill which would provide more access for limited English proficiency (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.

Dēmos is a non-profit public policy organization working to build a just, inclusive multiracial democracy and economy. We build power with and for Black and brown communities through our strategic partnerships with state-based and grassroots organizations, leveraging more than two decades of experience advancing policy solutions, research, legal advocacy, and narrative strategies. Since our founding in 2000, we have worked with our partners to put pro-democracy and economic justice narratives at the center of the national conversation and shift law and policy closer toward a just, multiracial democracy.

Building a just, multiracial democracy requires government at all levels to remove racially discriminatory barriers to the ballot box that prevent voters of color from exercising their full political power. In Maryland, as is true all across the United States, racial disparities in voter turnout continue to persist. In the November 2022 election, voter turnout for Black, Latino, and Asian American voters in Maryland lagged significantly behind white voter turnout, with Asian American and Latino turnout trailing behind white turnout by over 20 percentage points.<sup>i</sup>

Currently, Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act requires that counties provide election materials to language minority communities that meet specific coverage formulas. However, Section 203 only defined “language minority” communities to include “persons who are American Indian, Asian American, Alaskan Natives or of Spanish heritage.”<sup>ii</sup> Under the current definition, language minority communities who speak African or Caribbean languages are not covered, including Maryland’s significant French, Amharic, and Arabic-speaking communities.<sup>iii</sup> In addition, the law only requires provision of language access services if more than 10,000 citizens of voting age or 5% of the voting age population are members of a single language-minority group.<sup>iv</sup> Under the current formula, the only covered jurisdictions in Maryland are Montgomery and Prince George’s County, which are required to provide Spanish language assistance.

HB 983 would address the gaps in coverage under the federal Voting Rights Act by changing the language threshold to 2% or 4,000 of the citizen voting age population—creating more accessible elections that ensure all citizens are able to vote, regardless of their English proficiency or preferred language. 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.

As the most diverse state on the East Coast with more than 425,000 LEP residents, Maryland is an ideal state to expand language access and ensure all Marylanders have equal access to the ballot box. Language access provisions have been proven to work across the country and have helped boost registration and turnout in diverse language-minority communities, in one case helping to increase Asian American voter registration by 61%.<sup>v</sup>

Through HB 983, Maryland can continue to be a leader in expanding voting access and welcoming diverse communities. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on HB 983.

**Submitted by:**

Phi Nguyen

Director of Democracy, Demos

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<sup>i</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement. (2020)

<sup>ii</sup> [52 USC § 10310\(c\)\(3\)](#)

<sup>iii</sup> Migration Policy Institute, Maryland: State Immigration Data Profile. (2023)

<sup>iv</sup> Angelo Ancheta, Language Access and Voting Rights: An Overview of Federal, State, and Local Policies. *Demos*. Pg 11. (2024)

<sup>v</sup> Magpantay, Glenn D. "Sound Barriers Ver. 2.0: The Second Generation of Enforcement of the Language Assistance Provisions (Section 203) of the Voting Rights Act." *Brooklyn Law Review* 80, no. 1 (2014): 79.