



TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

HB 839 Election Law – Provisional Ballots – Nonpartisan Board of Education Contests

POSITION – Favorable with Amendments

BY: Linda T. Kohn, President

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The League of Women Voters of Maryland believes that elections should be accessible and encourage as many voters as possible to participate. We also believe that primaries should be more inclusive and open. While LWVMD can appreciate the spirit of HB 839, it does not go far enough. Marylanders must feel that they are not only wanted in the democratic process but also crucial to it.

The numbers don't lie. Maryland has over 900,000 unaffiliated voters, and yet, depending on the election year, half of those voters cannot even participate in the primary. As of right now, there is no mechanism for these voters to switch their registration on election day and vote on their beliefs. As such, during the 2024 primary, unaffiliated voters have an abysmal turnout that hovers around 8% of those eligible. Unfortunately, these numbers do not improve much when you look at voters who are affiliated with one of the main parties. In the 2024 Primary Elections, Maryland had a statewide turnout of only 27%. Most of this could be attributed to a disillusion with the primary system and feeling that their votes won't accurately reflect who they would want to support.

Beyond that, Board of Education races are not the only nonpartisan races that potential voters could be asked about. If HB 839 wanted to be more inclusive, it would take into account all nonpartisan races. This could set an unfortunate precedent for municipalities to set the same standard, inadvertently leaving out voters who are voting provisionally for offices like city and county council.

LWVMD would ask that amendments to HB 839 be made to reflect the following:

1. All voters can request the ballot for their chosen party
2. That language in the bill reflects that all nonpartisan races and not just Board of Education races should be counted.

Again, while LWVMD appreciates HB 839's attempts to be slightly more inclusive, it does not go far enough. Therefore, we urge a favorable report with amendments.