Election Law - Incarcerated Individuals - Voter Hotline and Voting Eligibility (Voting Rights for All Act)

Position: Favorable

Dear Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

My name is Lori Kronser. I am writing to urge a favorable report on SB 89 Election Law - Incarcerated Individuals - Voter Hotline and Eligibility (Voting Rights for All Act).

SB 89, the Voting Rights for All Act, expands voting access by establishing a voter hotline for incarcerated individuals and allowing people with felony convictions who are currently serving to vote. Throughout history, various discriminatory practices, such as literacy tests and strict voting requirements, have been implemented to suppress Black voters. By advancing SB 89, Maryland acknowledges this legacy and takes a significant step toward rectifying past injustices, ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their circumstances, have the opportunity to participate in the democratic process.

Too many Americans have seen how our nation's prison system is used to silence the voices of millions of Americans at the ballot box. According to the Sentencing Project, more than 16,000 Marylanders are currently disenfranchised due to criminal convictions in Maryland. It is time to give these Americans a voice in our democracy. Those who have finished serving a prison sentence for a felony need to take affirmative steps to register to vote. Many are unsure of their rights. They might know that being convicted of a felony affected their voting rights, but not the details: can they vote even if on probation? Do they need to take any additional steps to restore their voting rights? It would be much simpler if someone returning from prison never lost their voting rights in the first place.

Denying the right to vote to those who are in prison is also problematic. 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 prison as a participating and engaged member of society. Punishment is meted out by a prison sentence and should not include suppressing a prisoner's voice.

SB 89 serves as a beacon of hope for Maryland's most silenced populations currently disenfranchised due to criminal convictions. Despite being most impacted by the criminal legal system, these individuals remain voiceless in our nation's electoral process. Polling by The Sentencing Project, Stand Up America, Common Cause, and State Innovation Exchange revealed that most Americans believe the right to vote should be an inalienable right for all Americans, extending to those who are currently serving sentences, both within and outside of prison walls.

SB 89 is a long-overdue step towards fulfilling the promise of our democracy, where every American has a voice and a stake in shaping our nation's future. Showing Up for Racial Justice Annapolis and Anne Arundel County (SURJ3A) urges supporting this essential legislation and ensuring that all Americans can participate fully in our democratic processes.

SB 89 comprises a series of transformative measures designed to eradicate disenfranchisement and empower marginalized communities, including:

- Expansion of voting rights to Marylanders completing their sentences inside prison;
- Establishes a toll-free voter hotline for people in prison to receive information about voting, request voting materials, and report voting rights violations.

SB 89 represents a bold step towards a more just and equitable society, where the right to vote is not a privilege reserved for a select few but a fundamental right guaranteed to all Americans. By dismantling the barriers that bar tens of thousands of Marylanders from participating in our democracy, we can move closer to realizing the true essence of American democracy – a system of government that truly represents the will of all its people.

Thank you for your consideration of this critical step towards an inclusive democracy. We urge a favorable report.

Sincerely,

Lori Kronser

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