

Testimony in support of SB132, the "[Ballot Access](#)" bill sponsored by Sen. Cheryl Kagan

Maryland has an opportunity to take the lead this year in helping to improve participation in our nation's most important democratic process—voting—by passing SB132 as quickly as possible.

Maryland rightfully prides itself on having strong democratic values, good governance and broad citizen participation. Yet it currently prevents 984,920 unaffiliated ("Independent") voters, comprising more than 22 per cent of the state's voters, from voting in primary elections that choose which candidates will be nominated to represent their party's ideas and programs in the general election.

We can remedy this flaw in our system with the simple fix proposed in SB 132, the "[Ballot Access](#)" bill, sponsored by Sen. Cheryl Kagan. It would allow unaffiliated voters to join a party and complete a primary ballot so long as they do so during the state's Early Voting period. To be clear, this legislation only applies to those not affiliated with either party. Voters currently registered as either Democrats or Republicans would still need to change their affiliation 21 days in advance.

The need to allow almost one million Maryland voters to participate in every element of our voting system has never been more urgent. The unaffiliated portion of the electorate has been growing steadily. It has roughly doubled since [2000](#), when it was 12% of the electorate. This means that every year an increasing number of Marylanders express their faltering faith in our democratic institutions by declining to affiliate with either political party, thereby denying themselves an opportunity to determine the choices they will be presented with in the general election. This is not healthy for our state or for either political party. It is a trend which can and should be addressed without delay.

Expanding voter participation in our democracy doesn't weaken our party system. It strengthens it. Too many of our citizens today are expressing their growing mistrust of politics. We need to address their legitimate concerns by encouraging them to participate in all aspects of the process, not by denying them access to a major part of it.

Opening primaries will not weaken the quality of our general election candidates, it will strengthen it. The more representative primary voters are of the overall electorate, the more likely the winning candidates will understand and reflect the needs and concerns of all Marylanders. And the more likely they reflect what voters want, the better the odds that what we decide here in this body will help restore our citizen's faith in their democracy.

If we truly want a government that reflects the will of the people, lawmakers must be willing to update laws that do not serve the public interest. Expanding "Ballot Access" for unaffiliated voters would be a commonsense step toward a more inclusive and representative democracy. We urge you to vote yes on SB132.

Respectfully submitted by:

Dr. Mark Siegel, former Executive Director of the Democratic National Committee, and
Morley Winograd, Chairman of DNC Commission that reformed the Democratic Party's
presidential delegate selection rules