

2026 SB0029 Testimony For 2026-01-19.pdf

Uploaded by: Alan Lang

Position: FAV

Testimony For SB0029

Honorable Senators

Please enter a favorable report for SB0029.

I support:

- altering the information that is required to be included on the signature page of a petition seeking to place a question on the ballot and with a question on the ballot;
- requiring that a certain summary included on the signature page of a petition seeking to place a question on the ballot and a certain statement about a question on the ballot **be written in plain language**;
- altering the deadline by which ballot questions must be prepared and certified;
- requiring the State Board of Elections to make certain information regarding a ballot question available for a public comment period; and
- requiring the State Board and each applicable local board of elections to post certain information relating to certain ballot questions for at least a certain period of time before the general election.

I support any effort to make our voting process more understandable by the public. Sometimes the issues are written in such a way one almost needs an attorney to help one understand the issue and what a vote for or against actually means.

Using complicated language often results in two outcomes: voters skip the issue because they do not want to risk voting for/against something they were against/for or making an error and voting for something they were actually against and vice versa because they did not understand the consequences of their vote or petition signature.

I believe adopting the plain language requirements in this bill and the other objectives would greatly improve the process.

Please enter a favorable report for SB0140.

Alan Lang
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Legislative District 30B
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Alanlang1@verizon.net
January 19, 2026

Election Law - Plain Language

Uploaded by: Jonathon Rondeau

Position: FAV

January 21, 2026

Chair Brian J. Feldman
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: SB29/HB44 – Election Law - Petitions and Ballot Questions - Contents, Plain Language Requirement, and Procedures

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of Fello, we write in support of ***SB29/HB44 – Election Law - Petitions and Ballot Questions - Contents, Plain Language Requirement, and Procedures.***

Across Maryland, Fello is building communities where people belong. With a team of more than 650 employees, Fello supports over 5,000 people with disabilities each year – creating opportunities that empower people to live the lives they choose. From advancing equity and respect to expanding access and connection, inclusion is at the heart of everything we do. One powerful way this comes to life is through Fello Communities: beautiful, safe, and accessible rental housing that offers choice and stability for residents across income levels, from affordable to market-rate homes.

SB29/HB44 will increase the accessibility and transparency of ballot measures for all voters, including people with disabilities. The bill requires that summaries on petition signature pages and the condensed statements that appear with ballot questions be written in plain, clear language that is easy to understand, avoids legal jargon, passive voice, and double negatives, and explains the practical outcome of each voting choice. The bill also updates deadlines for preparing and certifying ballot language, requires the State Board of Elections and local boards to post information about ballot questions for at least 90 days before a general election, and establishes a public comment period so voters can review and provide feedback on proposed text before certification.

These changes will make ballot language more understandable, reduce confusion, and improve voter comprehension of ballot measures, ensuring that all Maryland voters can make informed decisions at the ballot box.

For these reasons, we respectfully urge a favorable report on SB29/HB44.

Sincerely,


Jonathon Rondeau
President & CEO

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SB 29 - Election Law - Petitions and Ballot Questi

Uploaded by: Morgan Drayton

Position: FAV

January 21, 2026

Testimony on SB 29
Election Law – Petitions and Ballot Questions – Contents, Plain Language Requirement, and
Procedures
Education, Energy, and the Environment

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland is in support of SB 29, which would require that all ballot questions and petitions be written in plain language – in other words, written in a way that they could be reasonably understood by a voter regardless of their level of education. Voting should be accessible to all eligible citizens, and that necessitates breaking down any intellectual barriers to voting in elections.

Regardless of the intent, ballot measures and petition language that are hard to understand represent a big problem in our elections. Too often we see voters leaving the polling booth unsure of how they voted on a question, or having skipped over certain questions altogether because they just couldn't be sure what they were being asked. It is important that voters are conscious and informed about the decisions they are making at the ballot box. It is also important that voters don't feel left out of policymaking by unclear or intimidating ballot language.

Our current petition and ballot measure language still favors the college-educated, who represent a minority of the U.S. population. According to data from the Census Bureau, only 31% of people 25 or older have a bachelor's degree or higher education level. Specifically, in the state of Maryland only 47% of people are college educated. This means that at least 53% of people are in jeopardy of not being able to understand what is written in a ballot question.

While the ability to comprehend the complicated language used in petitions and ballot measures is becoming more widespread, it still does not reflect the education level of the average voter.

This bill is not meant to question the intelligence of Marylanders but simply acknowledges the realities of the educational make-up of our state and country and makes necessary accommodations. We believe that measures should be taken to make voting on petitions and ballot measures more equitable for everyone. SB 29 would make voting more accessible for all Marylanders, and for that reason we urge a favorable report.

LK_1-21 SB29 Election Law - Petitions and Ballot Q

Uploaded by: Nikki Tyree

Position: FAV



**TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION, ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT
COMMITTEE**

**SB 29 Election Law – Petitions and Ballot Questions – Contents, Plain
Language Requirement, and Procedures**

POSITION – Favorable

BY: Linda T. Kohn, President

Date: January 21, 2026

The League of Women Voters of Maryland believes that elections should be feasible to implement, increase voter participation, and be equitable and accessible.

SB 29 is a necessary and long-overdue bill that would require all petitions and ballot questions to be posted and written to voters in plain language. It would also limit how the questions can be written so as not to use specific techniques that could be confusing to the reader. Furthermore, it would require that voters be told what the outcome of voting a certain way would mean.

Too often, LWVMD has been called upon to answer the most common question: What is this ballot question saying, and what will it do? In 2022, there was a ballot initiative on Howard County's Orphan Court. Not only did the questions, as written, confuse voters, but LWVMD was inundated with people who did not understand how voting yes or no would actually impact Howard County. Had SB 615 been law at that time, voters would have been given clear and concise language around what a vote of "yes" or a vote of "no" would mean for people in Howard County.

In every election, voters go to the polls and skip voting on ballot questions because they do not understand them or fear that if they do vote on them, they will vote "wrong." Some voters do their best to read the question and vote but then are dismayed to learn after the fact what their vote actually means. SB 615 would prevent this confusion.

LWVMD would ask that the State Board of Elections be provided with a reasonable budget to publicize this new initiative and alert Maryland voters that it is now available.

LWVMD urges a favorable report on SB 29.

SB29_DDCouncil_Support.pdf

Uploaded by: Rachel London

Position: FAV



Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council

CREATING CHANGE • IMPROVING LIVES

Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

**SB 29: Election Law - Petitions and Ballot Questions – Contents, Plain Language Requirement,
and Procedures**

January 21, 2026

Position: Support

The Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council (Council) creates change to make it possible for people with developmental disabilities to live the lives they want with the support they need. As such, we support efforts to increase access to civil rights, like voting for people with disabilities. SB 29 does just that.

WHAT does this legislation do?

- SB 29 makes changes to the way that petitions for new ballot questions and questions on a ballot are written. It requires that they are written in plain language, contain a brief summary of the practical outcome, and prohibits the use of passive voice, legal jargon, and double negatives.
- Plain language is a way of writing so that all people can understand information the first time they read it.

WHY is this legislation important?

- **This bill makes voting more accessible for people with disabilities.** Voting is a fundamental right for Marylanders with developmental disabilities, but they face barriers. The U.S. Election Commission found that 20% of voters with disabilities face difficulties with voting, compared to 6% of voters without disabilities. But these difficulties can be eliminated.
- **Writing ballot petitions and questions in plain language benefits everyone.** Many ballot questions can be confusing for people with and without disabilities to understand. Using plain language makes it easier for all voters. When one group is served more effectively, all voters are able to vote more effectively. Everyone deserves to a smooth voting process so they can exercise their right to vote during every election cycle

Since 2024, we have worked closely with state agencies to implement the Governor's Plain Language Executive Order (EO 01.01.2024.25). Together, we developed training, resources, tools, and pilot projects to increase the use of plain language across State government. Given the State's ongoing efforts to help state agencies, offices, and board use plain language, SB 29 makes sense.

Contact: Rachel London, Executive Director, RLondon@md-council.org

Testimony in support of SB0029 - Election Law - Pe

Uploaded by: Richard KAP Kaplowitz

Position: FAV

01/21/2026

Richard Keith Kaplowitz
Frederick, MD 21703

TESTIMONY ON SB#/0029- POSITION: FAVORABLE

Election Law - Petitions and Ballot Questions - Contents, Plain Language Requirement, and Procedures

TO: Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy and the Environment Committee

FROM: Richard Keith Kaplowitz

My name is Richard Keith Kaplowitz. I am a resident of District 3, Frederick County. I am submitting this testimony in support of SB#/0029, **Election Law - Petitions and Ballot Questions - Contents, Plain Language Requirement, and Procedures**

This bill is a recognition of problems that exist with the language sometimes employed on petitions and ballot questions. The Journal of Political Science has studied some of the problems on this language and found that: ¹

Voters with limited English language proficiency are protected by the Voting Rights Act, but some argue that existing provisions may not be enough in the face of complex ballot language. ... We find that those who scored lower on English-language ability tests were less able to vote in a manner consistent with their previously stated issue positions when faced with even simple ballot wording in English, and that they were more willing to cast potentially erroneous ballots when confronted with complex ballot language than those with high English proficiency.

The Center for Civic Design has concluded: ²

Ballot questions are an important and empowering part of our democracy. But when voters can't understand these questions, they are more likely to skip them and miss a chance to cast their vote, or misunderstand the question and [vote against their own intent](#). Voters are also [less likely to cast votes](#) on the rest of the ballot after a confusingly worded question. Finally, voters tell us that when they experience problems like this, they lose confidence that their vote makes a difference.

¹ <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol49/iss1/2/>

² <https://civicdesign.org/ballot-questions-are-hard-to-understand-here-are-6-ways-to-fix-them/>

The Center has “...identified four of the most common ways ballot questions are consistently misleading or confusing. For each of these problems, we’ve identified concrete solutions legislatures can use to make ballot questions easier to understand.”³

This bill agrees with the Centers and Journal conclusions and works to implement specific suggested solutions. It will accomplish this goal by altering the information that is required to be included on the signature page of a petition seeking to place a question on the ballot and with a question on the ballot. It will then require that a certain summary included on the signature page of a petition seeking to place a question on the ballot and a certain statement about a question on the ballot be written in plain language. Finally, it will make this occur on a timely basis by altering the deadline by which ballot questions must be prepared and certified.

I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on SB#/0029.

³ Ibid

SB 29 Election Law - Petitions and Ballot Question

Uploaded by: Sara Westrick

Position: FAV



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**SB 29 - Election Law - Petitions and Ballot Questions –
Contents, Plain Language Requirement, and Procedures
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
January 21, 2025
11:00 AM
FAVORABLE**

Chairman Feldman, Vice-Chair Kagan, and members of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee, my name is Sara Westrick, Advocacy Director for AARP Maryland. I would like to thank Vice-Chair Kagan for introducing this important legislation.

AARP is a nonpartisan organization that does not donate to or endorse candidates. AARP, however, plans a broad array of voter engagement efforts to help older Americans exercise their right to vote. For example, AARP has created an online voter engagement hub that points readers to each state’s voting resources, where they can find information about voter registration, early voting, and absentee ballot procedures.

We believe all Marylanders should be able to exercise their right to vote freely, easily, and safely. SB 29 is important in achieving this because it helps provide clarity and accessibility for voters.

SB 29 emphasizes “plain language,” avoiding passive voice, legal jargon, and double negatives. This type of writing helps voters to understand ballot questions more easily. In addition, clear summaries and titles can reduce confusion and help voters make informed decisions.

The bill also enhances transparency in the ballot question process by creating a 15-day public comment period on ballot question language before it is finalized. This gives voters meaningful time to review and understand proposed ballot questions, see what policy changes are being considered ahead of time, and provide feedback to identify confusing, ambiguous, or misleading language before it is locked in.

SB 29 also expands requirements for posting the complete text of ballot questions for at least 90 days before the election and requires links to the full text of underlying legislation or constitutional amendments. This can help make subjects more accessible to all Marylanders, and therefore more readily researched and understood by voters.

The bill also directs the State Board of Elections to consider the Plain Writing Act of 2010 and align with federal readability practices, which benefit voters with varying literacy levels and disabilities. In short, plain language writing helps bridge gaps in age, education levels, language abilities, and more, supporting a more equitable voting experience.

For all these reasons, I respectfully urge the committee to vote in favor of SB 29 and help Marylanders more freely and easily exercise their right to vote, and thank you for considering this important legislation.

For additional follow-up, please contact Sara Westrick at swestrick@arp.org or 410-310-0374.

Sen. Kagan SB29_ Simplified Ballot Language.pdf

Uploaded by: Sen. Cheryl Kagan

Position: FAV

CHERYL C. KAGAN
Legislative District 17
Montgomery County

Vice Chair
Education, Energy, and
the Environment Committee

Joint Audit and Evaluation Committee
Joint Committee on Federal Relations



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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony SB29: Simplified Ballot Language

Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee
Wednesday, January 21, 2026, 11 AM

According to [2022 Census Bureau](#) data, nearly 10 percent of Marylanders aged 25 and older do not have a high school diploma or equivalent. Despite this, our ballot questions often use confusing and technical language. In 2022, voters were presented with five statewide ballot measures written at an average Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level of 14-- equivalent to college-level reading. When questions are written in complex legal language, many voters skip them. State Board of Elections data show that nearly 400,000 Marylanders left important ballot questions blank, even though more than 2 million cast votes for Governor. Our democracy is weakened when voters cannot easily understand the issues they are being asked to decide.

While many organizations produce explanatory summaries, voters should not need additional guidance to make informed decisions. Twenty-three states already require clear, accessible ballot language. Maryland should do the same.

Examples

Consider Question #2 from 2022:

“Adds to the eligibility requirements to serve as a senator or a delegate to the Maryland General Assembly by requiring a person to have maintained a primary place of abode in the district that the person has been chosen to represent. Under current law, a person must have resided in the district to which the person has been elected for at least six months immediately preceding the date of the person's election or, if the district has been established for less than six months prior to the date of election, as long as the district has been established. The new law requires, beginning January 1, 2024, a person must have both resided in and maintained a primary place of abode in the district for the same time periods as under current law.”

A plain-language version of the same question could read:

Do you support requiring Maryland General Assembly candidates to live in and make their primary home in the district they seek to represent for at least six months before the election (or as long as the district has existed, if it was established less than six months ago)?

In contrast, some ballot questions already used clear and straightforward language:

- 2022 Question #4: “Do you favor the legalization of the use of cannabis by an individual who is at least 21 years of age on or after July 1, 2023, in the State of Maryland?”

- 2020 Question #2: “Do you approve the expansion of commercial gaming in the State of Maryland to authorize sports and events betting for the primary purpose of raising revenue for education?”

History

In July 2024, Governor Moore signed an Executive Order establishing the Maryland Plain Language Initiative. On August 4, 2025, the Secretary of State confirmed that her office interprets this Executive Order to extend to statewide ballot language. While this is a positive step, it would not cover county ballot measures, which still require legislative action.

Solution

SB29 is identical to SB615 (unanimous, 2025) and would:

- Require all ballot questions, state and local, to include a brief, descriptive title.
- Include a clear summary of the proposed change written in plain, accessible language that avoids legal jargon, double negatives, and passive voice.
- Provide a concise explanation of what a “yes” or “no” vote would mean in practical terms.
- Allow any legislatively mandated wording to appear alongside the plain-language statement.
- Set a submission deadline of July 1 in an election year, followed by a 15-day public comment period for revisions or legal review before ballots are finalized.
- Maintain the current requirement that the State Board of Elections and local boards publish the full text of proposed Constitutional Amendments at least 65 days before the General Election, with links to relevant legislative webpages.

Plain language strengthens democracy. When voters understand ballot questions, participation increases and election outcomes better reflect the will of the people. Marylanders deserve the ability to engage fully and confidently in the democratic process.

SB29 ensures that every Maryland voter-- regardless of education-- can access clear, understandable ballot language and make informed choices in both state and local elections.

I respectfully urge a favorable report on SB29 again this year.