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## HB 1289 | FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS

### GOVERNMENT, LABOR, AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE | 25 FEB 2026

#### Our Perspective

Veterans for Maryland Voters represents a community of Maryland veterans from all walks of life—spanning from constitutional conservatives to progressives. We are united by a shared belief that Marylanders deserve an election system that is as functional and resilient as the people it serves. Having taken an oath to defend our democracy, we view our support for election modernization as a continuation of that service. We want a system that is fair, transparent, and representative of every citizen's voice.

As veterans, we have a unique appreciation for "mission readiness"—and that applies to our election systems. We have previously asked for big changes; this is not one of them. This is a common-sense request for a data-driven study of our democratic tools.

#### A History of Common-Sense Evolution

There is a misconception that our current voting method is a static, sacred tradition. In reality, it was a practical solution to a period of chaos. In our country's early days, voting was often done aloud in public squares.<sup>1</sup> In the 1800s, Maryland elections were often marred by "party strip" ballots that led to intimidation and even deadly violence in the streets of Baltimore.<sup>2</sup>

Our current "Australian Ballot" was adopted in the late 1880s specifically to restore order and voter privacy.<sup>3</sup> However, the world has changed since the 19th century. In 1918, Australia realized that a "plurality-takes-all" system often failed to produce leaders with

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<sup>1</sup> National Endowment for the Humanities, **Back When Everyone Knew How You Voted**, Fall 2016, <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2016/fall/feature/back-when-everyone-knew-how-you-voted>.

<sup>2</sup> National Endowment for the Humanities, **Gangs of Baltimore**, May/June 2008, <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2008/mayjune/feature/gangs-baltimore>.

<sup>3</sup> Congressional Research Service, **Election Policy Fundamentals: The Secret Ballot**, July 5, 2024, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN12389>

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broad, majority support. They transitioned to Ranked Choice Voting to ensure their representatives truly reflected a consensus of the people.<sup>4</sup>

Maryland should not be afraid to look at the data and see if our current tools are still the best ones for the modern era.

### **Proposed Amendments: Ensuring a Fair & Balanced Study**

To ensure this Task Force produces a rigorous, unbiased roadmap rather than a partisan recommendation, VAV requests the following:

#### **1. Membership**

- **Add:** Two representatives from organizations with expertise in **Ranked Choice Voting**.
- **Add:** Two representatives from organizations with expertise in **Approval Voting**.
- **Increase:** The number of general **election systems experts** by two.
- **Clarify:** The local board of elections representative should be designated by the **Maryland Association of Election Officials (MAEO)**.

**Rationale:** A study is only as good as its data. Most reform advocates specialize in one method. To get an unbiased recommendation, the Task Force needs experts from both the RCV and Approval Voting camps, alongside the frontline professionals who actually run our elections.

#### **2. Scope**

- **Add:** Direct the Task Force to focus on implementation for **state-level offices** (General Assembly and statewide seats) only.
- **Add:** Require a specific look at how these methods could achieve **proportional representation** in Maryland's multi-member districts.

*Why:* State law and municipal law are different animals. By focusing on state offices, we keep the Task Force's work actionable. Furthermore, we need to know if these systems can better reflect the diversity of thought in our three-delegate districts.

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Electoral Commission, **A short history of federal electoral reform in Australia**, October 8, 2019, <https://www.aec.gov.au/Elections/history-of-electoral-reform.htm>

### 3. Timeline

- **Modify:** Set the report deadline to **December 1, 2026**.

*Why:* This ensures the General Assembly has a finished product in hand before the 2027 session begins.

### Conclusion

Veterans for Maryland Voters isn't asking to upend the system overnight. We are simply asking for a seat at the table to study how we can make our Republic more resilient, more representative, and more secure. We urge a **favorable report** on HB 1289 with these amendments.

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