

Chair Wells and the Members of the GLE Committee:

I offer this testimony in support of HB 580. I thank the Montgomery County delegation for their dogged support continuing to ask for the authority to institute alternate vote tabulation methods, specifically Ranked Choice and Approval voting. I serve on the Montgomery County Democratic Central Committee, but I must make clear that the County party organization has taken no position on the question.

To be totally transparent, I am more than a little ambivalent on the question. I have been active in local politics for a decade, as leader in local progressive groups. I was closely connected with each of Marc Elrich's County Executive campaigns and assisted as an observer during the ballot canvassing after Election Day, as well as the recounts. While there's no way to know, I have never been confident that Executive Elrich would have won either of those contests if we had a system requiring a majority winner. As someone on the left-wing of the Party, I fear that Ranked Choice voting (RCV) would tend to skew our primary contests towards more centrist candidates. But, as a matter of principle, I think it's important that we as a country move in that direction.

We must commit to majority rule. Not minority rule, and even plurality rule.

I think Executive Elrich has suffered from the perception that he barely had the support of only a third of the party's voters. I think he – or any Executive – would be in a stronger position if they could point to the kind of mandate that comes from winning with a majority of voters.

I believe that Ranked Choice Voting would provide that. I'm not a huge fan of Approval Voting, because I think it's less intuitive and voters will be less happy with a system that doesn't distinguish between candidates they put in "approval" votes for. Ranked choice voting does that and would make more sense to voters used to just voting for one candidate for each office. Method of voting, rather than Approval Voting, but that shouldn't concern this committee now.

What the committee should focus on is the erosion of support for government and for our major parties. Ranked choice voting would empower voters to vote for their preferred candidate without having to worry about strategic voting concerns. They could vote for their preferred candidate or party in the general election, but if no candidate breaks 50% on the first tally, the voters will still have a preference that could be counted for their next choice.

It is also true that this change would likely lead to less negative campaigning because candidates can no longer hope to win with a plurality based on taking down their chief opponents. Candidates will have to find ways to appeal to a majority of voters. If that moves us to a more centrist politics, so be it. That would be preferable to the vitriol and division, and the gridlock which marks our politics nationally.

Testimony by Edward Fischman, Montgomery County in Support of HB 580

Other jurisdictions have adopted RCV with great success. Notably, the District of Columbia will be using it their elections this year. Virginia may follow suit soon. Maryland should not be left far behind. Maryland would be the most populous state to adopt it, if we get there. The delegates in Montgomery County have repeatedly asked for this legislation, and the residents really would like it to happen.

When this ball passes and the issue comes before the County Council, I will be arguing to choose Ranked Choice Voting for our elections. I am confident that this will be a positive model for the rest of the state, and eventually, the country. Maryland should not just wait for the other states to lead the way on this healthy reform to our politics.

I urge the committee to issue a favorable report on HB 580.