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Seeking the Green Party nomination for Governor  
HB 580  
FAV

Since 2014, every Democratic primary for Montgomery County Executive has been won with less than a majority of the vote. In 2022, four out of seven primary winners in district council races won without majority support. In jurisdictions where one party dominates, the primary is the de facto general election -- these primary winners went on to govern. These are not just problems of arithmetic. They are symptoms of a voting method that rewards the wrong behavior.

Baltimore City tells the same story. In 2016, Catherine Pugh won the Democratic mayoral primary with 36.6% of the vote in a field of 13 candidates. In 2020, Brandon Scott won with 29.6% in a field of 24. Both won their general elections. The person who became mayor of Maryland's largest city was the first choice of fewer than three in ten primary voters. This is not a Montgomery County problem. It is a structural problem with plurality voting wherever competitive fields emerge.

Under plurality voting, candidates do not need to build broad coalitions. They need a plurality -- the largest slice of a divided field. That incentivizes campaigns aimed at energizing a narrow base and splitting the opposition, not at reaching the widest range of voters. Voters face the mirror image of the same problem: pressure to abandon the candidate they actually prefer in favor of the one they think can win. The result is elections that suppress honest expression, discourage candidates from running, and produce winners who do not reflect the actual preferences of the electorate.

Ranked choice voting restructures those incentives. As Professor Tabatha Abu El-Haj writes in the Oxford Handbook of American Election Law, drawing on the work of Richard Pildes and Michael Parsons, RCV's promise lies in "the incentives it creates for candidates to seek to appeal to party-adjacent voters as their second or third choices." Under plurality voting, those voters are irrelevant. Under ranked choice voting, they shape the outcome. That single structural change -- making second and third choices count -- gives candidates a reason to build coalitions rather than exploit divisions, and gives voters the freedom to express their actual preferences without penalty.

RCV's value extends beyond one-party primaries. In general elections, a growing segment of the electorate faces the same structural trap. Maryland is home to nearly one million unaffiliated voters -- the fastest-growing segment of the electorate. Under plurality voting, voters who prefer a candidate outside the two major parties must choose between voting honestly and risking a spoiler outcome, or voting strategically and abandoning their actual preference. As Abu El-Haj describes, the prevailing framework treats minor parties as a

problem that "distract voters, muddy the choice, and frequently act as spoilers." RCV rejects that premise. It treats voter choice as a feature of democracy, not a bug -- and it ensures that the growing number of Marylanders who do not identify with either major party can participate honestly in elections.

Maryland municipalities can already adopt ranked choice voting. Takoma Park has used it successfully for its municipal elections, demonstrating that RCV works in this state and that voters adapt readily. But counties do not have that authority. That is the gap HB 580 addresses -- and it matters, because county-level adoption creates a model other Maryland counties can study and follow. Virginia already permits ranked choice voting in county elections. HB 580 would give Maryland counties the same flexibility.

HB 580 does not mandate a new voting method. It gives Montgomery County the authority to study, debate, and potentially adopt a system that aligns candidate incentives with the interests of voters. That is exactly how democratic innovation should work: locally, with public input, at a pace that allows for careful implementation.

Ranked choice voting has been part of the Green Party platform for decades. I want to be direct about why, because it is not the reason people might assume. RCV does not particularly help third parties win elections. Greens support it because it changes the incentives -- for candidates and for voters -- in ways that strengthen democracy. That is the standard this committee should apply: not whether a voting method advantages one party or another, but whether it aligns the incentives of campaigns with the interests of the people they seek to represent.

I encourage this committee to provide a favorable report on HB 580.