

GOVERNMENT, LABOR, and ELECTIONS COMMITTEE

February 4, 2026

**HB 44– Election Law – Petitions and Ballot Questions – Contents,
Plain Language Requirement, and Procedures**

Position: SUPPORT

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM) is the Protection & Advocacy agency in Maryland, federally mandated to advance the civil rights of people with disabilities. DRM works to increase opportunities for Marylanders with disabilities to be part of their communities through voting.

DRM strongly supports House Bill 44, which would require that ballot questions and initiatives include plain language summaries and a clear explanation of the practical outcome of each voting choice, making ballot measures easier for voters to understand before casting their votes. This change to current practice is imperative to strengthening democracy in our state. A voter cannot meaningfully participate in the voting process without understanding what they are voting on and the impact their selection may have.

Research has shown that voters tend to have a short attention span when trying to comprehend ballot language.¹ A study conducted by Hofstra University found that providing voters with less legalistic language and additional information regarding the proposed ballot measure or question makes the voting process easier to understand for all voters.² Further, voters have shared that complex and difficult to understand language influences

¹<https://www.thecampaignworkshop.com/blog/ballot-initiatives-and-ballot-measures/ballot-language>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0261379417301889?via%3Dihub>

voting choices. In particular, language that is easier to understand is more likely to receive support, while language that is challenging to comprehend is more likely to be opposed or not chosen.³ By providing a plain language description of the question being put forth, voters will feel more empowered and confident in their decisions throughout the selection process.

An analysis conducted by Ballotpedia in 2023 found that many ballot measures required a graduate-level reading ability to understand.⁴ Not only can this create a challenge for the average voter, but it also poses particular barriers for individuals with intellectual disabilities or those who experience cognitive impacts such as brain fog from chronic illness. HB 44 aims to bring Maryland in line with the Federal Plain Writing Act of 2010 by requiring ballot language understandable to someone with an eighth-grade reading level. This bill addresses the barriers that arise due to the confusing and legalistic nature of ballot questions or initiatives and will provide voters with a plain language explanation to ensure they can make informed selections. By providing voters with a deeper understanding of the decisions they are tasked to make, this bill will strengthen the democratic process across the state.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on HB 44. We are available, should the State Board of Elections need technical assistance, guidance or resources in providing support with the establishment of the proposed guidelines.

Respectfully submitted,

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³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10584609.2022.2092920#abstract>

⁴ <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2024/06/plain-language-ballot-measures-disability/>