

Chair Wells, Vice Chair Kerr, and Distinguished Committee Members,

My name is Brandon Russell, and I am a resident of St. Mary's County. I write in support of HB350, the Voting Rights Act of 2026, and respectfully urge the committee to issue a **favorable report**.

St. Mary's County is governed by a five-member Board of Commissioners elected every four years. Four commissioners are required to live in—and run from—specific districts, while the fifth, the Commissioner President, runs at-large. Despite this structure, all five commissioners are elected at-large. The existence of districts suggests that voters within those districts choose their own representative, but in practice they do not. This system is confusing, misleading, and creates an unnecessary barrier to voter understanding and engagement.

At-large voting also restricts the ability of constituents to hold their elected officials accountable. Voters in rural District A may prioritize issues like infrastructure, while voters in a more urban and populous District B may have very different concerns. When all votes are cast countywide, the priorities of larger districts can consistently override those of smaller or more rural communities, even when those communities are electing “their” district representative.

Moreover, at-large voting discourages a diverse and representative candidate pool by diluting the voting power of specific communities and groups with shared interests. Our democracy functions best when everyone has a meaningful voice. Yet in St. Mary's County, the Board of Commissioners has repeatedly been composed of older, white men, despite many other qualified candidates running. Women, African American, LGBTQIA+, and other minority candidates have run—and lost—in districts that could be competitive under true district-based elections.

The Voting Rights Act of 2026 would provide a clear legal pathway to challenge unfair voting practices like at-large elections. It restores power to voters by ensuring communities can directly elect representatives who reflect and advocate for their interests. At a time when voting rights at the federal level are increasingly at risk, Maryland must take action to protect the foundation of our democratic republic.

For these reasons, **I again urge a favorable report on HB350**. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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