



**TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE GOVERNMENT, LABOR AND ELECTIONS
COMMITTEE**

HB 496: Election Law—Unaffiliated Voters—Open Primary Elections

POSITION: Informational

BY: Linda Kohn, President

DATE: February 11, 2026

Voter turnout in primary elections in Maryland is historically low, particularly in gubernatorial elections. In 2022 and 2018, less than 30% of registered voters cast a ballot. While turnout among voters registered with either the Republican or Democrat parties are similar, turnout among unaffiliated voters stayed in the single digits. When more than 70% of voters sit out the primary, the results cannot be representative of the desires and priorities of the broader electorate.

As the premier voting rights organization in the state, the League of Women Voters of Maryland recognizes that states have discretion in how they conduct their primary elections and there is not a single model. According to data from the National Conference of State Legislatures, Maryland is considered to have a partially closed primary in that voters can change their party affiliation to vote in the primary but are then considered a member of that party.¹ But states use other approaches that range from *closed* (in which voters register with a party and must be a member of the party to vote) to *open* (in which voters can choose a ballot at a primary, but the information remains private and they are not registered with the party whose ballot was selected).

HB 496 would allow unaffiliated voters the ability to ask for a ballot of the party of their choice in order to vote in the primary but would not be required to join the party in order to cast their ballot. The League of Women Voters of Maryland supports actions that help make primary elections in Maryland more open for all voters in the state so everyone is able to vote their choice.

¹National Conference of State Legislatures, "State Primary Election Types," December 15, 2025.