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HB350 Voting Rights Act of 2026- Counties and Municipal Corporations Government, Labor, and Elections February 11th, 2026

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), representing public sector employees and retirees stand in support of HB 350. Our members are deeply committed to advancing racial equity, economic justice, and a democracy in which every community has a meaningful voice.

AFSCME strongly urges the Committee to pass HB 350 to enact protections against racial vote dilution in Maryland. Racial vote dilution occurs when electoral practices, such as at-large elections or unfair district maps, weaken the voting strength of voters of color, effectively denying them and their communities meaningful political participation. The protections outlined in HB 350 are essential to ensuring that all Marylanders, particularly those from historically disenfranchised communities, have an equal opportunity to elect representatives of their choice.

For more than sixty years, the federal Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 served as the nation’s most effective tool for addressing discriminatory voting practices. At its height, Section 2 of the VRA prohibited racial vote dilution and voter suppression, while Section 5 prevented discriminatory practices before they could take effect through preclearance. However, federal courts—including the U.S. Supreme Court—have severely weakened these protections. Decisions such as *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) dismantled the preclearance framework, while *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee* (2021) made it far more difficult to challenge discriminatory voter suppression. Now, even Section 2’s application to redistricting and meaningful representation for communities of color is under threat in *Louisiana v. Callais* (2025).

At the same time, the federal government is not only failing to adequately protect voters from intimidation and discrimination but is actively advancing policies that undermine access to the ballot. As federal voting rights protections continue to erode and enforcement grows increasingly uncertain, Maryland legislators have both the authority and the responsibility to safeguard fair and equal access to democratic participation.

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO

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HB 350 meets this perilous moment by building on the foundational protections of the federal VRA with streamlined standards and procedures that protect the freedom to vote while making litigation less time-intensive and costly than under federal law. Maryland law currently contains no explicit protection against racial vote dilution, and recent challenges to racially dilutive voting systems in Federalsburg and Baltimore County underscore the urgent need for these safeguards.

Combatting vote dilution is a critical step toward realizing a government that is truly of, by, and for the people. When voters of color are systematically prevented from electing candidates of their choice, entire communities are denied a voice in decisions that directly affect their lives. Prohibiting vote dilution strengthens accountability, promotes inclusion, and helps ensure that public institutions reflect the people they serve.

HB 350 strengthens Maryland's democratic institutions, honors the legacy of the federal Voting Rights Act, and advances the long-standing civil rights principles that AFSCME has fought for throughout its history.

For these reasons, AFSCME respectfully urges the Committee to issue a favorable report on HB 350.

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