



# MARYLAND FORWARD PARTY

*Not Left. Not Right. Forward.*

**BILL NO:** HB0496

**TITLE:** Election Law – Unaffiliated Voters – Open Primary Elections

**COMMITTEE:** Government, Labor and Elections

**POSITION:** FAVORABLE

**DATE:** February 11, 2026

**TO:** Chair Wells, Vice Chair Kerr, and Members of the Committee

**FROM:** Maryland Forward Party

**SUBJECT:** Strengthening Democracy Through Open Primaries

Maryland Forward Party, representing a growing coalition including the state's large Unaffiliated population, **strongly supports HB0496**. This bill represents an important step toward our goal of strengthening democracy by expanding voter participation, competition, and accountability without forcing voters into permanent party membership.

Maryland's current closed primary system excludes a rapidly growing share of taxpaying voters who are Unaffiliated. These voters are full participants in our democracy and contribute to civic life yet are shut out of the most critical stage of the democratic process; in many Maryland districts, the primary election effectively determines the eventual officeholder. Excluding unaffiliated voters from that decision undermines the principle of representative government.

HB 496 provides a pragmatic solution: allowing unaffiliated voters to choose a party ballot in a primary election without requiring them to join that party. This respects voter independence while ensuring that Maryland's elections reflect the will of the broader electorate.

Allowing unaffiliated voter access to primary ballots will strengthen Maryland's democracy by:

- Increasing voter turnout and engagement in the democratic process
- Encouraging candidates to engage with a wider range of constituents
- Reducing polarization by rewarding coalition building
- Improving trust in the electoral system as it is more inclusive and representative

Maryland Forward Party believes voters should be able to participate meaningfully in elections without being forced into a partisan identity. HB0496 is a pro-voter reform that modernizes Maryland's election system and better reflects today's electorate. For these reasons, we respectfully urge the Committee to issue a **FAVORABLE** Report on HB0496.

Sincerely,

*Lee Bradshaw*

**Legislative Committee Chair**

Maryland Forward Party