

**Chair Wells, Vice Chair Kerr, and Distinguished Members of the Committee,**

My name is Brandon Russell, and I am a resident of Maryland. I am writing in support of HB496, and **I urge a favorable report on this bill.**

Maryland's electorate is changing. A growing number of voters are choosing to register as unaffiliated—not because they are disengaged, but because they value independence and do not wish to formally align with a political party. Despite this, these voters are currently excluded from primary elections.

In many Maryland jurisdictions, like St. Mary's County, the primary election is the decisive contest. In 2022, the county Sheriff's race was decided in the Republican primary, disenfranchising a significant portion of the electorate and limiting meaningful participation in our democracy.

Allowing unaffiliated voters to choose a party ballot for a primary election strikes a reasonable balance. It preserves party autonomy while expanding access, increasing participation, and ensuring that candidates selected in primaries better reflect the broader electorate they will ultimately serve. This reform does not force party affiliation, nor does it undermine party identity—it simply recognizes the reality of how many Marylanders choose to engage civically.

This bill differs from another, HB156, that intends to permit unaffiliated voters to participate in primary elections. HB156 requires the voter to identify with a political party at an early voting center, creating an extra step for unaffiliated voters. It potentially keeps them registered with a political party afterward. HB496, however, does not require this step and explicitly states the voter may not automatically become affiliated with the party whose ballot the voter voted.

Encouraging participation strengthens public trust in our electoral system and leads to more representative outcomes. Maryland has long positioned itself as a leader in expanding access to democracy, and this change would be a meaningful step in that tradition.

For these reasons, **I respectfully urge the committee to issue a favorable report on this legislation.**

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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