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**Testimony in support of Bill HB 496**  
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My husband and I are unaffiliated voters, but for the first 40 years of our adult lives, he was a second-generation Republican and I was a second-generation Democrat.

***Disillusionment with the political parties:***

About 20 years ago I became concerned as I saw legislators become less willing to work together to find common ground and get things done, and I looked for organizations that could encourage them to come together. When I joined No Labels at their inaugural convention in 2010, I was still a proud Democrat, convinced that the parties would see the light and work together for the good of the country.

But the situation only got worse, and I became discouraged and disillusioned when I realized that neither party valued the importance of cooperation and working together on our behalf. One stark example happened when I was in the U.S. Capital with the LWVMD, lobbying for our list of issues. Our group leader asked each legislator to work with their colleagues across the aisle to achieve that list, and one of them responded that the way for us to get what we want is to vote more of their party into office. He seemed less interested in working on our issues than in getting his party elected, and trying to convince us that helping his party win was the best way for us to get what we want.

***We became unaffiliated and joined a growing number . . .***

So my husband and I unaffiliated from our respective parties, and joined a trend that has continued to grow. Last year the ***Democratic and Republican parties lost 45,128*** registered voters, while ***Unaffiliated grew by 45,393*** registered voters (*Maryland Board of Elections Voter Registration Activity Reports*).

***Many of us want to be able to vote and have our voice heard, but we are unwilling to affiliate in order to do so.***

Many unaffiliated voters are like me, unwilling to affiliate with a major party in order to vote, Speaking for myself, I would feel morally compromised if I affiliated with and thereby declared my support for an organization that seems more interested in winning and growing their numbers than in addressing the concerns of us citizens. I expect that is how many Democrats would feel if they were told that in order to vote and be heard, they had to register as a Republican, and vice versa. It's not fair to ask us to affiliate with a political party in order to vote.

***Survey of willingness to affiliate:*** A lot of unaffiliated voters feel like I do. Last month, in preparation for this testimony, [Independent Voters of Maryland](#) surveyed more than 100 registered voters who consider themselves to be independents, and got 29 responses. ***Of those who are registered as unaffiliated, 44% were not willing to affiliate in order to vote.*** Some of their comments were:

- US citizens should be able to vote in any election regardless of affiliation.

- I would like to be able to vote in a primary election, but do not want to affiliate solely to vote. Especially in an era of highly partisan politics, where neither party does a good job of representing my views, the current voting laws in Maryland serve to disenfranchise me. Next to gerrymandering, these registration laws are among the most egregious examples of laws that limit my vote.
- If I choose to support a candidate, I should not have to join a political party that I do not support to cast my vote.
- I do not want to be a Republican or a Democrat for one minute--their dysfunction got us into this mess. As a lifelong independent voter, I want serious campaign reform.

Some of those who are willing to affiliate, at least temporarily, in order to vote seemed reluctant to do so, saying:

- If I choose to support a candidate, I should not have to join a political party that I do not support to cast my vote.
- I have been so disturbed by parties that I recently became independent. This is making me reflect on the long-term implications of that change. ***I want my vote to count.***

### ***Why do we want to vote in the primary elections?***

This last comment in the survey above captures the reason we are here today. We want our vote to count.

But according to a [2017 report](#) by one of the LWVMD study committees I was on, the ultimate selection of candidates in the majority of Maryland counties takes place in the primary election.

***When we voters who are unaffiliated show up to vote in the general election, we are merely rubber-stamping the selection that was made at the primary election that we were excluded from.***

And just as important as having my vote count, ***I want our elected officials to be interested and care about what I want.*** Research (Alvarez and Sinclair, 2012, among many other studies) indicates that ***open primaries encourage legislators to network and compromise more,*** and other studies indicate that ***candidates in open primaries respond to more constituents in a more bipartisan way.***

### ***Maryland, my Maryland – please make us proud . . .***

Maryland has had a shameful reluctance to grant many of its citizens the right to vote:

- In 1870 ***Maryland rejected the 15th amendment*** that would prohibit the denial of the right to vote based on race, color, or previous condition of servitude, and didn't ratify it until 1973, making it one of the last 3 states to ratify it.
- In 1920 ***Maryland voted against the 19th amendment*** that would grant women the right to vote, and didn't ratify it until 1943.
- And now, ***Maryland is one of the last 14 states to open their primary elections to unaffiliated voters (more than one fifth of its voters and growing!).***

I urge Maryland to discontinue its denial of suffrage to its disenfranchised citizens and join the rest of the country in allowing us to vote in the primary election without requiring us to affiliate with political parties that do not share our values.

For these reasons, I support Bill HB 496 and hope that this committee will provide a favorable report. Thank you.

*Dona Sauerburger*

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- R. Michael Alvarez and Betsy Sinclair (2012). "Electoral Institutions and Legislative Behavior: The Effects of Primary Processes" Sage Journal; Political Research Quarterly

- League of Women Voters of Maryland (2017). [Study Background materials for Primaries in Maryland](#)