MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND
WOMEN'S DEMOCRATIC CLUB
P.O. Box 34047, Bethesda, MD 20827 www.womensdemocraticclub.org

HB 1356 - Maryland Employee Civic Activity and Lawful Expression Protection Act
Government, Labor, and Elections Committee - March 5, 2026
SUPPORT

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony concerning an important priority of the **Montgomery County Women's Democratic Club** (WDC) for the 2026 legislative session. Founded in 1956, WDC is one of Maryland's largest and most active Democratic clubs, with hundreds of politically active members, including many elected officials. WDC is known for its advocacy for law and policy to improve the lives of women and their families.

WDC urges a favorable report on HB 1356 - Maryland Employee Civic Activity and Lawful Expression Protection Act. Passage of HB 1356 will protect Marylanders from being fired or otherwise penalized because of their lawful political activity or political speech outside of work. No Marylander should have to choose between keeping their job and participating in democracy. HB 1356 ensures that employees can engage in lawful civic and political life without fear of retaliation, coercion, or blacklisting.

Current Maryland law lacks clear protection for lawful off-duty civic activity. Workers increasingly report fear of discipline or termination for protesting, testifying, volunteering, or expressing political views online. There is widespread and well-founded fear among employees that their off-duty life will negatively impact their livelihoods. In consequence, many employees censor themselves, both on-duty and off: 62% of Americans [1]feel the current political climate prevents them from sharing their true beliefs, with 74% of employees [2]reporting they proactively self-censor at work to avoid professional backlash. More than half of all workers believe discussing politics could damage their career. Research by Jennifer Silva shows that workers in low-wage jobs are especially inclined to view civic participation as a "luxury" because they cannot afford even a small risk of employer disapproval.[3] In consequence, many employees do self-censor, ceding civic life to those who can "afford" to be unemployed.

Meanwhile, employers face growing pressure from both government actors and wealthy elites to silence in advance speech with which they don't agree or to fire or penalize good employees for legal off-duty civic engagement. Increasingly, any action employers take is criticized in "the court of public opinion."

Employees' fears of employment repercussions for civic participation are well founded. For those who do not self-censor, the lack of current protections in Maryland's "at-will" environment leads to tangible professional harm. A quarter of U.S. companies recently reported disciplining an employee for their personal social media posts in a single month, with 26% of those cases resulting in termination.[4] Nearly 9 in 10 hiring managers

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[1] Ekins, E. (2020, July 22). *Poll: 62% of Americans say they have political views they're afraid to share.* Cato Institute Survey Reports.
[2] Allwork.Space News Team. (2025, August 1). *Only 27% of workers feel safe sharing political views at the office*. Allwork.Space.
[3] Silva, J. M. (2019). *We're still here: Pain and politics in the heart of America*. Oxford University Press.
[4] Fair Play Talks. (2025, October 2). Quarter of U.S. companies disciplined staff over political posts on social media, survey finds (survey of 1,249 U.S. business leaders).

admit they would consider firing an employee for off-duty social media content.[5] Even in 2017, half of employers reported checking current employees' social media profiles and over a third reported reprimanding or firing an employee for their social media content. More than half of employers have eliminated candidates during the vetting process based on their personal feeds.[6] Since 2017, employer policing of legal employee speech and civic engagement has grown; according to a 2024 survey, 73% of hiring managers admit they've rejected job candidates because of negative findings on social media.[7]

Too often, "brand protection"—a legitimate concern when a corporate officer is accused of malfeasance—has become a label used to silence any employee who cares about their community or its governance. Too often, civic participation is treated as a potential conflict of interest. And so public political discourse has come to be dominated by wealthy elites from across the political spectrum.

This bill ensures that an employer doesn't "own" an employee's conscience or their status as a citizen. HB 1356 directly addresses the silencing of Maryland employees' civic activity and lawful expression. It explicitly protects civic activity and lawful expression conducted outside of work by prohibiting employer retaliation and compelled political speech.

No one should have to choose between employment and the ability to freely express their political beliefs and engage in lawful civic activity. As democrats, we firmly believe that all of Maryland's citizens—whatever their income, politics or legal outside interests—should be able to engage in their communities and in our democracy.

We urge a favorable committee report on HB1356.

Cynthia Rubenstein
WDC President

Dorothy Manevich
Advancing Democracy
Subcommittee

Kate Stein
WDC Advocacy Chair

[5] Express Employment Professionals. (2023, January 11). *88% of hiring managers would consider firing workers for personal social media posts* (survey by The Harris Poll).
[6] CareerBuilder. (2017, June 15). *Number of employers using social media to screen candidates at all-time high, finds latest CareerBuilder study* [Press release]. PR Newswire.
[7] Top Echelon. (2024, November 6). *Social media screening: 73% of hiring managers reject candidates due to negative findings on social media*.