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Seeking the Green Party nomination for Governor
HB 584
FAV

The General Assembly can pass clean elections statutes. It has, and it should continue to. But statutes can be weakened or repealed in a future session, often out of sight of most Marylanders. A constitutional amendment is harder to change. It requires supermajorities and voter ratification. That durability matters when the protections at stake are ones we expect to face sustained pressure from wealthy interests for decades to come.

But durability is not the most important reason to put these protections in the constitution.

A constitution is a shared covenant. It is the document where Marylanders say to each other: these are the things we hold in common, the commitments we make that transcend any single election cycle or governing coalition. Placing clean elections protections in the constitution says that the integrity of our democracy is not a policy preference of one party. It is a foundational commitment of the people.

That matters.

But even that is not the most important reason.

The most important reason is that a constitutional amendment goes before the voters. And when it does, voters have to talk about it.

The mechanics of money in politics are deliberately invisible. Most Marylanders never think about how campaigns are funded, how corporate spending shapes which candidates are viable, or how the rules of elections determine who governs. A constitutional amendment makes those mechanics visible. It puts them on the ballot. It forces a public conversation.

I have seen what happens when voters are asked to engage directly with the structure of their democracy. In 2023 and 2024, I served on the Baltimore City Charter Review Commission, appointed by Mayor Brandon Scott. During that process, David Smith of Sinclair Media used the citizen petition process to place Question H on the ballot, a measure that would have slashed Baltimore's City Council from 14 district members to eight, increasing the size of each district by roughly 30,000 people. It was a power grab dressed up as good government reform.

I chaired Baltimore for Democracy, one of the coalitions that organized to defeat it. The conventional wisdom was against us -- only one charter amendment had failed in Baltimore in the previous 25 years out of 50 that appeared on the ballot. But we won. And we won not just because we had the right arguments. We won because the campaign itself forced Baltimore voters to think about the structure of their government: to ask who benefits when a city council shrinks, to understand that it is easier to buy a council of eight than a council of fourteen, and to decide for themselves what kind of democracy they wanted.

That campaign strengthened Baltimore's democratic muscles. Voters who had never thought about council district size were suddenly debating representation, accountability, and the influence of wealthy individuals on city governance. Many were shocked to learn that ballot question campaigns are exempt from the campaign finance restrictions that apply to candidate races, meaning a single wealthy individual can spend without limit to reshape city government. They were having those conversations with their neighbors, at PTA meetings, with strangers at the polls, in bars, on the bus, at the farmers market. The conversation was the point. The defeat of Question H was the outcome, but the democratic engagement it produced was the lasting value.

That is exactly what a constitutional amendment on clean elections would do at the state level. It would force Marylanders to confront the role of money in their elections -- not as an abstract policy debate in Annapolis, but as a question on their ballot that demands their attention and their vote. Debates about ballot amendments strengthen the collective muscles of democracy. They make self-governance a practice, not just a principle.

I encourage this committee to provide a favorable report on HB0584.