

Comments on Plain Language for Ballot Questions HB44 (Del. Feldmark) / SB29 (Sen. Kagan)

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Thank you for the language and providing opportunities for voters to learn about the issues by posting both the ballot language and a summary in advance.

I am from the Center for Civic Design, a Cambridge, Maryland-based nonprofit organization. We believe democracy is a design problem. We opportunity to comment on the importance of writing ballots questions using clear, plain

work with elections offices in Maryland and other states to improve the voter experience.

When we ask people about their voting experience, one of the most frequent comments is about ballot questions. They complain that they are confusing, written in legal terms, and may even be trying to deliberately trick them because of how hard some are to understand. They have opinions but worry that their voting choice is not for the practical outcome they agree with.

Ballot questions can include complex issues. That does not mean the question itself has to be complex. In research studies, people found information faster, answered more questions accurately, and gave had higher satisfaction when information was in plain language.

When we ask voters to weigh in on important issues, we should write the question clearly so they understand their options and can make their voice heard with confidence.

The requirements in this bill will do just that, without imposing too many restrictions:

- An informative title focused on the goal or outcome
- A description of change in policy that will take place (not the legal mechanism)
- Clear explanations of practical outcomes of each voting choice
- Avoiding legal jargon, double negatives, and passive voice
- Sharing the questions publicly so voters have time to read the question and summary to make their decision about how to vote

Taken together these requirements can increase transparency in the process, confidence in elections, and trust in the government. That may seem like a big claim, but too often we ask voters to make decisions without providing them the tools to make an informed decision.

Plain language in government communications is not a new concept. There are federal guidelines that support compliance with the Plain Writing Act of 2010. Maryland is one of many states with executive orders and guidance on plain language. And there is even an international standard, *ISO 24495-1:2023 Plain language*, created with strong support from the US-based Center for Plain Language and based on research and practice. Like this bill, the international standard covers more than words, recognizing that how information is structured also supports understanding.

This bill provides a framework for writing a ballot question, but we do not believe it places difficult restrictions on the process. Instead, the structure can help those writing the questions communicate with voters more effectively. Questions that can be communicated in just a few words can be short. Questions, such those covering fiscal questions, have room (as they do now) to explain how the funds will be used or the benefits to approving the question.

Change can be hard, but we believe that the requirements in this bill are simply common sense.

We support plain language ballot questions and hope that 2026 will be the year that Maryland voters will be able to read their ballots without confusion.