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My name is Helen Woods, and I would like to say that I am a 50-year-old Independent voter—however, that would only be true if I were allowed to vote. Unfortunately, I am barred from voting in most elections of importance where I live in Prince George’s County, Maryland.

I was raised by a patriotic American family. My grandfathers served in both theaters of World War II, and my parents were public servants who spent their careers serving Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, where I attended high school. I learned about government in school and signed up to vote as an Independent the same day I went to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get my learner’s permit. After that, I voted in every major election—and many minor ones as well—including by absentee ballot while I was in college.

After graduate school, I moved back to Prince George’s County, Maryland. I was excited to return to my birthplace and get involved in serving my community. I soon received my new Maryland voter registration card, and when the next election came up, I researched the candidates, put my voter registration card in my wallet along with my ID, and walked to the local high school to stand in line for my chance to vote. Imagine my shock when I reached the front of the line, presented my registration card, and was promptly told that I was **not allowed to vote**.

I was stunned. I had always been allowed to vote in primaries in Virginia. The election judges offered to let me register as a Democrat or a Republican and even told me I could switch back to being an Independent after the election. But I am not a Democrat or a Republican in my heart. I am a moderate Independent, and I should not be forced to subscribe to a political ideology—any more than a religious ideology—in order to exercise my constitutional right to vote. In Prince George’s County, nearly all elections beyond the most local ones are decided in the primaries, which means I am effectively barred from voting in almost every election of consequence.

I am sure you would agree that forcing someone to become a Muslim or a Mormon in order to vote would be wrong. I see no difference here. In either case, a person is being forced to declare allegiance to a specific set of values and beliefs in order to exercise their constitutional right to vote. That is not what democracy should be about.

I urge you to restore the right to vote to Independent voters like myself. Please vote in favor of HB0496.