

To: Government, Labor, and Elections Committee  
**Testimony in Support of HB0496**

February 9, 2026

Submitted by Cathy Stewart  
Open Primaries  
[MD Let Us Vote](#)

On behalf of:

- 1) Ty Ford  
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- 2) Ashley Bergen  
108 N. Jerome PK  
Glen Burnie, MD 21060

**Ty Ford**  
**7801 Ruxway Rd**  
**Baltimore, MD 21204-3535**

**Testimony In support of HB0496**

Submitted to the Government, Labor, and Elections Committee  
February 9, 2026

I will be 78 years old this year. Since 1986, I have been self-employed running an entrepreneurial media company. I have lived in Maryland almost all of my life. When I registered to vote, I was told that I had to align with either the Democratic or Republican party. I thought that's the way it works everywhere, but I have always felt this was wrong. But that is not how it works in most of the country! There are only 14 states that have closed primaries.

When I first registered, the parties were much better than they are now. All the polls show that Americans increasingly feel the political parties are out of touch. That is why so many Marylanders and Americans are becoming independent.

According to Gallup, 45% of Americans now consider themselves independent. Right now, almost one million Maryland voters are unaffiliated with the parties. It is wrong and unAmerican to deny these citizens the right to vote in primaries that we all pay for with our tax dollars.

I object to a system that coerces people to join a political party that they do not align with.

It's obvious to me that since Citizens United was perpetrated on this country, democracy as we know it has been going downhill. Opening the primary polls to independent voters may be a solution. It would be a step that acknowledges the voting rights of almost 25% of our citizens. Let me end by saying, I would like the opportunity to vote as who I am – an independent!

I ask the Committee members to support the passage of the bi-partisan bill HB0496.

**Ashley Bergen  
108 N. Jerome PK  
Glen Burnie, MD 21060**

**Testimony in support of HB0496**  
Before the Government, Labor, and Elections Committee  
February 11, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB0496. My name is Ashley Bergen and I have lived in our state for over 15 years. I am the mother of two children. My daughter is in High School and I have an autistic 14 year old son.

I have been an independent since I first became a voter. Actually it was in middle school when I began to notice that the Democratic and Republican parties are like two feathers on the same bird. One feather is on the left wing and one feather is on the right wing. And I sometimes feel that the bird is flying around in circles.

There are over one million Marylanders like me who are not members of the two parties. We should not be forced to join a political party to vote in the primaries. As an independent, I want to be able to vote for the best person, the leader who reflects the issues I am concerned about. Frankly, if I can't vote in the primaries, I don't have a serious voice in selecting those leaders. The primaries are a critical round in our taxpayer funded elections.

It makes me mad that I help pay for these primaries but my voice is not getting heard. I feel like we are throwing tax dollars away when we have an election process that locks out 25% of our voters. That is a democracy fraud!

I want to urge the Government, Labor and Elections Committee to vote in support of HB0496. This bill is a solution that invites all our citizens to fully participate in every round of elections that are publicly funded. For me this is a basic issue of fairness. Let me vote. It is time for the fastest growing community of voters to have full voting rights.