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## **HB 580 - FAVORABLE**

### **GOVERNMENT, LABOR, AND ELECTION COMMITTEE | 18 FEB 2026**

#### **Our Mission and Perspective**

We are the Maryland chapter of Veterans for All Voters, a non-partisan community of service members ranging from constitutional conservatives to progressives. We are united by a shared conviction: the American people deserve an election system that is functional, representative, and focused on results. Having taken an oath to protect our nation's institutions, we believe the best way to honor that service is to ensure every citizen's voice is heard clearly at the ballot box.

#### **A Quick "Sea Story"**

While I was stationed aboard a ship, a major primary was occurring back home. As a deployed service member, I had to vote via an absentee ballot. This requires careful planning; you must calculate exactly when to mail your ballot to ensure it reaches the election office before the deadline.

At the time, I did not support the front-runner, but I knew my favorite candidate was a long shot. I felt forced to engage in strategic voting—casting my ballot not for the person I believed in, but for a candidate I thought had the best chance of defeating the person I liked least.

I dropped my ballot in the mail and walked to a computer to check the news. Once I logged in, I found out that my selected candidate had suspended their campaign. My ballot was effectively wasted before it even left the vessel. Under our current system, my voice was silenced simply by the timing of a campaign announcement.

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) would have solved this:

- **Voter Intent:** I could have voted for my preferred candidate without fear, knowing that if they were eliminated, my vote would automatically transfer to my next choice. Strategic voting would no longer be necessary or helpful.
- **Logistics:** For every voter, it ensures that if a candidate withdraws or falls out of viability, your vote stays active. For service members abroad, it allows us to rank our preferences on a single ballot that remains relevant through every round of counting, regardless of mail delays or changing campaign fields.

### Today's Reality

Today, a candidate in a crowded field can win with only 30% or 40% of the vote. In those cases, the majority of voters actually voted *against* the winner. This isn't theoretical; we saw the impact of plurality voting clearly in the primary for Prince George's County Special Election for County Executive last March.<sup>1</sup>

- In the 9-way Democratic race, the winner advanced with 46.5% of the vote.
- In the 3-way Republican race, the winner advanced with 37.8% of the vote.

In both instances, more than half of the voters preferred a different candidate, but the system lacked a way to identify which candidate had the broadest support. RCV provides that mechanism, ensuring the winner is the person who can build a true consensus among the voters.

### Addressing Common Concerns

- **"One Person, One Vote":** RCV adheres strictly to this principle, but it does so more effectively than our current system. RCV ensures that your single vote stays with your top choice as long as they are viable; if they are eliminated, that same single vote moves to your next preference. It guarantees the winner has the broadest possible support without ever giving any voter more than one "voice" in the final tally.

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<sup>1</sup> Maryland State Board of Elections, **Official 2025 Special Primary Election Results for Prince George's County**, [https://elections.maryland.gov/elections/2025/SP\\_Primary\\_Results/gen\\_results\\_2025\\_by\\_county\\_17.html](https://elections.maryland.gov/elections/2025/SP_Primary_Results/gen_results_2025_by_county_17.html)

- **Ease of Use:** RCV is intuitive. We use this logic every day—if a store is out of your favorite brand, you buy your second choice. Takoma Park has used this system successfully since 2007. Greenbelt voters overwhelmingly (67%) approved it in November. Recent exit polls show high satisfaction: 84% of Alaska voters, 82% of Maine voters, and 96% of New York City voters reported that the ranked ballot was easy and simple to complete.<sup>2</sup>
- **Cost and Implementation:** Mr. DeMarinis confirmed in his February 4<sup>th</sup> testimony to this committee that the voting system already scheduled to be in place by the 2028 election will be fully RCV capable.<sup>3</sup> The primary investment will be voter education—a step that candidates will likely assist with as they seek "second-choice" endorsements.
- **Speed and Accuracy:** Tallying is completed by computer in minutes. While final certification waits for all mail-in ballots to arrive (as it does now), the actual RCV calculation is performed quickly. In the event of a hand recount, the process is straightforward and does not significantly extend the timeline. I am happy to sit down with a practice voting deck with members of this committee so you can see firsthand how easy and quick it is.
- **Partisan Neutrality and Structure:** This bill does not change the existing primary system. It is simply a counting method used within current primary and general election structures. It allows parties to field multiple candidates without a "spoiler effect," ensuring the eventual winner has the broadest possible support among their own base.

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<sup>2</sup> Fair Vote, **Exit Surveys: Voters Love Ranked Choice Voting**, July 1, 2025, <https://fairvote.org/report/exit-surveys-report-2025/>

<sup>3</sup> **Testimony of Maryland State Board of Elections Administrator Jared DeMarinis to the House Government, Labor, and Elections Board**, February 4, 2025, [https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsite/Committees/Media/false?cmte=gvc&clip=GVC\\_2\\_4\\_2026\\_meeting\\_1&ys=2026rs](https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsite/Committees/Media/false?cmte=gvc&clip=GVC_2_4_2026_meeting_1&ys=2026rs)

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## **Conclusion**

HB580 is enabling legislation. The Montgomery County Delegation has made a unanimous request for the authority to improve their local elections. This approach allows Maryland's most populous county to trial a system that has already succeeded across the country. Because this is a local choice, it is inherently reversible. If the results do not serve the voters, the system can be adjusted or reverted. However, if it delivers the consensus and clarity we expect, it will provide invaluable lessons that can benefit every county in Maryland.

HB580 is about giving a Maryland county the freedom to improve its own local democracy. It ensures that no voter—especially those in uniform—is forced to "game the system" just to make their voice count.

We ask for a favorable report on HB580. Thank you.

### **Mike Pellittiere**

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### **Veterans for All Voters**

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