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Testimony SB29: Simplified Ballot Language

House Government, Labor, and Elections Committee
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According to [2022 Census Bureau](#) data, nearly 10 percent of Marylanders aged 25 and older do not have a high school diploma or equivalent. Despite this, our ballot questions often use confusing and technical language. In 2022, voters were presented with five statewide ballot measures written at an average Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level of 14-- equivalent to college-level reading. When questions are written in complex legal language, many voters skip them. State Board of Elections data show that nearly 400,000 Marylanders left important ballot questions blank, even though more than 2 million cast votes for Governor. Our democracy is weakened when voters cannot easily understand the issues they are being asked to decide.

While many organizations produce explanatory summaries, voters should not need additional guidance to make informed decisions. Twenty-three states already require clear, accessible ballot language. Maryland should do the same.

Examples

Consider Question #2 from 2022:

“Adds to the eligibility requirements to serve as a senator or a delegate to the Maryland General Assembly by requiring a person to have maintained a primary place of abode in the district that the person has been chosen to represent. Under current law, a person must have resided in the district to which the person has been elected for at least six months immediately preceding the date of the person's election or, if the district has been established for less than six months prior to the date of election, as long as the district has been established. The new law requires, beginning January 1, 2024, a person must have both resided in and maintained a primary place of abode in the district for the same time periods as under current law.”

A plain-language version of the same question could read:

Do you support requiring Maryland General Assembly candidates to live in and make their primary home in the district they seek to represent for at least six months before the election (or as long as the district has existed, if it was established less than six months ago)?

In contrast, some ballot questions already used clear and straightforward language:

- 2022 Question #4: “Do you favor the legalization of the use of cannabis by an individual who is at least 21 years of age on or after July 1, 2023, in the State of Maryland?”

- 2020 Question #2: “Do you approve the expansion of commercial gaming in the State of Maryland to authorize sports and events betting for the primary purpose of raising revenue for education?”

History

In July 2024, Governor Moore signed an Executive Order establishing the Maryland Plain Language Initiative. On August 4, 2025, the Secretary of State confirmed that her office interprets this Executive Order to extend to statewide ballot language. While this is a positive step, it would not cover county ballot measures, which still require legislative action.

Solution

[SB29](#) is identical to SB615 (unanimous, 2025) and would:

- Require all ballot questions, state and local, to include a brief, descriptive title.
- Include a clear summary of the proposed change written in plain, accessible language that avoids legal jargon, double negatives, and passive voice.
- Provide a concise explanation of what a “yes” or “no” vote would mean in practical terms.
- Allow any legislatively mandated wording to appear alongside the plain-language statement.
- Set a submission deadline of July 1 in an election year, followed by a 15-day public comment period for revisions or legal review before ballots are finalized.
- Maintain the current requirement that the State Board of Elections and local boards publish the full text of proposed Constitutional Amendments at least 65 days before the General Election, with links to relevant legislative webpages.

Plain language strengthens democracy. When voters understand ballot questions, participation increases and election outcomes better reflect the will of the people. Marylanders deserve the ability to engage fully and confidently in the democratic process.

SB29 ensures that every Maryland voter-- regardless of education-- can access clear, understandable ballot language and make informed choices in both state and local elections.

This bill passed **unanimously** out of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee and the Senate both this year and last year.

I respectfully urge a favorable report on SB29 again this year. (I hope you move Delegate Feldmark’s HB44 as well!)