

Chairperson Wells, Vice Chair Kerr, and Committee Members,

I am Holly Johnson, a retired naval officer. My husband and I live just across the Severn River in Arnold, in Legislative District 30A. Today, I am pleased to testify in support of House Bill 496, introduced by Delegates Qi and Schmidt to allow Maryland's unaffiliated voters the opportunity to participate in our state-financed and state-administered primary elections without registering with a party.

Ten years ago, we were excited when the Navy sent my husband and me back to the state where we met and fell in love as midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy. We appreciate our closeknit community in Arnold, where our children graduated from Broadneck High School. When our children were accepted to the University of Maryland, we proudly raised the Maryland flag in front of our home.

So in 2022, as we retired from our Navy careers, we were honored and excited to declare our Maryland residency, and register to vote in our new home state. Having been Washington state residents during our Navy careers, a state with fully open primary elections, we were surprised at the requirement to declare a party at the time of registration. As an independent with a history of voting for the person, not the party, I chose to register as "unaffiliated."

Shortly thereafter, I learned that Maryland's primaries were closed to unaffiliated voters, and if I wanted to influence the upcoming gubernatorial nomination (among other primary races), I had to affiliate with one of the parties several weeks before the election. Reluctantly, I changed my voter registration to Republican, so that I could vote for moderate candidates who might be willing to listen to and work with the other side. But after the primary, I changed my registration back to unaffiliated.

I did this again in 2024, but I won't be doing it in 2026 or beyond, as I am dissatisfied with both parties, and I don't want to be identified with either party anymore, even if only for a few weeks. It feels disingenuous to say that I am an independent but then register with a party anyway. While I would prefer open primaries like those in Washington, HB 496 provides a pathway where I wouldn't have to register with a party. Instead, I could select a party's ballot at my polling place on election day.

Please support Maryland's independent voters like me by supporting HB 496, and passing it on to the state legislature. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

//s//

Holly M Johnson