



The Center for
Voting and Democracy

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Testimony Supporting S.B. 680
(Act to establish the Blue Ribbon Commission on Voting, Openness, Transparency, and
Equality (VOTE) in Elections)
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FairVote: The Center for Voting and Democracy is a Maryland-based, national, non-partisan organization that works to promote fair, functional, and representative democracy for voters. FairVote has a history of working with people across the political spectrum for over 20 years, advocating for electoral structures that provide better representation for all. We have served as experts in electoral reform, weighing in on a wide range of reform areas, and write to express support for S.B. 680 to establish the Blue Ribbon Commission on Voting, Openness, Transparency, and Equality in Elections as a means to ensure the best democracy for Maryland.

Careful Consideration is Essential: The Blue Ribbon Commission proposed by S.B. 680 would ensure that good ideas actually become good policy as legislators work to create the best democracy for Maryland voters. Elections are complicated: fixing one problem may exacerbate another, or result in unintended and undemocratic outcomes. Having a commission to examine innovative ideas will allow commissioners well versed in the electoral process to consider the nuances of a proposed reform before endorsing it. Such commissions are hardly novel. Famously, the Presidential Commission on Election Administration brought together advocates for different approaches and ultimately came out with a genuinely bipartisan approach to the most pressing issues in election administration. Currently, neighboring Virginia's Independent Bipartisan Advisory Commission on Redistricting is holding public meetings to consider approaches to redistricting reform.

The Example of Primary Election Reform: To see the value of careful consideration of all options, consider the movement for open primaries. Proponents of a top two primary system sought to promote the voting rights of independent voters in primaries, and offered top two as a means to encourage candidates to campaign to all voters, not just partisan voters. In practice, however, this system gave too much power to an unrepresentative primary electorate, and limited the choices of general election voters. These unfortunate outcomes could easily have been prevented with a simple change. The top four primary system closely resembles top two, but by expanding the general election field following the primary elections, top four would allow voters more meaningful choices and help to accomplish the goals of Top Two even better, as we have detailed in our analysis of top two in California and Washington.

Structural Means to Achieve Representative Democracy: Critically, the commission will not be focused on only one or two reforms, like different approaches to open primaries. The commission will consider all kinds of ideas and identify reforms that would have the most impact in Maryland. Reforms that would receive careful consideration include the use of proportional representation systems, which would increase electoral competition and foster more accurate representation for voters. Ranked choice voting—which FairVote highly recommends as a means to give voters greater choice and power at the polls—would also be considered. The Blue Ribbon Commission would allow powerful innovations like these to receive the attention they deserve, while ensuring that unintended outcomes do not ruin policies rooted in good intentions. Maryland voters deserve to have these ideas considered without fear of taking a step back on accident.

Conclusion: Establishing the Blue Ribbon Commission on Voting, Openness, Transparency, and Equality (VOTE) in Elections will allow for consideration of important electoral reforms that have the potential to give Maryland voters more power and achieve more representative democracy. These reforms command the careful deliberation that the Blue Ribbon Commission would afford them to ensure they result in good policy. We fully support S.B 680 and encourage the senators to do so as well.