



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS[®] OF MARYLAND, INC.

TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

HB 592 BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION ON VOTING, OPENNESS, TRANSPARENCY, AND EQUALITY (VOTE) IN ELECTIONS

POSITION: SUPPORT, WITH AMENDMENTS

BY: BARBARA SCHNACKENBERG AND NANCY SORENG CO-PRESIDENTS

DATE: FEBRUARY 24, 2016

The mission of the League of Women Voters is the encouragement of the informed and active participation of citizens in government. One of our core values is that the responsibility of good government rests on the shoulders of its citizens. As such, we are excited about the creation of a Blue Ribbon Commission on Voting, Openness, Transparency and Equality in Elections as proposed by House Bill 592.

This bill accurately acknowledges that there is more to successful elections than accurate vote counts. Only about 44 % of eligible voters participated in the 2014 General Election. Less than one half of Maryland's voters participated in the ultimate democratic act. The League and other election reform and advocacy groups have participated for years in efforts to make Maryland's election inclusive, convenient, and accessible, yet we have missed the mark with more than half of voters. The 44% doesn't even factor in those who are eligible to vote but haven't registered. That number would be even smaller if it did. Our state's democracy needs support, and HB 592 has the potential to allow us to explore, discuss, and learn from the experiences in other jurisdictions attempting to address voter participation and engagement.

Could open primaries be supportive of increased voter participation? Maybe.

Does the California experiment with top two or top four primaries allow for the election of more representative elected official? Maybe.

Are Maryland citizens so concerned about apparent campaign fund- raising disparities that they have given up on the notion that a single vote is more important than a single – or multiple – dollars in an election campaign? Maybe.

Could our representatives be chosen, as in proportional representation schemes, in a manner that allows multiple viewpoints to be acknowledged instead of just the viewpoint of top vote-getters? Maybe.

These are questions that could be answered – or at least explored – by the Commission proposed by HB 592. And the exploration of these issues is as important as any issue this legislature can contemplate to support our state’s democratic principles. This Commission offers the opportunity for the General Assembly to make available to voters and others information about ways in which our election processes and outreach can be improved.

Having stated the League’s support for the Blue Ribbon Commission and this legislation, it is necessary for us to also acknowledge the limitations and omissions of the bill, and to suggest improvements and amendments. Our first suggestion relates to the composition of the Commission, which mandates representatives of the two major political parties in Maryland, but not minor parties or unaffiliated voters. Of the 3.7 million registered voters in Maryland in January 2016, over 751,000 were registered as a member of a minority party (Green or Libertarian), unaffiliated with any party, or other. Indeed, during the month of January 2016 alone, more voters registered as unaffiliated, with a minority party, or other (5,352) than registered as Republicans (4,647) and this number is more than half of the number who registered as Democrats (9,581) during that month. Clearly this substantial voting block deserves the attention of the political establishment in Maryland, as well as a seat at the table during discussion of voter engagement and participation.

Additionally, HB 592 requires the participation of bipartisan civic organizations in various geographical parts of the state. The League would prefer that this section of the bill be amended to replace “bipartisan” with “nonpartisan” to reflect the importance of including voters and potential voters who are not affiliated with one of the two major political parties. And finally, although we would not wish to rush the important work of the Blue Ribbon Commission, we would suggest that the report date for the Commission’s report to the Governor and the General Assembly be advanced to October 1, 2017 instead of December 31, 2017. This earlier report date would allow consideration of the report’s recommendations for inclusion in potential legislation for the 2018 General Assembly session.

The League of Women Voters is pleased to be named in HB 592 as an organization to be represented on this Blue Ribbon Commission on Voting, Openness, Transparency, and Equality, and we would be proud to provide our experience, studied positions and resources to aid the Commission. We support the passage of HB 592, with recommended amendments.