

January 29, 2020

Testimony on HB 140
Election Law – Petitions and Ballot Questions – Plain Language Requirement
Ways and Means

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland is in support of HB 140 which would require that Ballot Questions be written on a 6th grade level of reading comprehension. This change will inevitably lead to less confusion for voters during elections. Voting should be accessible for all eligible citizens, that includes any intellectual barriers to voting in elections.

Regardless of intent, Ballot measures that are hard to understand are a big problem in elections. Either voters are left being unsure of how they voted on a question or they may avoid the questions all together because they are just not sure what they are being asked. It is important that voters are conscious of the decisions they are making. It is also important that voters don't feel left out of policymaking by intimidating ballot language.

Ballot measures still favor the college-educated who represent a minority of the U.S. population. According to the Census Bureau, only 31 percent of people 25 or older have a bachelor's degree or higher education level. Specifically, in Maryland only 47% of people are college educated. Meaning that at least 53% of people are in jeopardy of not being able to understand what is written in a ballot question. While the ability to comprehend ballot measures is becoming more widespread, it still does not reflect the skills of the average American voter.

We support the amendments being proposed by the Sponsor which would ensure the ballot language being proposed meets legal requirements.

This bill is not about questioning the intelligence of Marylanders, this bill is about acknowledging the realities of the educational make up of our state and country. Measures should be taken to make voting on ballot measures more equitable for everyone. HB 140 would make voting more accessible.

We urge a favorable report.