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SB831: Election Reform Act of 2021

Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
Wednesday, March 3, 2021
Position: **FAVORABLE**

In 2018, I ran as an independent candidate for a U.S. Senate seat in Maryland, polling as high as 18 percent in the three-way race. Unaffiliated with any political party, I had one goal in mind-- to unite the country and to bring pragmatism back to Washington.

As an independent, I witnessed firsthand the perverse incentives that push candidates and lawmakers to ideological extremes. I saw the resistance of party leaders to sensible solutions to our nation's problems and watched elected officials prioritize loyalty to their political party over progress for the American people.

After losing the race to the incumbent Senator Ben Cardin, I wrote the [*Contract to Unite America: Ten Reforms to Reclaim our Republic*](#). Of those 10, several are included in whole or in part of Sen. Kagan's [SB831](#):

- Supporting increased ballot access for unaffiliated voters in Primaries;
- Making Circuit Court Judges nonpartisan; and
- Establishing candidate debates(perhaps the most important of them all).

Unaffiliated voters (also known as independents) made the conscious choice not to affiliate with a party because they don't believe they cleanly fit into either party. Unfortunately, Maryland has closed primaries, which means that independents cannot help narrow the field for either party. There may be a candidate who energizes some independents, but those voters would currently be excluded from closed primaries when they show up during Early Voting or on Election Day. This legislation allows those unaffiliated individuals who feel passionately about a candidate to change their party registration and cast a partisan ballot.

Elections for Circuit Court judges, which are nonpartisan, should not be held exclusively through partisan primaries. These elections should be held similar to races for the Board of Education, allowing any registered voter to cast a ballot for these important offices.

Finally, candidate debates should be mandated and available to the general public. It is time that democracy takes place in the open. If an independent candidate (such as I was) wants to run against a long-term incumbent, voters will benefit from seeing candidates share their vision and policy positions.

I extend great thanks to Senator Kagan for her leadership on these issues, and for consulting with me as she laid the framework for SB831. I **strongly encourage** the Committee to support these aspects of the bill.