

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF BILL SB0329 - FAVORABLE
Election Law – Polling Sites – Firearms Prohibitions

TO: Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, and
members of the Education, Health, and
Environmental Affairs Committee

FROM: Chris Apple
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Armed voter intimidation is sadly a long-standing tradition in our country. In 1876, armed white "rifle clubs" calling themselves "Red Shirts" terrorized a majority-black district of Hamburg, South Carolina. They killed and wounded dozens of people. Their aim was clear: scare Blacks away from the polls so the Red Shirts' preferred candidate would win the gubernatorial election.

It would be wonderful if groups like the Red Shirts were confined to that darker period of our history. Unfortunately, some extremist groups today are taking on a very similar tone. The Proud Boys, a white nationalist extremist group, routinely arrive armed at Black Lives Matter rallies, sometimes even pointing their weapons at protesters. The Proud Boys conducted an extensive poll-watching campaign on Election Day 2020, determined to find and eliminate election fraud.¹ Dubbed the "Army for Trump," the group's activities were concerning enough that some officials temporarily banned open carry at polling places, even where it was otherwise legal to do so.

Intimidation is central to the Proud Boys' philosophy. One group leader claimed it was "policy to shoot" Black Lives Matter "rioters."² In North Carolina, the Proud Boys appeared at a local school board meeting to oppose mask mandates. "If our presence escalates that pressure," one member told a local reporter, "and makes it to the point where we become a distraction to conducting business and they just change the mask mandate so we go away, that's a win."³

Guns were spotted at the polls in at least 25 states on Election Day 2020.⁴ In Virginia in 2016, an armed man at a polling station was stopping voters - some with children in tow - and asking if they'd be "voting for Crooked Hillary."⁵

Armed intimidation isn't just a vague threat - these extremist groups already have this tool in their belts. These groups could directly influence Maryland elections by scaring voters away. I urge the committee to issue a favorable report for SB0329.

¹ <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/neo-nazi-proud-boys-groups-push-trump-campaign/story?id=73663331>

² <https://everytownresearch.org/report/more-than-brawlers-the-proud-boys-and-armed-extremism/>

³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/extremism-us-jan-6-capitol-rcna10731>

⁴ <https://www.csgv.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CSGV-GunsAtThePolls-X.pdf>

⁵ <https://gothamist.com/news/armed-trump-supporter-who-intimidated-virginia-voter-is-allowed-to-carry-weapon-officials-say>