

February 8, 2022

Testimony on HB 362
Montgomery County – Voting Methods – MC 13-22
Ways and Means

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland is in favor of HB 362, which would authorize the Montgomery County Council to adopt a ranked-choice voting method for certain local offices. Montgomery County would join Takoma Park, which has used ranked choice voting in its municipal elections since 2007.

In ranked-choice systems, voters rank candidates in their order of preference. Ballots are counted for the voters' first choices, and if one candidate receives an outright majority, he or she wins. If no candidate has a majority, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and voters who ranked that candidate as their first choice have their votes count for their second choice. This process continues until a candidate has a clear majority (50% plus one).

A large field of candidates of candidates should be a signal of a healthy democracy. However, crowded electoral contests often give way to vote-splitting, fears of wasted votes, and a winner without clear majority support. This is a problem that many Montgomery County voters experienced firsthand in the 2018 local elections, when 38 candidates, including 33 Democrats, vied for 4 at-large seats on the County Council.

The advantage of ranked-choice voting systems, especially in a historically crowded electoral field like Montgomery County, is that they open electoral access to third-party candidates without creating a “spoiler” effect. This allows voters the freedom to voice their true preferences, rather than being forced to choose between the two most popular choices that may not represent them or their interests. It encourages candidates to run civilized campaigns that appeal to broader constituencies to garner second and third-choice support as well. Most importantly, ranked-choice voting guarantees that the winning candidate is supported by a majority of the voters.

Across the country, 22 jurisdictions (including Takoma Park, Maryland, New York City, San Francisco, California, and Cambridge, Massachusetts) used ranked choice voting in their most recent election. 53 jurisdictions expect to use it in their next election or the one following.

Common Cause Maryland firmly believes that the adoption of ranked-choice voting in Montgomery County will amplify voters' voices, increase civic engagement and goodwill, and ensure that the candidate who reflects the views of the widest number of voters wins. For these reasons, we support HB 362 and urge a favorable report.