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Committee: Ways and Means
Testimony on: HB 535 Election Law – Ballots – Processing and Reporting Procedures
Position: Favorable
Hearing Date: February 14, 2023

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club urges a favorable report on HB 535. The bill establishes uniform statewide procedures for the canvassing of and curing of errors in submission of absentee and provisional ballots, and requires that all election results be reported by precinct.

The Sierra Club and its members care about both the natural and human environments, including ending racial and social injustice. As a grassroots organization, we believe that voting should be as accessible and convenient as possible for all eligible voters, regardless of whether they choose to vote in person at Early Voting Centers or on election day or by mail.

In Maryland, some mail-in ballots get rejected because of relatively minor problems. According to the 2020 Election Administration and Voting Survey that the State Board of Elections sent to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, 1,511 Maryland voters' ballots were rejected in the November 2020 election because the voter's signature was not on the outer return envelope.

As many as 24 states have formal processes that allow voters to cure minor problems so their votes can be counted. While at least some local boards of elections in Maryland did alert voters and allow them to cure problems in the 2022 elections, there is not currently a uniform statewide standard or process. This bill would establish a uniform ballot curing process that will ensure all voters are treated fairly and equitably no matter where they live in the State.

The bill requires election officials to examine absentee ballot envelopes for missing voter signatures promptly after receipt, and to begin processing of absentee ballots eight business days before early voting begins (unless waived by the Administrator of Elections). The bill stipulates that absentee ballot vote totals may not be tabulated before the polls close on election day.

Reporting all election results by precinct will increase transparency and confidence in the election process.

Voting is the foundation of our democracy, and we believe it is essential to our democracy and to racial and social justice to make the process of voting as accessible and convenient as possible for every individual who is eligible.

We urge a favorable report on HB 535.

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Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America's oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 70,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.