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Testimony of Jeremy Gruber, Senior VP, Open Primaries

**Maryland House of Delegates, Ways and Means Committee
January 17, 2019**

In Support of HB26 Baltimore City – Ranked Choice Voting and Open Primaries

On behalf of Open Primaries, I want to thank the Ways & Means Committee members for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB 26. Open Primaries is a national non-profit organization dedicated to more open and inclusive election systems.

Today, 85% of American cities use open primary or completely nonpartisan election systems to select municipal officials. 75% of the thirty largest cities in the U.S. use nonpartisan or open primaries.¹ These include cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Detroit, Dallas, San Francisco and Boston. Baltimore's current use of closed partisan primaries to elect local leaders is not only unfair and exclusionary. It is behind the times.

Baltimore, like the rest of the country, is experiencing a historic shift in political affiliation. Independents - now 42% of voters nationwide - are the fastest growing segment of voters in most states, including Maryland, and are shut out of voting in partisan primaries. A full 50% of millennials—currently the largest segment of voters—are now independents.²

Closed, partisan primaries are being rejected nationally after 26.3 million independent voters were shut out of the 2016 presidential primaries. The undemocratic exclusion of independents from round one of the electoral process had been identified as a key driver of the hyper-partisanship at every level of government today.³ That's why 70% of Americans now support open primaries⁴ and the *Baltimore Sun* has urged their adoption.⁵

Baltimore is essentially a one party city. Though independent registration is growing, 79% of voters are currently registered as Democrats. Primary elections in Baltimore are often times the only competitive elections in the city. 50,000 registered voters in Baltimore—13% of all registered voters—are unaffiliated independents, and they are

¹ National League of Cities <https://www.nlc.org/partisan-vs-nonpartisan-elections>

² Pew Research <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>

³ Katherine Gel and Michael Porter, Why Competition In the Politics Industry is Failing America, Harvard Business School, September 2017.

⁴ AP NORC Poll <http://www.apnorc.org/projects/Pages/HTML%20Reports/the-frustrated-public-americans-views-of-the-election-issue-brief.aspx>

⁵ Baltimore Sun editorial Oct 2018 <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/editorial/bs-ed-1016-election-reform-20181015-story.html>

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effectively disenfranchised from the elections that determine their elected leaders. That's more voters than Republicans, Greens and Libertarians combined.⁶

Baltimore's system of elections just hasn't kept up with the reality of voter affiliation today. Its partisan electoral system has failed to inspire competition and accountability, and allows election of public officials without the full inclusion of the electorate. Perhaps that's why Baltimore routinely lags behind the already low voter turnout numbers in the rest of the state.

There's a reason municipal elections are overwhelmingly open and nonpartisan across the country. Local governance is distinct from state and federal governance inasmuch as it tends to be more managerial and provision-oriented than focused on ideological policy making. Cities deal with resource redistribution at a much more local and regional scope. The problems local officials focus on include low-income housing, urban redevelopment, education, crime, social welfare services, environmental control and land use planning. Local officials must also be responsive to the public in situations where unified local needs and preferences diverge from state and national policy objectives. Exclusionary, partisan elections inject unnecessary partisanship into local political issues that should be free from them.

Finally, primary elections in the city of Baltimore are paid for by the taxpayers and should be open to everyone. If the political parties, which are private organizations, want to conduct closed elections, they should not ask the public to fund them.

Everyone benefits from a healthier, more inclusive political system that encourages competition. But at the very time that Baltimoreans are demanding innovation at all levels of government, they are saddled with an electoral system that impedes it. With an open, nonpartisan primary, all candidates are on the same ballot and all voters can participate. A wider variety of candidates are encouraged to run, having a greater likelihood of prevailing in open primaries, than in the current closed system. Once elected, representatives are further incentivized to reach out to and govern for all their constituents.

Instead of lagging behind the rest of the nation, Baltimore and Maryland have the opportunity to lead. We urge this Committee to support HB26 and give Baltimore the tools it needs to move forward with more inclusive and democratic elections.

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⁶ Baltimore City Board of Elections Registration Numbers Oct. 2018
<https://boe.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/october-21-2018-citywide.pdf>