

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2026 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

House Bill 156 (Delegate Fair, *et al.*)
Government, Labor, and Elections

Election Law - Affiliating With a Party and Voting - Unaffiliated Voters

This emergency bill authorizes an unaffiliated voter to apply to change the voter’s existing voter registration to affiliate with a political party during early voting before a primary election. If an election judge at the early voting center determines that the voter resides in the county, the voter may vote (and have counted) a provisional ballot for the political party.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: General fund expenditures are expected to increase by an indeterminate amount beginning as early as FY 2026, and in FY 2028 and 2030 (and future years in which a primary election occurs), as discussed below. Under one (illustrative) set of assumptions, general fund expenditures increase by \$66,000 in FY 2026. Revenues are not affected.

Local Effect: Local government expenditures are expected to increase by an indeterminate amount beginning as early as FY 2026, and in FY 2028 and 2030 (and future years in which a primary election occurs), as discussed below. Under one (illustrative) set of assumptions, local government expenditures increase, collectively, by at least \$114,000 in FY 2026. Revenues are not affected. **This bill may impose a mandate on a unit of local government.**

Small Business Effect: Minimal.

Analysis

Current Law: Party affiliation changes can be made at any time that voter registration is open. Voter registration is only closed beginning on the twenty-first day preceding an

election until the eleventh day after the election. There are certain exceptions to the close of registration during that time period: (1) during early voting, an individual may appear in person at an early voting center in the individual's county of residence and apply to register to vote or change the voter's address on an existing voter registration, then subsequently vote the appropriate ballot; and (2) on Election Day, an individual may appear at a precinct polling place in the individual's county of residence and apply to register to vote, and then vote.

State and Local Fiscal Effect: State and local government expenditures are expected to increase as early as fiscal 2026, which reflects the emergency status of the bill, to implement the bill in fiscal years in which a primary election occurs; however, the extent of additional costs cannot be reliably estimated at this time primarily because it is uncertain how many unaffiliated voters choose, under the bill, to change their voter registration to affiliate with a political party.

For illustrative purposes only, general fund expenditures increase by \$66,000 and local government expenditures increase by at least \$114,000 in fiscal 2026, if certain assumptions are made. This illustrative estimate accounts for costs of additional paper ballots and additional provisional ballot election judges (two of the larger costs expected to be incurred), as well as costs for voter education and revision of the provisional ballot application. The estimate is based on the following assumptions/information:

- *Additional Ballots (State – \$17,000; local – \$17,000)* – Additional ballots are ordered (at \$0.23 per ballot), to be prepared for up to 5% of unaffiliated registered voters who apply to affiliate with a political party pursuant to the bill. Paper ballot costs are shared by the State Board of Elections (SBE) and the local boards.
- *Additional Provisional Judges (State – \$10,000; local – \$58,000)* – An additional provisional ballot election judge is needed at a minimum of 25% of early voting centers to administer provisional voting for additional voters. Costs of election judges are largely borne by the local boards, with the exception of the additional \$100 paid to returning election judges, of which SBE pays half.
- *Voter Education and Revision of the Provisional Ballot Application (State – \$40,000; local – \$40,000)* – These are estimated costs based on information provided by SBE (for similar and past legislation), assumed to be shared costs.

Additional costs, not accounted for in the above illustrative estimate, include costs of additional provisional ballot canvassing staff and provisional ballot applications.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has been introduced within the last three years. See HB 1280 of 2025 and SB 99 and HB 257 of 2024.

Cross File: SB 132 (Senators Kagan and Rosapepe) - Education, Energy, and the Environment.

Information Source(s): Baltimore, Carroll, Harford, and St. Mary's counties; Maryland State Board of Elections; Department of Legislative Services

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