

parties, candidates, and advocacy groups to appoint poll watchers and challengers to observe the conduct of the election. We only allow absentee ballots to be used by those with valid reasons that would prohibit their attendance at the polls. All of these factors create a delicate balance between protecting voters' rights while recognizing the State's obligation to protect against voter fraud.

Senate Bill 478 upsets this delicate balance without providing additional safeguards to protect against voter fraud. In fact, it is an invitation for greater voter fraud in the State. It places a new burden on political parties, candidates, and advocacy groups to appoint poll watchers on the early voting days when such resources are already scarce. The absence of poll watchers and challengers on voting days diminishes the ability to monitor the voter identification process. Those states that administer early voting programs have strict voter identification procedures, such as requirements to produce a photo identification card, but the Maryland General Assembly has rejected more stringent voter identification procedures for more than a decade.

Moreover, there is a lack of consensus among the State's election officials about early voting in Maryland. Even though members of the State Board of Elections expressed severe reservations regarding Senate Bill 478, the State Administrator testified in favor of the bill before the General Assembly. Minutes from the February 2005 meeting of the State Board of Elections indicate that members questioned the policy of moving forward with early voting at this time because the Board had not studied the process, and the legislation did not provide a cohesive plan for implementation. In addition, the Maryland Association of Elections Officials opposed the legislation.

While I believe early voting may be an appropriate election technique in Maryland, it should only be implemented after a thorough study and with the full support of Maryland's election leaders. Please be assured that the Administration is committed to instilling public confidence in elections and ensuring that all Marylanders have the opportunity to cast a ballot and have their ballot counted. To this end, I will appoint a commission to examine and evaluate the election law bills passed this session and make recommendations concerning our State's election process. I am confident such a commission will develop policies and procedures assuring that fair and accurate elections take place within the State.

For the above stated reasons, I have vetoed Senate Bill 478.

Very truly yours,
Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr.
Governor

Senate Bill No. 478

AN ACT concerning

Election Law - Early Voting

FOR the purpose of establishing a process to allow voters to vote in elections at early voting polling places in the State; specifying the period in which early voting is allowed; ~~specifying criteria and procedures to guide the State Administrator of Elections in setting the number and location of early voting polling places for~~