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SENATE BILL NO. 1395

Offered January 13, 2021

Prefiled January 13, 2021

A BILL to amend and reenact §§ 24.2-105, as it shall become effective, 24.2-306, 24.2-649, 24.2-1000, 24.2-1005, and 24.2-1005.1 of the Code of Virginia; to amend the Code of Virginia by adding a section numbered 24.2-1005.2, by adding in Article 5 of Chapter 2 of Title 24.2 a section numbered 24.2-224.1, and by adding in Title 24.2 a chapter numbered 1.1, consisting of sections numbered 24.2-125 through 24.2-129; and to repeal § 24.2-124, as it shall become effective, of the Code of Virginia, relating to elections; prohibited discrimination in voting and elections administration; required process for enacting certain covered practices; civil causes of action.

Patrons—McClellan and Locke; Delegates: Bourne, Cole, J.G., McQuinn, Price, Rasoul and Scott

Referred to Committee on Privileges and Elections

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:

1. That §§ 24.2-105, as it shall become effective, 24.2-306, 24.2-649, 24.2-1000, 24.2-1005, and 24.2-1005.1 of the Code of Virginia are amended and reenacted and that the Code of Virginia is amended by adding a section numbered 24.2-1005.2, by adding in Article 5 of Chapter 2 of Title 24.2 a section numbered 24.2-224.1, and by adding in Title 24.2 a chapter numbered 1.1, consisting of sections numbered 24.2-125 through 24.2-129, as follows:

§ 24.2-105. (Effective September 1, 2021) Prescribing various forms.

A. The State Board shall prescribe appropriate forms and records for the registration of voters, conduct of elections, and implementation of this title, which shall be used throughout the Commonwealth.

B. The State Board shall prescribe voting and election materials in languages other than English for use by a county, city, or town that is subject to the requirements of § 24.2-124 § 24.2-128. For purposes of this subsection, voting and election materials mean registration or voting notices, forms, and instructions. For purposes of this subsection, registration notices mean any notice of voter registration approval, denial, or cancellation, required by the provisions of Chapter 4 (§ 24.2-400 et seq.).

The State Board may make available voting and election materials in any additional languages other than those required by subsection A of § 24.2-124 § 24.2-128 as it deems necessary and appropriate. The State Board may accept voting and election materials translated by volunteers but shall verify the accuracy of such translations prior to making the translated materials available to a county, city, or town, or any voter.

CHAPTER 1.1. RIGHTS OF VOTERS.

§ 24.2-125. Definitions.

For purposes of this chapter, "protected class" means a group of citizens protected from discrimination based on race or color or membership in a language minority group.

§ 24.2-126. Vote denial or dilution.

A. No voting qualification or prerequisite to voting or standard, practice, or procedure shall be imposed or applied by the state or any locality in a manner that results in a denial or abridgement of the right of any citizen of the United States to vote based on race or color or membership in a language minority group.

B. A violation of subsection A is established if, on the basis of the totality of circumstances, it is shown that the political processes leading to nomination or election in the state or a locality are not equally open to participation by members of a protected class in that its members have less opportunity than other members of the electorate to participate in the political processes or to elect representatives of their choice. The extent to which members of a protected class have been elected to office in the state or locality is one circumstance that may be considered.

C. Nothing in this section shall be construed to establish a right to have members of a protected class elected in numbers equal to their proportion in the population.

§ 24.2-127. Impairment of voting rights of registered voters.

Nothing in this chapter shall be construed to deny, impair, or otherwise adversely affect the right to vote of any registered voter.

§ 24.2-128. Minority language accessibility.

A. The State Board shall designate a county, city, or town as a covered locality if it determines, in consultation with the Director of the Census, on the basis of the 2010 American Community Survey

59 census data and subsequent American Community Survey data in five-year increments, or comparable
60 census data, that (i) more than five percent of the citizens of voting age of such county, city, or town
61 are members of a single language minority and are unable to speak or understand English adequately
62 enough to participate in the electoral process; (ii) more than 10,000 of the citizens of voting age of
63 such county, city, or town are members of a single language minority and are unable to speak or
64 understand English adequately enough to participate in the electoral process; or (iii) in the case of a
65 county, city, or town containing all or any part of an Indian reservation, more than five percent of the
66 American Indian citizens of voting age within the Indian reservation are members of a single language
67 minority and are unable to speak or understand English adequately enough to participate in the
68 electoral process.

69 B. Whenever a covered locality provides any voting or election materials, it shall provide such
70 materials in the language of the applicable minority group as well as in the English language. For
71 purposes of this requirement, "voting or election materials" means registration or voting notices, forms,
72 instructions, assistance, voter information pamphlets, ballots, sample ballots, candidate qualification
73 information, and notices regarding changes to local election districts, precincts, or polling places. For
74 purposes of this requirement, "registration notices" means any notice of voter registration approval,
75 denial, or cancellation required by the provisions of Chapter 4 (§ 24.2-400 et seq.). A covered locality
76 may distribute such materials in the preferred language identified by the voter.

77 C. The Attorney General, or any qualified voter who is a member of a language minority group for
78 whom a covered locality is required to provide voting or election materials in such language, may
79 institute a cause of action in the circuit court of the covered locality to compel the provision of the
80 voting or election materials in the language of the applicable minority group. In such action, the court
81 may, in its discretion, allow a private plaintiff a reasonable attorney fee as part of the costs, if such
82 plaintiff is the prevailing party.

83 **§ 24.2-129. Covered practices; actions required prior to enactment or administration.**

84 A. For the purposes of this section:

85 "Certification of no objection" means a certification issued by the Attorney General that there is no
86 objection to the enactment or administration of a covered practice by a locality because the covered
87 practice neither has the purpose or effect of denying or abridging the right to vote based on race or
88 color or membership in a language minority group nor will result in the retrogression in the position of
89 members of a racial or ethnic group with respect to their effective exercise of the electoral franchise.

90 "Covered practice" means:

91 1. Any change to the method of election of members of a governing body or an elected school board
92 by adding seats elected at large or by converting one or more seats elected from a single-member
93 district to one or more at-large seats or seats from a multi-member district;

94 2. Any change, or series of changes within a 12-month period, to the boundaries of the covered
95 jurisdiction that reduces by more than five percentage points the proportion of the jurisdiction's voting
96 age population that is composed of members of a single racial or language minority group, as
97 determined by the most recent American Community Survey data;

98 3. Any change to the boundaries of election districts or wards in the locality, including changes
99 made pursuant to a decennial redistricting measure;

100 4. Any change that restricts the ability of any person to provide interpreter services to voters in any
101 language other than English or that limits or impairs the creation or distribution of voting or election
102 materials in any language other than English; or

103 5. Any change that reduces the number of or consolidates or relocates polling places in the covered
104 jurisdiction, except where permitted by law in the event of an emergency.

105 "Language minority group" means persons who speak one or more languages other than English at
106 home, as determined by the most recent American Community Survey data.

107 "Racial minority group" means persons who are Black or African American, American Indian or
108 Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or of Spanish heritage.

109 "Voting age population" means the resident population of persons who are 18 years of age or older,
110 as determined by the most recent American Community Survey data.

111 B. Prior to enacting or seeking to administer any voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or
112 any standard, practice, or procedure with respect to voting, that is a covered practice, the governing
113 body shall cause to be published on the official website for the locality the proposed covered practice
114 and general notice of opportunity for public comment on the proposed covered practice. The governing
115 body shall also publicize the notice through press releases and such other media as will best serve the
116 purpose and subject involved. Such notice shall be made at least 45 days in advance of the last date
117 prescribed in the notice for public comment.

118 Public comment shall be accepted for a period of no fewer than 30 days. During this period, the
119 governing body shall afford interested persons an opportunity to submit data, views, and arguments in
120 writing by mail, fax, or email, or through an online public comment forum on the official website for

121 the locality if one has been established. The governing body shall conduct at least one public hearing
122 during this period to receive public comment on the proposed covered practice.

123 The governing body may make changes to the proposed covered practice in response to public
124 comment received. If doing so, the revised covered practice shall be published and public comment shall
125 be accepted in accordance with this subsection, except the public comment period shall be no fewer
126 than 15 days.

127 C. Following the public comment period or periods prescribed in subsection B, the governing body
128 shall publish the final covered practice, which shall include a plain English description of the practice
129 and the text of an ordinance giving effect to the practice, maps of proposed boundary changes, or other
130 relevant materials, and notice that the covered practice will take effect in 30 days. During this 30-day
131 waiting period, any person who will be subject to or affected by the covered practice may challenge in
132 the circuit court of the locality where the covered practice is to be implemented the covered practice as
133 (i) having the purpose or effect of denying or abridging the right to vote on the basis of race or color
134 or membership in a language minority group or (ii) resulting in the retrogression in the position of
135 members of a racial or ethnic group with respect to their effective exercise of the electoral franchise. In
136 such action, the court may, in its discretion, allow a private plaintiff a reasonable attorney fee as part
137 of the costs, if such plaintiff is the prevailing party.

138 D. The governing body of a locality seeking to administer or implement a covered practice, in lieu of
139 following the provisions of subsections B and C, may submit the proposed covered practice to the Office
140 of the Attorney General for issuance of a certification of no objection. Such practice shall not be given
141 effect until the Attorney General has issued such certification. A certification of no objection shall be
142 deemed to have been issued if the Attorney General does not interpose an objection within 60 days of
143 the governing body's submission or if, upon good cause shown and to facilitate an expedited approval
144 within 60 days of the governing body's submission, the Attorney General has affirmatively indicated that
145 no such objection will be made. An affirmative indication by the Attorney General that no objection will
146 be made or the absence of an objection to the covered practice by the Attorney General shall not bar a
147 subsequent action to enjoin enforcement of such qualification, prerequisite, standard, practice, or
148 procedure.

149 **§ 24.2-224.1. At-large method of election; limitations; violations; remedies.**

150 A. An at-large method of election, including one that combines at-large elections with district- or
151 ward-based elections, shall not be imposed or applied by the governing body of any locality in a
152 manner that impairs the ability of a protected class, as defined in § 24.2-125, to elect candidates of its
153 choice or its ability to influence the outcome of an election, as a result of the dilution or the
154 abridgement of the rights of voters who are members of a protected class.

155 B. A violation of subsection A is established if it is shown that racially polarized voting occurs in
156 local elections. For purposes of this subsection, "racially polarized voting" means voting in which there
157 is a difference, as defined in case law regarding enforcement of the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965,
158 in the choice of candidates or other electoral choices that are preferred by voters in a protected class,
159 as defined in § 24.2-125, and in the choice of candidates and other electoral choices that are preferred
160 by voters in the rest of the electorate. Whether racially polarized voting has occurred shall be
161 determined by examining the results of elections in which at least one candidate is a member of a
162 protected class. A finding of racially polarized voting or a violation of subsection A shall not be
163 precluded by the fact that members of a protected class are not geographically compact or concentrated
164 in a locality. Proof of an intent on the part of voters or elected officials to discriminate against a
165 protected class shall not be required to prove a violation of subsection A.

166 C. Any voter who is a member of a protected class, as defined in § 24.2-125, and who resides in a
167 locality where a violation of this section is alleged shall be entitled to initiate a cause of action in the
168 circuit court of the county or city in which the locality is located. In such action, the court may, in its
169 discretion, allow a private plaintiff a reasonable attorney fee as part of the costs, if such plaintiff is the
170 prevailing party.

171 D. Upon a finding of a violation of this section, the court shall implement appropriate remedies,
172 including the imposition of district-based elections in the locality, that are tailored to remedy the
173 violation.

174 **§ 24.2-306. Changes not to be enacted within 60 days of general election; notice requirements.**

175 A. No change in any local election district, precinct, or polling place shall be enacted within 60 days
176 next preceding any general election. ~~Notice~~ In addition to the requirements set forth in § 24.2-129,
177 notice shall be published prior to enactment in a newspaper having general circulation in the election
178 district or precinct once a week for two successive weeks. The published notice shall state where
179 descriptions and maps of proposed boundary and polling place changes may be inspected.

180 B. Notice of any adopted change in any election district, town, precinct, or polling place other than
181 in the location of the office of the general registrar shall be mailed to all registered voters whose

182 election district, town, precinct, or polling place is changed at least 15 days prior to the next general,
183 special, or primary election in which the voters will be voting in the changed election district, town,
184 precinct, or polling place. Notice of a change in the location of the office of the general registrar shall
185 be given by posting on the official website of the county or city, by posting at not less than 10 public
186 places, or by publication once in a newspaper of general circulation in the county or city within not
187 more than 21 days in advance of the change or within seven days following the change.

188 C. Each county, city, and town shall comply with the applicable requirements of law, including
189 §§ 24.2-304.3 and 30-395, and send copies of enacted changes, including a Geographic Information
190 System (GIS) map showing the new boundaries of the districts or precincts, to the local electoral board,
191 the Department, and the Division of Legislative Services. Any county, city, or town that does not have
192 GIS capabilities may request the Department of Elections to create on its behalf a GIS map showing the
193 boundaries of the new districts or precincts, and the Department of Elections shall create such a map.

194 **§ 24.2-649. Assistance for certain voters; penalties.**

195 A. Any voter age 65 or older or physically disabled may request and then shall be handed a printed
196 ballot by an officer of election outside the polling place but within 150 feet of the entrance to the
197 polling place. The voter shall mark the printed ballot in the officer's presence but in a secret manner
198 and, obscuring his vote, return the ballot to the officer. The officer shall immediately return to the
199 polling place and shall deposit a paper ballot in the ballot container in accordance with § 24.2-646 or a
200 machine-readable ballot in the ballot scanner machine in accordance with the instructions of the State
201 Board.

202 Any county or city that has acquired an electronic voting machine that is so constructed as to be
203 easily portable may use the voting machine in lieu of a printed ballot for the voter requiring assistance
204 pursuant to this subsection. However, the electronic voting machine may be used in lieu of a printed
205 ballot only so long as: (i) the voting machine remains in the plain view of two officers of election
206 representing two political parties, or in a primary election, two officers of election representing the party
207 conducting the primary, provided that if the use of two officers for this purpose would result in too few
208 officers remaining in the polling place to meet legal requirements, the voting machine shall remain in
209 plain view of one officer who shall be either the chief officer or the assistant chief officer and (ii) the
210 voter casts his ballot in a secret manner unless the voter requests assistance pursuant to this section.
211 After the voter has completed voting his ballot, the officer or officers shall immediately return the
212 voting machine to its assigned location inside the polling place. The machine number, the time that the
213 machine was removed and the time that it was returned, the number on the machine's public counter
214 before the machine was removed and the number on the same counter when it was returned, and the
215 name or names of the officer or officers who accompanied the machine shall be recorded on the
216 statement of results.

217 B. Any qualified voter who requires assistance to vote by reason of physical disability or inability to
218 read or write may, if he so requests, be assisted in voting. If he is blind, he may designate an officer of
219 election or any other person to assist him. If he is unable to read and write or disabled for any cause
220 other than blindness, he may designate an officer of election or some other person to assist him other
221 than the voter's employer or agent of that employer, or officer or agent of the voter's union.

222 The officer of election or other person so designated shall not enter the booth with the voter unless
223 (i) the voter signs a request stating that he requires assistance by reason of physical disability or
224 inability to read or write and (ii) the officer of election or other person signs a statement that he is not
225 the voter's employer or an agent of that employer, or an officer or agent of the voter's union, and that he
226 will act in accordance with the requirements of this section. The request and statement shall be on a
227 single form furnished by the State Board. If the voter is unable to sign the request, his own mark
228 acknowledged by him before an officer of election shall be sufficient signature, provided no mark shall
229 be required of a voter who is blind. An officer of election shall advise the voter and person assisting the
230 voter of the requirements of this section and record the name of the voter and the name and address of
231 the person assisting him.

232 The officer of election or other person so designated shall assist the qualified voter in the preparation
233 of his ballot in accordance with his instructions and without soliciting his vote or in any manner
234 attempting to influence his vote and shall not in any manner divulge or indicate, by signs or otherwise,
235 how the voter voted on any office or question. If a printed ballot is used, the officer or other person so
236 designated shall deposit the ballot in the ballot container in accordance with § 24.2-646 or in the ballot
237 scanner machine in accordance with the instructions of the State Board.

238 C. If the voter requires assistance in a language other than English and has not designated a person
239 to assist him, an officer of election, ~~before he assists~~ *may assist as an interpreter, but shall first* inquire
240 of the representatives authorized to be present pursuant to § 24.2-604.4 whether they have a volunteer
241 available who can interpret for the voter. One representative interpreter for each party or candidate,
242 insofar as available, shall be permitted to observe the officer of election communicate with the voter. *In*
243 *any locality designated as a covered locality pursuant to § 24.2-128, the local electoral board shall*

244 *ensure that in each polling place, there is an interpreter for the language of each applicable minority*
 245 *group. The voter may designate one of the volunteer party or candidate interpreters to provide*
 246 *assistance. A person so designated by the voter shall meet all the requirements of this section for a*
 247 *person providing assistance.*

248 D. A person who willfully violates subsection B or C is guilty of a Class 1 misdemeanor. In
 249 addition, the provisions of § 24.2-1016 and its felony penalties for false statements shall be applicable to
 250 any request or statement signed pursuant to this section, and the provisions of §§ 24.2-704 and
 251 24.2-1012 and the felony penalties for violations of the law related to providing assistance to absentee
 252 voters shall be applicable in such cases.

253 E. In any precinct in which an electronic voting machine is available that provides an audio ballot,
 254 the officers of election shall notify a voter requiring assistance pursuant to this section that such
 255 machine is available for him to use to vote in privacy without assistance and the officers of election
 256 shall instruct the voter on the use of the voting machine. Nothing in this section shall be construed to
 257 require a voter to use the machine unassisted.

258 **§ 24.2-1000. Intimidation of officers of election.**

259 Any person who, by bribery, intimidation, *threats, coercion*, or other means in violation of the
 260 election laws, willfully hinders or prevents, or attempts to hinder or prevent, the officers of election at
 261 any ~~precinct~~ *polling place, voter satellite office, or other location being used by a locality for voting*
 262 *purposes* from holding an election ~~shall be~~ *is* guilty of a Class 5 felony.

263 **§ 24.2-1005. Intimidation of voters; civil cause of action.**

264 A. Any person who ~~(i) by threats, bribery, or other means in violation of the election laws,~~
 265 *intimidates, threatens, or coerces, or attempts to influence intimidate, threaten, or coerce, any other*
 266 *person in giving his vote or ballot or by such means who intimidates, threatens, or coerces, or attempts*
 267 *to intimidate, threaten, or coerce a voter to deter or prevent him from voting; (ii) furnishes a ballot to a*
 268 *person who he knows cannot understand the language in which the ballot is printed and misinforms him*
 269 *as to the content of the ballot with an intent to deceive him and induce him to vote contrary to his*
 270 *desire; or (iii) changes a ballot of a person to prevent the person from voting as he desired, shall be is*
 271 *guilty of a Class 1 misdemeanor.*

272 B. *In addition to the criminal penalty provided in subsection A, such actions shall also create a*
 273 *cause of action. A voter who is intimidated, threatened, or coerced by another person in violation of*
 274 *subsection A shall be entitled to institute an action for preventative relief, including an application for a*
 275 *permanent or temporary injunction, restraining order, or other order, against such person. The action*
 276 *shall be instituted in the circuit court of the locality where the violation occurred. In any such action,*
 277 *the court may, in its discretion, allow a private plaintiff a reasonable attorney fee as part of the costs, if*
 278 *such plaintiff is the prevailing party.*

279 C. This section applies to any election and to any method used by a political party for selection of
 280 its nominees and for selection of delegates to its conventions and meetings.

281 **§ 24.2-1005.1. Communication of false information to registered voter.**

282 A. It shall be unlawful for any person to communicate to a registered voter, by any means, false
 283 information, knowing the same to be false, intended to impede the voter in the exercise of his right to
 284 vote. The provisions of this section shall apply to information only about the date, time, and place of
 285 the election or the voter's precinct, polling place, or voter registration status.

286 B. Any person who violates the provisions of this section ~~shall be~~ *is* guilty of a Class 1
 287 misdemeanor.

288 C. ~~A violation of this section~~ *Such violation* may be prosecuted either in the jurisdiction from which
 289 the communication was made or in the jurisdiction in which the communication was received.

290 C. *In addition to the criminal penalty provided in subsection B, a violation of the provisions of this*
 291 *section shall also create a cause of action. A registered voter to whom such false information is*
 292 *communicated shall be entitled to institute an action for preventative relief, including an application for*
 293 *a permanent or temporary injunction, restraining order, or other order, against the person*
 294 *communicating such false information. The action shall be instituted in the circuit court of either the*
 295 *jurisdiction from which the communication was made or the jurisdiction in which the communication*
 296 *was received. In any such action, the court may, in its discretion, allow a private plaintiff a reasonable*
 297 *attorney fee as part of the costs, if such plaintiff is the prevailing party.*

298 **§ 24.2-1005.2. Interference with voting.**

299 A. Any person acting under the color of law who fails to permit, or refuses to permit, a qualified
 300 voter to vote, or who willfully fails or refuses to tabulate, count, or report the vote of a qualified voter,
 301 is guilty of a Class 1 misdemeanor.

302 B. Any person who furnishes a ballot to a person who he knows cannot understand the language in
 303 which the ballot is printed and misinforms him as to the content of the ballot with an intent to deceive
 304 him and induce him to vote contrary to his desire is guilty of a Class 1 misdemeanor. Any person who

305 *changes a ballot of a person to prevent the person from voting as he desires is guilty of a Class 1*
306 *misdemeanor. This subsection applies to any election and to any method used by a political party for*
307 *selection of its nominees and for selection of delegates to its conventions and meetings.*
308 **2. That § 24.2-124, as it shall become effective, of the Code of Virginia is repealed.**
309 **3. That the provisions of § 24.2-128 of the Code of Virginia, as created by this act, shall become**
310 **effective on September 1, 2021.**