



Millions to the Polls

PRACTICAL POLICIES TO FULFILL THE FREEDOM
TO VOTE FOR ALL AMERICANS

**PRE-REGISTRATION
OF 16- & 17-YEAR-OLDS**

J. MIJIN CHA & LIZ KENNEDY

PRE-REGISTRATION OF 16- & 17-YEAR-OLDS

- Eligible 16 and 17 year olds should be pre-registered to vote and automatically added to voting rolls when they turn 18.
- Targeted outreach to young eligible voters leads to substantial increases in voter registration.
- Encouraging civic engagement at a young age leads to increased participation over a lifetime.

In the 2008 election, young people voted at the second-highest rate of all time.¹ Voter turnout among 18-24 year olds grew by double digits from 2000 to 2008. Yet, they still had the lowest turnout of any age group. Sixty-seven percent of citizens 30 years or older voted.² In contrast, less than half of eligible voters between the ages of 18-24 voted.³ In other words, in the second highest turnout of all time, more young people *did not* vote than voted.

This low level of turnout for any group is not good for our democracy. Young people face unique policy concerns and they should voice their preferences and priorities through the electoral process. Without their participation, our representative democracy becomes significantly less representative.

The primary indicator of voter turnout is registration. Once registered, voters are much more likely to turn out to vote. In the last Presidential election, the overall voting rate was 61.8 percent, but over 86 percent of registered voters voted.⁴ The disparity in registration rates can be seen with young voters. In the 2008 election, only 59 percent of eligible voters between the ages of 18 to 24 were registered to vote. In contrast, 74 percent of eligible voters over the age of 24 were registered to vote.⁵

Engaging potential voters at a young age is a successful way to increase voter registration, not just in the short term but also over a lifetime. Voters who are engaged at an early age are more likely to stay engaged.⁶ Pre-registering 16 and 17 year olds to vote can be an important first step to engaging young adults. It has also been proven to work. In 2008, pre-registered young voters in Florida turned out at a rate 4.7 percent higher than young voters who registered after turning 18.⁷

Pre-registration does not require any additional voter registration databases. Young voters who are not yet 18 can be entered as “pending.” Once they reach 18, their registrations can automatically move from pending to active. Currently, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Maryland, North Carolina, and the District of Columbia allow eligible voters to pre-register at sixteen.⁸ In Colorado, anyone who is an eligible voter over the age of 16 can register to vote, even if they will not be 18 by the time of the next

election.⁹

In addition, nine states allow voters to pre-register at seventeen.¹⁰ Adding to this, 20 states allow teens to register if they will be 18 before the next election and seven states allow teens to register if they will turn 18 before the next general election.^{11,12}

Beyond pre-registration, several states have programs to further engage young voters. Hawaii's Office of Elections conducts pre-registration outreach activities in the state's high schools through the Young Voter Registration Program.¹³ The Office of Elections also recruits student volunteers to help conduct the pre-registration drives, which further engages young voters.¹⁴

Florida, which also provides pre-registration, has the Supervisor of Elections staff come to schools for one day and conduct registration drives through individual classroom visits or school-wide assemblies.¹⁵ In Osakaloosa and Palm Beach Counties, Supervisors of Elections voluntarily and on their own initiative extended their outreach activities to private schools, elementary and middle schools, and juvenile detention facilities.¹⁶

Washington State started a "Happy 18th Birthday" pilot program in 2008 where the Secretary of State mailed either a postage paid registration form pre-filled with the recipient's information or a postcard with instructions for Washington's online voter registration system to randomly selected young people nearing their 18th birthdays.¹⁷ A January 2009 analysis using the state voter registration database showed that 19-20 percent of those who received the mailing registered in time to vote in the presidential primary, whereas only 8 percent in the control group did so.¹⁸

Wisconsin reaches out to young voters through a state law that establishes a "registration deputy" at every high school that is filled by a volunteering teacher or staff person.¹⁹ California is considering allowing teenagers as young as 15 to pre-register to vote at the Department of Motor Vehicles when they get their driver's license or learner's permit or by using the state's online and mail-in voter registration systems.²⁰

Until 2013, North Carolina had some of the best practices for pre-registering young voters, including:

- Teens were eligible to pre-register if at least 16 and register if 17, but would be 18 on or before the next general or regular municipal election and no earlier than 60 days prior to any primary election.²¹
- When preregistered teenagers become old enough to register, they were automatically registered to vote by the Board of Elections and the normal verification process for all new registered voters took place at that time, including verification of the ID number and residential address.
- The forms were sent electronically by the DMV and county elections boards to the State Board of Elections to hold until the time for the verification process.

Unfortunately, the entire effort was repealed by the legislature in 2013 and eligible young voters are no longer allowed to pre-register to vote in the state.²²

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

States should encourage civic engagement among young people by engaging 16 and 17 year olds before they are eligible to vote. In particular:

- Individuals who are at least 16 years old may complete all the necessary steps for voter registration. Pre-registered young people are then “activated” as registered voters when they become eligible to vote at age 18.
- These voters should receive notification when their registration has been activated, as well as polling location information prior to the first election in which their registration is active.
- The package of information could also include a set of frequently asked questions about the voting process, the date of the next election, and their responsibilities to re-register when changing addresses, if they are in a state without Same Day Registration or Permanent Portable Registration.
- High schools can register students at a number of school sponsored events, including high school civics class, or as part of a student assembly or “Civics Day” in which students meet with local political leaders. ■

ENDNOTES

1. The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, *Research Products Fact Sheet New Census Data Confirm Increase in Youth Voter Turnout In 2008 Election*, (April 28 2009) available at <http://www.civicyouth.org/new-census-data-confirm-increase-in-youth-voter-turnout-in-2008-election/>.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. U.S. Census Bureau., *The Diversifying Electorate- Voting Rates by Race and Hispanic Origin in 2012 (and Other Recent Elections)*, (2013) available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p20-568.pdf>.
5. *Ibid.*
6. The New America Foundation, *Empowering California's Youth: A proposal allowing voters to pre-register at age 16*, (2007) available at http://www.newamerica.net/files/nafmigration/Pre_Registration_at_Age_16.pdf.
7. Michael P. McDonald & Matthew Thornburg, *Registering the Youth: Preregistration Programs*, 13 N.Y.U. J. Legis. & Pub. Policy 551, 567 n.88 (2010), available at <http://www.nyujlpp.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Michael-P-McDonald-Matthew-Thornburg-Registering-the-Youth-Through-Voter-Preregistration.pdf>.
8. National Conference of State Legislatures, *Pre-Registration for Young People* (2013), available at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/preregistration-for-young-voters.aspx> (2013); A Uniform Advance Voter Registration Age: Boosting More Efficient Registration and Education Programs (2012), available at <http://www.fairvote.org/assets/Uniform-Registration-FACT-SHEETNATIONAL.pdf>.
9. The Governor of Colorado signed this measure on May 10, 2013. H.B. 13-1135, 69th Gen. Assembly, Reg. Sess. (Col. 2013), available at <http://www.leg.state.co.us/clics/clics2013a/csl.nsf/fsbillcont3/C9538D3A79A9B9C487257AEE00573D96?open&file=1135sstaapp.pdf>.
10. National Conference of State Legislature, *Pre-Registration for Young People*.
11. Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, and Washington. *Ibid.*
12. Arizona, Connecticut, Mississippi, Virginia, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Ohio.
13. McDonald & Thornburg, *Registering the Youth: Preregistration Programs*.
14. *Ibid.*
15. The Center for Voting and Democracy, *Voter Preregistration Best Practices*. (2013), available at <http://www.fairvote.org/voter-preregistration-best-practices/#.UdSOTDsqr0>.
16. McDonald & Thornburg, *Registering the Youth: Preregistration Programs*.
17. The Pew Center on the States, Washington State's *Make Voting Work for 18 Year-Olds—Experiment 1* (Oct. 2009), available at http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/PCS_Assets/2009/Washington_18_years_old_voting_brief.pdf.
18. *Ibid.*
19. 2003 WISCONSIN ACT 265, § 41. 6.28 (2) (b) Wisconsin State Assembly. (Apr. 24, 2004), available at http://archive.fairvote.org/media/youthreg/WI_LAW.pdf.
20. Aaron Sankin, *California Voter Pre-Registration Could Drastically Increase Young Voter Turnout*, Huffington Post (Jan. 18, 2013), available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/17/california-voter-pre-registration_n_2499577.html.
21. The North Carolina State Bd. of Elections, *2010-11 Guidelines for Voter Registration: Preregistration* (2011), available at <http://www.fairvote.org/assets/Preregistration/PreregistrationNC-Guidelines.pdf>.
22. Effective September 2013, HB 589 ends pre-registration for 16 and 17 year olds. Also, effective January 2014 the Citizens Awareness Month and the required annual registration drive in high schools are eliminated. Democracy North Carolina, *Monster Law: More Money, Less Voting* (Aug. 2013), available at <http://www.democracy-nc.org/downloads/MonsterLaw-IDAUG2013.pdf>.