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Expanding the Youth Electorate through Preregistration



It is an important rite of passage as a young adult in America: taking one's place in the democratic process by registering to vote and casting a ballot. Unfortunately, too many young citizens do not take advantage of this opportunity.

Research shows that preregistration policies targeting 16- and 17-year-old citizens not only help to increase civic participation among young people, but also enfranchise a broader range of America's youth, particularly those from historically underrepresented populations. Empowering this untapped pool of future voters can help reduce historical disparities in the electorate for future generations with just a simple, inexpensive adjustment in the administration of elections.

This legislative brief discusses the underrepresentation of youth—particularly youth of color—in the general electorate, and how the growing trend of preregistration helps to address this problem. It concludes with recommendations for implementing preregistration policies.

What is Preregistration and Why is it Important?

Preregistration is an emerging election reform designed to help enfranchise eligible young people in greater numbers by allowing them to register in advance of their 18th birthdays, so that they will automatically be enrolled and eligible to cast a ballot as soon as they reach voting age. In addition, most preregistration programs typically include an education component that teaches youth about the importance of voting and civic participation.

Preregistration is important because it is an effective mechanism to target and educate youth about the importance of voting. Though recent voting trends indicate that participation among this age group is on the rise, young people are still underrepresented in the American electorate. In the 2008 presidential election, voters under age 30 were the only group to show an increase in voting rates, indicating that once registered, they will turn out. However, if members of this population had actually registered and voted at the same rate as those over 30, an additional seven million people would have voted.¹ While voter registration rates for young citizens of color had also increased between 2004 and 2008, overall, young Americans still registered to vote at a rate of 61 percent, a full 10 percentage points behind the general population.

The underrepresentation of youth in the electorate is problematic, but there is an even more remarkable disparity within the youth electorate itself. Young people of color, despite their increase in voter registration and voting rates, still lag behind young whites. In 2008, 75 percent of 18-29 year old White citizens were registered to vote, exceeding voter registration rates of minority youth—including African-Americans (64%), Asians (52%), and Latinos (53%) – by as much as 23 percentage points.

The growing population of young Americans—especially youth of color – and their lagging participation in the democratic process indicate a need to revitalize both youth voter engagement and voter access. Today, there are nearly 8.9 million 16- and 17-year-old citizens in the United States, of whom more than 3.8 million (39%) are non-white.

If preregistered at the same rate as their 18-year-old counterparts, there would have been more than 4.3 million 16- and 17-year-old pre-registrants as of November 2008, all just an 18th birthday away from access to the ballot box.

Preregistration in Practice: States Demonstrate that it’s Engaging, Easy, and Cost-Effective

Many states recognize the importance of preregistration. However, in most of these states, the law is unclear as to when a young person may preregister; usually, they allow pre-registrants to complete a voter application if they will be 18 by the next election. This renders voter registration efforts that could potentially target a wider pool of young people (including high school drives and DMV registrations under the “Motor Voter” provision of the National Voter Registration Act) less effective than they might be in a state with a clearer cutoff. Today, only four states—Florida, Hawaii, North Carolina, and Rhode Island— allow citizens as young as 16 to

preregister to vote, and four more—California, Louisiana, Maine, and Oregon—allow citizens to preregister at 17, making voter outreach and education easier to implement.

A 2009 report by George Mason University Associate Professor Michael McDonald examined states with established preregistration programs, finding that preregistration had long term, positive effects for thousands of young citizens.² In particular, the study found that Florida’s 2008 program had been the most successful, with 78,000 young people preregistered due to “robust high school outreach programs.”

Florida’s preregistration program had a positive impact on voter participation, particularly among young African-Americans. According to McDonald, citizens who had previously preregistered were two percentage points more likely to vote in 2008 than those who only registered after turning 18. Remarkably, preregistered African-

Preregistration Policies in the States

Preregistration for 16- and 17-year olds	Preregistration for 17-year olds	Preregistration for 17.5-year olds	Preregistration for 17-year olds who will be 18 by next election	
Florida	California	Iowa	Alaska	New York
Hawaii	Louisiana	Georgia	Arizona	Ohio
North Carolina	Maine		Arkansas	South Dakota
Rhode Island	Oregon		Connecticut	Tennessee
			Indiana	Texas
			Minnesota	Utah
			Missouri	West Virginia
			Nebraska	Wisconsin
			Nevada	Wyoming

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Americans were 5.2 percentage points more likely to vote in 2008 than those who registered after they had turned 18.

“Preregistration laws may be reasonably expected to increase youth voter turnout if voter registration poses a significant barrier to youth voter participation. Voter registration burdens first-time voters who are unfamiliar with voter registration laws and who may inadvertently disenfranchise themselves by missing a registration deadline,” wrote McDonald. “Political campaigns also tend to target persons already registered to vote for their persuasion and voter mobilization efforts since many campaigns, particularly at the state and local level, do not have resources to conduct large-scale voter registration drives.”

The lasting effect of preregistration on civic participation has been demonstrated in Florida’s increased voter engagement among those who originally preregistered. Furthermore, research shows that the chances of purging 18-25 year-olds who previously preregistered from the voter rolls, thereby nullifying their registration status, is extremely low. Although 18-year-olds may move slightly more than the general public, they move less frequently than citizens in their mid-to-late 20’s. Eighty-three percent of 18-year-old citizens remain at their current address for at least one year, just four percentage points lower than the general voting-eligible public. By contrast, only 66 percent of 25-year-old citizens remain at their current address for at least one year. Voter purge rates for pre-registrants, McDonald writes, is only two percentage points

higher than those who register at the traditional age of 18. Ultimately, preregistration is still highly effective in engaging and enfranchising young citizens by the time they reach voting age.

Implementation is Easy and Cost-Effective

Preregistration only requires minute changes to the voter registration form and to the central voter registry software, advocates say.³

For several states, adding more preregistered voters to the system requires little or no change. A number of states already input advance-registered voters into voter registration databases as “pending” applicants. As noted by nonpartisan think tank and preregistration advocate FairVote, “a State’s Board of Elections transfers ‘pending’ voters to ‘active’ status when they become eligible to vote.”⁴

“Pre-registration is a cost-effective step toward greater standardization, which means a cleaner, more accurate data set,” testified former director of FairVote Rhode Island, Ari Savitzky, in support of a preregistration bill in 2008. (The state finally adopted a similar bill in 2010.) “Pre-registration could also save money and minimize human error by allowing students to register year round at points of civic engagement and education, helping order the chaos of private, partisan voter registration, which can swamp boards of canvassers in the run-up to the voter registration deadline.”

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These simple, low-cost changes are contrasted with high rewards as preregistration has the potential to engage young voters early on as electoral participants. Pre-registrants also have a greater likelihood of processing their forms through the Motor Vehicle Division or, in some states, online, thereby reducing voter registration errors.

State Legislatures Recognize the Importance of Preregistration

The 2009-2010 legislative sessions brought an array of bipartisan-supported preregistration bills in multiple states, including those that passed in California, North Carolina, and Rhode Island. The rest are states where we may expect to see preregistration up for debate in future sessions.

Arizona

For the second year in a row, Representative Eddie Ableser (D-Tempe) has introduced a bill (House Bill 2269) to permit citizens as young as 16 to preregister to vote. Senator Jose Luis Garcia (D-Tucson) introduced a similar bill (Senate Bill 1220) that would allow 17-year-olds to preregister. Garcia's bill was held in committee on February 25, 2010, and Ableser's bill remains pending.

As of November 2008, Arizona citizens 18- to 30-years old were registered to vote at a rate five points lower than the general voting-eligible Arizona population.⁵ In 2008, Arizona citizens 18- to 30-years old turned out to vote at a rate 12 percentage points lower than the general voting-eligible Arizona population.

There are an estimated 191,000 16- and 17-year-old citizens in Arizona.⁶ If preregistered at the same rate as their 18- to 30-year-old counterparts, there would have been over 122,000 pre-registrants in Arizona as of November 2008.

Kansas

Representative Milack Talia (D-Merriam) introduced House Bill 2256, allowing for "early voter registration" for citizens as young as 14 years of age. The bill provides that the citizen would be notified once they turn 18 and are eligible to cast a ballot. It was carried over to the 2010 session.

Massachusetts

Representative Ellen Story (D-Amherst) introduced House Bill 683 during the 2009-2010 session, providing preregistration for citizens who are at least 16.5 years of age. The bill is currently pending.

Michigan

Representatives Lesia Liss (D-Warren) and Robert Jones (D-Kalamazoo) introduced preregistration bills, HB 4261 and HB 4337 respectively, during the 2009-2010 legislative session. Senator

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Cameron Brown also introduced preregistration Senate Bill 61, a measure providing preregistration for 16- and 17-year-olds who obtain a driver's license. All bills are currently pending.

New Hampshire

Rep. Carolyn Gargas (R-Hillsborough) introduced House Bill 1360 in January, 2010, providing voter registration opportunities for 17-year-old citizens. The bill is currently pending.

Washington

Representative Marko Lias (D- Mukilteo) introduced House Bill 1193, providing a preregistration program run by the Secretary of State for citizens as young as 13. The 2009 bill was carried over and reintroduced on January 11, 2010. It remains pending in the House State Government & Tribal Affairs Committee.

Policy Recommendations

With thousands of young people in Florida, Hawaii, and North Carolina (and soon Rhode Island), taking advantage of preregistration opportunities, it appears that these policies just may be one key to enfranchising this historically underrepresented group of citizens. The rate of success in mobilizing youth, especially youth of color, may be heightened with a few accompanying measures that maximize the impact of

voter registration efforts by providing a wider range of young people with access to the franchise while guiding them towards lifelong civic participation.

Project Vote is able to provide technical assistance to states seeking to extend voter registration access to underrepresented youth by implementing preregistration policies. Currently, Project vote is providing advocacy materials to stakeholders in several states.

High School Targeted Voter Registration Programs

Dropout rates in 12th grade exemplify the need for preregistration efforts at a younger age if it is to occur through schools. This problem is exacerbated among minority citizens, who are more likely to drop out of school before their senior year. According to the 2009 Statistical Abstracts of the United States, the annual dropout rate for White students in grades 10 through 12 is three percent, compared to four percent for African-Americans and Asians, and six percent for Latinos.⁷

Voter Education

Research shows that preregistration is most successful when educators are involved. According to McDonald's report, existing preregistration programs were found to be most successful when voter registration was part of a class or assembly

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activity with guidance on how to complete a voter registration form and other informative details on the voting process.

In Florida, lawmakers say success rates can be further improved with established voter education and voter registration programs on every public high school campus to ensure all eligible students not only have access to preregistering and registering to vote, but also understand the process for civic engagement in Florida. Currently, there is an effort in the state to mandate voter education accompanying the state's preregistration program, which would make Florida's preregistration policy a positive model for other states to follow.

Standardize Existing Preregistration Opportunities

Providing a precise age limit in preregistration policies - as opposed to policies that only allow 17.5-year olds or those that will be 18 by the following election - is a key component to successful youth voter engagement. Implementing policies that permit all 16- and 17-year-old citizens to preregister to vote reduces confusion among young people and election administrators and provides a wider pool of potential voters in registration efforts. These efforts may include voter registration on high school campuses, law enforcement facilities geared to juveniles, and agencies offering voter registration under the National Voter Registration Act.

This policy recommendation may contribute to higher voter registration rates from federally mandated voter registration programs, especially for underage youth who do not attend public school. Under the "Motor Voter" provision of the National Voter Registration Act, 16- and 17-year-old citizens who obtain driver's licenses may also register to vote while applying for their first driver's license.⁸ A lesser known but key component of the NVRA that captures underrepresented low-income citizens may also be utilized to provide voter registration access to certain young citizens who apply for public assistance.

Conclusion

Creating access to the democratic process while instilling the value of civic participation at a young age has been proven to boost turnout and potentially create lifelong voters. Preregistration is a simple and effective way to reach the growing population of underrepresented youth before they become voters, at the same time increasing the number of historically underrepresented minorities.

Notes

- 1 Hess, D. and Jody Herman. *Representational Bias of the 2008 Electorate*. Project Vote. November 2009.
- 2 McDonald, Michael. "Voter Preregistration Programs." George Mason University. November 2009. http://elections.gmu.edu/Preregistration_Report.pdf
- 3 Savitzky, Ari. "Senate Testimony on behalf of [2008 Rhode Island Bill,] S 2081: Youth Voter Preregistration." FairVote. 2008. <http://archive.fairvote.org/?page=2227>
- 4 "Youth Preregistration Fact Sheet: Boosting More Efficient Registration and Education Programs." FairVote. 2009. <http://www.fairvote.org/youth-preregistration-fact-sheet>.
- 5 "Expanding the Youth Electorate in Arizona with Preregistration." Project Vote. December 2009.
- 6 Due to the small sample size, the margin of error for this figure is large, at about +/- 14%.
- 7 Table 241 of the 2009 Statistical Abstracts of the United States
- 8 "Youth Preregistration Fact Sheet: Boosting More Efficient Registration and Education Programs." FairVote. 2009. <http://www.fairvote.org/youth-preregistration-fact-sheet>.

Project Vote is a national nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that promotes voting in historically underrepresented communities. Project Vote takes a leadership role in nationwide voting rights and election administration issues, working through research, litigation, and advocacy to ensure that our constituencies can register, vote, and cast ballots that count.

Disclaimer

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