



Engaging the Youth Electorate through High School Voter Registration

Youth are widely underrepresented in the U.S. electorate. Research suggests that high school voter registration programs increase electoral participation among youth. Legislators, election officials, and school administrators throughout the United States should support the creation of high school voter registration programs to engage students in the electoral process. These programs should, at minimum, provide students who are eligible to register and preregister to vote with voter registration applications and instruction on how to complete and submit their applications. Several factors demonstrate why these programs are necessary.

Unequal Representation

Youth in the United States are underrepresented in the registered and voting electorate.

- As of November 2008, U.S. citizens 18- to 29-years old were registered to vote at a rate 10 percentage points lower than the general voting-eligible population.¹
- In the 2008 election, U.S. citizens aged 18 to 29 turned out to vote at a rate 13 percentage points lower than the general voting-eligible population.
- Registration and voting rates are much lower for 18-year-olds than the general voting-eligible population. In November 2008, the registration rate was 22 percentage points lower and the voting rate was 21 percentage points lower.

The Impact of High School Voter Registration Programs Could be Substantial

High school voter registration programs could increase 18-year-olds' overall registration rate and improve youth participation in elections.

- There are an estimated 3.8 million 18-year-old citizens in the United States.
- If registered at the same rate as the general U.S. population (71%), there would have been more than 830,000 additional 18-year-old registered voters as of November 2008.
- High school voter registration programs can be very successful in engaging the youth electorate. For instance, Florida county-level Supervisors of Elections have deemed current student voter registration and education programs in their counties "tremendously effective" in increasing voter registration and turnout.²

High School Voter Registration Programs have broad support

States, counties, and cities across the country have recognized the underrepresentation of youth in the U.S. electorate and have adopted laws, administrative rules, and mandates to increase youth electoral participation through high school voter registration programs.

- Project Vote research has revealed that California, Florida, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island have implemented high school voter registration programs in schools statewide.
- Ohio Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner developed the "Grads Vote 2007" pilot program to register graduating high school seniors. "We want young people to vote and participate in their government," Brunner said. "This is an effective and low-cost way to give them access."³
- The National Association of Secretaries of State is also working to promote civic participation among America's youth through its New Millennium Project.

Legislators, election officials, and school officials across the United States should implement high school voter registration programs to engage youth in the electoral process and improve overall performance on voter registration and voter turnout.

¹ Unless noted otherwise, data come from Project Vote's analysis of the November 2008 Current Population Survey.

² FL Division of Elections, *Voter Education Programs Report for the 2008 Election Cycle*, p. 14.

³ See press release entitled "May 22, 2007: Pilot Project Targets Youth Voter Registration in Five Counties" available at <http://www.sos.state.oh.us/SOS/secBrunner/Secretary%20Brunner%20Around%20Ohio/20070522.aspx>



Commonly Asked Questions About High School Voter Registration

What are the benefits of high school voter registration programs?

In the United States, 18-year-olds are registered to vote at a rate 22 percentage points lower than the general public. High school voter registration programs have the potential to reach and engage this underrepresented group. The high school setting provides a unique opportunity to educate students about and engage them in the electoral process.

State high school voter registration programs, such as those in Florida and Vermont, have been found to be effective in increasing voter registration and turnout among youth.⁴ Vermont's Secretary of State Deborah L. Markowitz has pointed out the importance of registering students before they leave high school. She remarked, "Students find it difficult to register while away at college, the military, or while working. We know from experience that Vermont's young people are more likely to vote if they register before they leave high school."⁵

How have high school voter registration programs been implemented?

High school voter registration programs have been implemented in a variety of ways across the United States. Programs in some jurisdictions designate schools as voter registration agencies and make forms available to students. Programs sometime include education components, such as election officials providing a voter education program as part of civics classes. Other programs include voter registration drives at the schools, sometimes during a school assembly. For instance, in Vermont, the secretary of state coordinates with school administrators and faculty during High School Voter Registration Week, an annual high school voter registration drive.

Implementation seems to be most successful when there is a voter education component and coordination among election officials and school administrators. In the case of Florida, high school voter outreach programs vary by county. The Miami-Dade Supervisor of Elections Office started performing school voter registration drives more than 20 years ago. In 2004, the Miami-Dade Elections office reached out to more than 20 local high schools, and these outreach efforts continue. They did this by forming a strong relationship with the Miami-Dade School Board. Due to that relationship, last year, the Miami-Dade Elections Office was able to collect roughly 12,000 new voter registration forms from high school students.

How much will high school voter registration programs cost?

The cost of a program depends on how it is implemented. A main cost of a program will include the distribution and processing of voter registration forms. The use of online voter registration can create a considerable savings in the distribution and processing of these forms. The state of California found that implementing an online system for school voter registration increased the cost-effectiveness of their program.⁶ Online forms have been shown to cost as little as \$0.03 per registration.⁷

⁴ Op. Cit. at #2. See also Michael McDonald, *Voter Preregistration Programs*, available at http://elections.gmu.edu/Preregistration_Report.pdf.

⁵ See Press Release entitled "May 14-21 is High School Voter Registration Week" dated May 14, 2008, available at [http://www.sec.state.vt.us/secdesk/pressreleases/2008/2008_May_Press_Releases.html#advisory hs voter reg week](http://www.sec.state.vt.us/secdesk/pressreleases/2008/2008_May_Press_Releases.html#advisory%20hs%20voter%20reg%20week)

⁶ CA Secretary of State, *Annual Report to the Legislature on Student Voter Registration*.

⁷ Pew Center on the States, *Bringing Elections into the 21st Century: Voter Registration Modernization*.