

# Voter Pre-Registration for High School Students



H. 683—REP. STORY

## The problem.

While voting is fundamental to our democracy, there are many Americans that aren't registered to vote. This problem is particularly acute among young voters. Nationwide, less than 50% of 18-year-olds are registered.

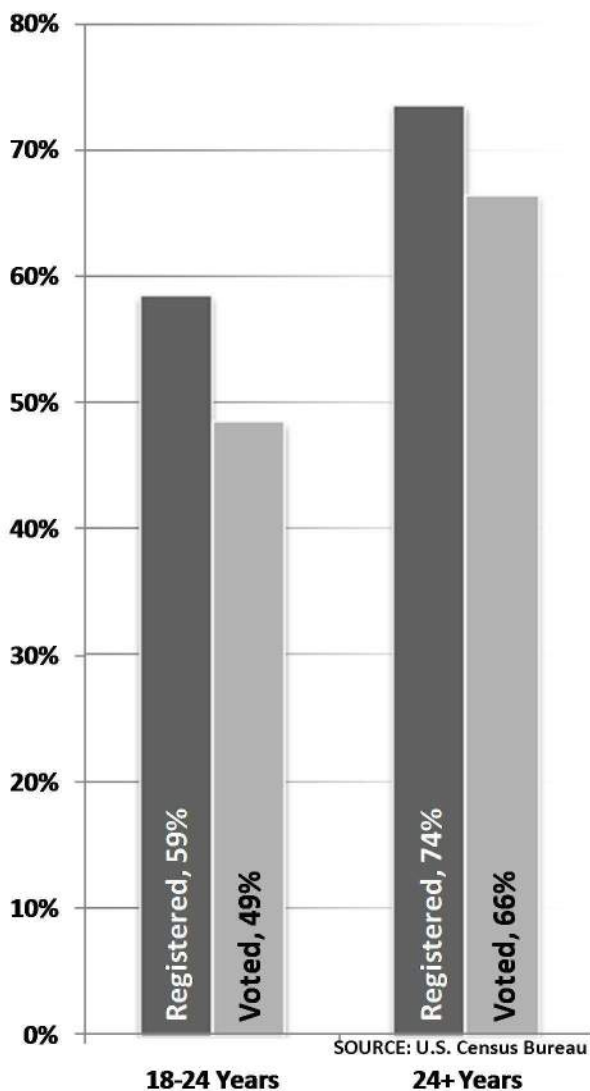
In the 2008 election, only 59% of eligible voters between the ages of 18 and 24 were registered to vote compared with 74% of eligible voters older than 24—a significant 15% gap.

## The solution.

Allow high school students to pre-register to vote, so that when they turn 18 their registration will automatically be activated. At 16½-years-old, most people are getting their drivers licenses, registering with the Selective Service, and beginning to prepare for life after high school—what better time to register to vote?

## The benefits.

- Most registration systems are already capable of handling pre-registered voters and will automatically transfer 'pending' registrations to 'active' when a voter becomes eligible.
- Lowering the registration age does not change the voting age which is set by the U.S. Constitution.
- Current registration drives only focus on seniors and registration rates are typically highest during presidential election years. Students who are of age in non-election years are thus less likely to register.
- A standardized voting curriculum encourages students to learn about the mechanics of participation.
- Several states acknowledge the importance of early participation by allowing 17-year-olds to serve as election judges.
- Academic studies and electoral analyses indicate that voting behavior is habit-forming. If you vote, you will keep voting. If you don't vote, you probably won't start.



## Where it works.

Pre-registration exists for 16 or 17-year-olds in Connecticut, Hawaii, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, Oregon, Texas, Wisconsin, and most recently Florida where a bipartisan bill was recently signed.

## Teaching participation.

According to Professor Eric Plutzer, a professor of political science and sociology at Penn State:

"The informational approach is like telling my six-year-old daughter that she shouldn't play baseball until she understands the 'infield fly rule.' But if she goes ahead and participates in baseball, she'll gradually learn the rules, the terminology, even the trivia. It's the same with politics. Convince a young citizen to vote, and he or she will read the newspaper differently, recognize the names of people on the ballot when they're mentioned on television or by a neighbor, and eventually become highly informed. Get them to the polls once, and they will likely vote again and again."

After implementing pre-registration, educators would be able to seamlessly integrate the process into the existing civics curriculum. Teachers could register students to vote as they taught them about the democratic process and government.

It has often been noted that those who fail to register and vote early in life are less likely to ever become actively engaged in the political process.

This 'disengagement cycle' becomes increasingly difficult to break as an individual settles into a pattern of non-participation and apathy. If a person does not register early on, it becomes increasingly likely that they will never do so.

Because of this, high school provides a crucial window during which the importance of registering and voting can be fully impressed on young citizens. The structured environment provides an opportunity to cultivate engaged and informed participants who will not only vote, but who will also serve as the next generation of poll and election workers.

## *States Move to Create Culture of Voter Engagement through Pre-Registration*

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The rising levels of voter participation among the nation's youth continue to be challenged by the current voter registration system, perpetuating the difficulty of fostering lifelong voters. Some states are proposing to take this challenge into their own hands by making voter registration accessible to citizens as young as 16. Already widely accessible at schools and departments of motor vehicles, the move would allow future voters in some states to automatically be enrolled on the voter rolls on their 18th birthdays, a change that advocates say could "close the registry gap between young voters and the rest of the population."

"It's good public policy to get young people involved as early as possible in the democratic process," said Fair Vote Rhode Island Director Matt Sledge in Brown University's *Daily Herald* last week. The preregistration bill, he said, would "close the registry gap between young voters and the rest of the population."

Institutionalizing preregistration not only makes it easier to conduct and participate in voter registration activities on high school campuses and DMVs since it captures more young people before they graduate, but it also helps "boost the effectiveness of civics education by tying it directly to civic participation through the opportunity to preregister," according to a Fair Vote report. The report further notes that "uniform" preregistration laws, like those in Hawaii and Florida, help alleviate general voter registration ills by acting as a "cost-effective step toward greater standardization, which means a cleaner, more accurate data set. Pre-registration could also save money and minimize human error by allowing students to register year round at points of civic engagement and education..."

According to a 2007 proposal for preregistration in California by the public policy group, New America Foundation, "if young people are not hooked into democratic institutions and practices while they're in high school, it becomes more difficult to do so after they leave high school."

The group emphasized that young people become more difficult to "contact or engage" directly after high school, resulting in a "'disengagement cycle' that becomes increasingly difficult to break. High school, in many cases, is the final opportunity to fully engage young people about participating in our democracy. Having common sense practices for engaging young people in high school is crucial. One of the most effective efforts is to lower the age for voter registration to sixteen."