

**Testimony in Support of the EMPOWER Act  
H. 720 and S. 389**

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Our democracy is in a crisis of political inequality, polarization, and low participation. Despite record turnout in the 2018 elections, voting rates are still low and genuine civic engagement remains in decline. Moreover, while we now cherish the ideal of universal suffrage, it is not one that we were truly founded on and it has never been achieved. That means that the fight to secure full, equitable participation in our democracy is far from over. And that means we must both continue to dismantle barriers to political participation and encourage participation here in the Commonwealth. Two bills before you, H. 720 and S. 389, would help do just that.

The EMPOWER Act allows cities and towns in the Commonwealth to lower the voting age to 16 or 17 for municipal elections, without needing to pass a home rule petition, after a majority vote by the city council in cities like Boston and Somerville, or through town meetings in smaller towns. On behalf of our Common Cause Massachusetts members, we urge you to give these bills a favorable report.

First, participation in our elections overall remains low and these bills would help develop a norm of political participation for young people. Political science research has long shown that voting is a habit that is best established early in life and most likely established when there is a strong culture of civic engagement. Specifically, research shows that whether an eligible voter participates in their first and second election most influences their lifelong voting habits. Therefore, allowing 16 and 17 year-olds to vote in municipal elections would increase the likelihood that they participate in all future elections. Voting is the cornerstone activity of a democracy and we need broad and consistent participation for it to fulfill its roll in creating an engaged and reflective electorate and a truly representative government.

Second, those elections that suffer the most from low participation are municipal elections - often those whose outcomes could most directly and perceptibly impact a new voters' day-to-day life and immediate community. Just this fall, despite what was a historic election for Boston, turnout was only 16.5 percent. What's more, low turnout is particularly pronounced among young voters. In 2015, for example, the "Tisch College's Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) found that turnout among residents aged 18 to 29 in Boston's ... municipal election was under 2 percent, compared to almost 15 percent for Bostonians age 30 or older." Municipal elections are those

that most need youth participation. By being eligible to vote while still likely at home, young Bay Staters will be more likely to participate in these critical elections.

Third, elections at the local level are uniquely positioned to foster the kind of genuine civic engagement that is most needed to redress apathy, isolation, and polarization exacerbated by low participation in elections and the decline in social capital. That's because municipal elections can have far more quickly perceptible impacts - including expanded library hours, new bike lanes, or whether a municipality becomes a "Safe City." This allows new voters to see that their votes matter, and to connect their participation to direct outcomes for their local community. In that way, participation in these elections can foster a commitment to the common good.

Peter Levine of Tufts' Tisch College, an expert on civic renewal, describes the core of citizenship as a "combination of deliberation, collaboration, and civic relationships." With more of this kind of citizenship, he argues, we could address our most pressing problems. Allowing young Bay Staters to cast a ballot in municipal elections will mean that those elections are their first. These voters will likely participate in future elections, including municipal elections. But they will also be more likely to participate in civic life on the local level in other ways, whether that's attending community meetings, volunteering for local campaigns, or working together to solve problems within their communities. These behaviors all foster a feeling of connection to and responsibility for the common good. In short, participating in local elections specifically encourages young Bay Staters to learn how to live well in community with others, deliberate, and solve shared problems.

The 2018 civic education legislation was laudable but long-overdue, and will undoubtedly strengthen democratic citizenship in the Commonwealth. But with the EMPOWER Act, more students will be able to connect what they learn in school to real policies and campaigns at the local level. At this moment when young people in America are raising their voice, we must do all we can to ensure that it is heard, and that it is sustained. Allowing young Bay Staters to cast a ballot will increase our chances of transforming those mobilized budding activists into sustained voters and participants in our democracy.

Finally, we believe that in the same way that states have the charge of acting as the "laboratories of democracy," so too do cities and towns have a responsibility to experiment with reforms on the local level so that we may better understand their impact and efficacy. Massachusetts municipalities have an opportunity to allow our state to further live up to its monicker of "the cradle of democracy."

On behalf of Common Cause Massachusetts members I urge you to give H. 720 and S. 389 a favorable review.