



Engaging the Youth Electorate through Preregistration

Legislators across the United States should support legislation that allows 16- and 17-year-olds to preregister to vote. A preregistered voter's registration becomes active upon turning 18 years of age. Preregistration for 16- and 17-year-olds is an important step in addressing underrepresentation among youth in the U.S. electorate. Several factors demonstrate why preregistration legislation is necessary.

Unequal Representation

Youth are underrepresented in the U.S. registered and voting electorate. Furthermore, racial disparities exist among the youth that are registered.¹

- As of November 2008, fewer than half (49%) of the 3.7 million 18-year-old citizens were registered to vote, a rate 22 points lower than the general population.²
- In 2008, non-white or Latino 18-year-old citizens were registered to vote at a rate six percentage points behind their white counterparts, 51 percent of whom are registered.

The Impact of Preregistration Could be Substantial

Preregistration policies have the ability to increase the electoral participation of youth in the U.S.

- 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-yr-old counterparts, there would have been over 4.3 million 16 and 17-yr-old preregistrants as of November 2008.
- According to a recent analysis of Florida and Hawaii, two states that have implemented preregistration policies, those who preregistered were more likely to turn out to vote than those who registered after turning 18 years old. The turnout increase was highest among African-American youth.³

Preregistration is a Low Cost but High Reward Policy

This legislation also can be implemented at low cost.⁴ Implementation costs would only include:

- Making small changes to the voter registration form and to any voter registration software and online resources;
- Informing voter registration agencies of the changes and providing them with updated materials; and
- Processing the additional new voter registrations generated through preregistration.

While these costs are low, the potential rewards of preregistration are high.

- Preregistration has the potential to engage young voters earlier as electoral participants.
- Preregistered youth would be likely to register through motor vehicle offices or online, which would reduce voter registration errors.

Preregistration has Broad Support

- The states of Hawaii, Florida, Maryland, North Carolina, and Rhode Island, as well as the territory of Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia, have passed preregistration laws.
- Several states are considering preregistration, including Delaware and New York.

States across the U.S. should follow the lead of such states as Florida and North Carolina and allow 16 and 17-year-old citizens to preregister to vote.

¹ See Doug Hess and Jody Herman's report *Representational Bias in the 2008 Electorate*, available at www.projectvote.org.

² Unless noted otherwise, data come from Project Vote's analysis of the November 2008 Current Population Survey.

³ Michael McDonald, *Voter Preregistration Programs*, available at http://elections.gmu.edu/Preregistration_Report.pdf.

⁴ See Ari Savitzky's testimony before the Rhode Island senate, available at <http://fairvote.org/ri/?page=2227>.



Commonly Asked Questions About Preregistration

Why should I support preregistration legislation?

Youth are underrepresented in the registered and voting electorate.⁵ Preregistration of 16 and 17-year-olds has been shown to improve registration and turnout rates among those who have preregistered as compared to those who registered after turning 18.⁶ States could improve their overall voter registration and turnout performance and reduce the underrepresentation of youth in the electorate by enacting preregistration for the estimated 8.9 million 16 and 17-year-old citizens across the U.S.

States like Florida and Hawaii have proven that preregistration programs can successfully prepare 16 and 17-year-old citizens to become engaged voters. State legislatures should follow the lead of these states and allow 16 and 17-year-old citizens to preregister to vote.

What would preregistration cost?

Preregistration legislation can be implemented at low cost.⁷ Implementation costs include making small changes to the voter registration form and to any voter registration software and online resources, informing voter registration agencies of the changes and providing updated materials, and processing the additional new voter registrations generated through preregistration.

The benefits from passing preregistration laws would outweigh any costs; especially given that it would engage young voters early as electoral participants. Maricopa County, Arizona, reported that processing voter registration applications costs on average \$0.03 per online registration.⁸ If preregistered youth were to register online, the processing cost for these new preregistrations would be minimal.

Will preregistered voters move when they turn 18, thereby nullifying their preregistrations?

While 18-year-olds may move slightly more than the general public, they move much 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. This rate is just slightly lower than the general voting-eligible public, 87 percent of whom remain at their current address for at least one year. By contrast, only 66 percent of 25-year-old citizens remain at their current address for at least one year.

Furthermore, preregistrations remain valid on the voter rolls at a rate similar to the general voting-eligible public. Based on a study of preregistration programs in Hawaii and Florida, preregistrations are purged at a rate only 2 percentage points higher than new regular registrants.⁹

⁵ Unless noted otherwise, data come from Project Vote's analysis of the November 2008 Current Population Survey.

⁶ Op. Cit. Michael McDonald.

⁷ Op. Cit. Ari Savitzky.

⁸ See The Pew Center on the States' Issue Brief *Bringing Elections into the 21st Century: Voter Registration Modernization*, available at http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Voter_Registration_Modernization_Brief_web.pdf

⁹ Op. Cit. Michael McDonald.