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Senate Rules Committee
State Capitol
900 Court St NE
Salem, OR 97031

March 27, 2019

Chair Burdick and members of the Senate Rules Committee,

As Multnomah County Commissioner for District 3, southeast and east Portland, I write to you today to voice my support for SJR 22, the Our Future, Our Vote Act.

In 1971, America was in turmoil. Jim Crow had only just been struck from the law seven years prior; three years later the country was rocked by the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy; and our nation was being torn apart at its seams by the divisive, drawn out, and ultimately futile Vietnam War. Tens of thousands of young people were being drafted to fight and die in a war that they did not support and had no say in starting. Thousands of them were returning in body bags.

Our nation recognized in 1971 the injustice of sending 18, 19, and 20 year olds to fight and die in a war started by a government that did not represent them. So on March 23, 1971 Congress introduced the 26th amendment to the constitution, lowering the national voting age to 18. By July 1, the amendment had been ratified and became the law of the land -- the fastest ratification of a constitutional amendment in our nation's history.

The America that we have inherited does not face the same challenges as the America of 1971, but our challenges echo those that came before us.

Our planet is facing a climate crisis that threatens the very existence of our civilization. Our 18, 19, and 20 year olds who bravely volunteer to serve our country are fighting a war in a distant land with no clear outcome and no clear benefit. Our children are being gunned down in their classrooms. 97 times last year. Already 18 times this year. And the twin forces of technological change and a rigged economic system are creating never-before-seen levels of economic inequality. Millennials may be the first generation to be less-well off financially than their parents were before them.

Though we face these daunting challenges which will disproportionately impact today's young people, and affect them long after most of us are gone, we, the current adults governing our society, have failed to meaningfully address them.

We have failed to stop the mass shootings that terrorize our schools. We have failed to end wars that are now being fought by soldiers who were not born when they began. Due to our inaction, we now risk handing our children and grandchildren a world that is more than 2.0 centigrades warmer, more dangerous, and more unequal than the one that we were given.

Inequality and student debt are growing worse and worse. In America right now, three men -- Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and Warren Buffett -- together own as much wealth as the bottom 50% of Americans combined, and for communities of color, who are facing entrenched racism in the financial system, the outlook is only worse. Last year total student debt among Americans reached \$1.5 trillion. Politicians on both sides have spent decades failing to meaningfully address the problems. Instead, they have fueled them with policies like the recent middle class tax increases that prioritize short-term corporate profits above all else.

In these trying times though, hope can be seen in the actions of young people -- 16, 17, 18 and younger -- who are not accepting this fate without a fight.

You can see that hope in Greta Thunberg, a 16-year old climate activist who started the global climate strike movement, and has been nominated for this year's Nobel Peace Prize for her activism and leadership.

You can see that hope in the students of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, who, just over a year ago, refused to listen to the "thoughts and prayers" of politicians who again failed to take any action after 17 of their fellow students were gunned down in their classrooms. They instead started the March for Our Lives movement, which has revived the nation's gun safety debate and crushed the NRA's toxic influence in Washington.

And, you can see hope in the hundreds of thousands of young people who marched out of their schools on March 15th to call for action on the climate crisis.

It is clear that the generation currently preparing to enter adulthood understands that as a result of our national inaction, their lives, livelihoods, and futures are at risk. They are taking action on a nationwide and global scale when we are not, and they deserve a seat at the decision-making table.

We Oregonians are proud of our history as a driver of democracy. We pioneered Vote by Mail and Automatic Voter Registration, which are now widely held up as the gold standard of voting systems in America.

It is time that we continue that tradition and extend a vote, and a voice, to 16 and 17 year olds so they can fully participate in our democracy and share the perspectives of those who will inherit the world we are creating.

I urge you to pass SJR 22 and put this question before the voters.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jessica Vega Pederson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jessica Vega Pederson
Multnomah County Commissioner