

Statement of Representative Jan Schakowsky
Testimony before the House Administration Committee
“Ensuring the Rights of College Students to Vote”
September 25, 2008

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for inviting me today to discuss the challenges our nation faces in promoting and protecting the right of college students to vote. I am the representative of Illinois' Ninth Congressional district, which is home to Northwestern University, Loyola University of Chicago, Oakton Community College and Truman College. I am here today to talk about bipartisan legislation that I have introduced along with my friend Congressman Steven LaTourette of Ohio to reduce some of the barriers that college students face when trying to vote.

I believe that the foundation of America's democracy lies in civic engagement and broad participation in government. From the Civil Rights Amendment, to women's suffrage, to the abolition of the poll tax and finally the ratification of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, this nation has embarked on a difficult but steady march toward being a more inclusive nation.

In July, I introduced H.R. 6704, the Student Voter Opportunity to Encourage Registration Act of 2008, which is a continuation of that progress, because it provides a pathway to participation for America's youth.

The need for this bipartisan bill is clear. Despite a small rise in youth voting in the 2004 presidential election, young voters are far less likely to vote than older voters. In the 2004 presidential election, only 47 percent of 18-24 year old citizens voted, compared to 66 percent of citizens 25 and older. This marked the eighth straight presidential contest in which less than half of young Americans voted.

While there are a number of factors that contribute to this trend, one is clearly the fact many college students are first-time voters and often are unfamiliar with how to register. The Student VOTER Act offers a straightforward solution: it requires colleges and universities that receive federal funds to provide students the opportunity to register to vote on campus. The Student VOTER Act does this by amending the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, also known as the “Motor Voter Act,” to designate colleges and universities that receive federal funds as voter registration agencies.

This legislation will not present a substantial burden to our nation's universities. Already, the Federal Election Commission has created the National Mail Voter Registration Form which allows Americans to register to vote from anywhere in the United States. This form can easily be used at any University providing registration services for its students. For example, even before orientation begins, Brown University in Rhode Island provides its students with voter registration materials.

I am here today to talk with you about my bill, but I also understand that my legislation addresses only one of the challenges I believe young people will face when they attempt to vote this fall.

As we have already seen in this election year, enthusiasm and interest in the political process is stronger among young voters than perhaps at any other time in our nation's history. While this is grounds for optimism I am also troubled by efforts to intentionally mislead young voters and or prevent them from voting. I was shocked to learn about a misinformation campaign at Virginia Tech earlier this year, where flyers were printed and posted around campus that said students who registered to vote in Virginia could no longer be claimed as dependents on their parents' tax returns. Aside from being wholly inaccurate, this type of misinformation can have devastating consequences effectively intimidating young people into not voting.

Another obstacle for young voters is stringent Voter ID laws. Seven states specify that voters must show a photo ID before being permitted to vote. According to a Rock the Vote survey, 19 percent of young adults (18-29) report they do not possess a government issued photo ID with their current address. As a result, thousands—if not hundreds of thousands—of college students will be forced to vote provisionally this November, for which they might not even receive verification as to whether or not their ballots count.

These examples of the barriers students face today when attempting to register to vote demonstrate the importance of today's hearing. I thank the Committee for inviting me to testify and yield back the balance of my time.