

\*Remarks as Prepared for Delivery\*  
Comments of Catherine McLaughlin, Executive Director, Harvard's Institute of Politics  
on Ensuring the Rights of College Students to Vote  
Before the Committee on House Administration  
Washington, D.C.  
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I would like to thank Chairman Brady, Ranking Member Ehlers and members of this Committee for the opportunity to speak to you today about such an important subject.

My name is Catherine McLaughlin and I am the Executive Director of Harvard University's Institute of Politics (IOP) at the John F. Kennedy School of Government.

The Institute was established in 1966 as a memorial to President John F. Kennedy, and its mission is to inspire young people to a life of politics, public service and leadership. This mission, of course, is born out of President Kennedy's call to all of us – but particularly to young people – to serve our country and our communities through political engagement.

President Kennedy in 1963 described the responsibility we have as educated citizens to participate in our democracy. Speaking to students at Vanderbilt University, President Kennedy said, "The educated citizen has an obligation to serve the public. He may be a precinct worker or President. He may give his talents at the courthouse, the State house, or the White House. He may be a civil servant or a Senator, a candidate or a campaign worker, a winner or a loser. But he must be a participant and not a spectator."

That's what we are here talking about today – to make sure that young people have this critical opportunity to participate in the political process.

We are currently witnessing a political re-engagement by young people, who now must be considered a key voting bloc that can help play a strong role in the outcome of national elections.

The 2004 elections represented a reversal of more than a decade of declining youth voter turnout. For context, prior to the 2004 elections voter turnout by 18-24 year-olds declined by 16 percentage points between 1972 (when youth were given the right to vote) and 2000.

The downward trend was reversed in 2004. Forty-seven percent of 18 to 24 year-olds voted in 2004, an increase of eleven percentage points from the 2000 presidential election.

Since 2000, the IOP has conducted a unique national poll of the political views of 18-24 year-olds. Initially it focused solely on college students, in the fall of 2006, we expanded our polling to include all 18-24 year olds. Widely praised by the media, scholars, and the political community, the IOP survey is unique in that it was and still is largely produced by undergraduate students at the Institute of Politics under the direction of IOP Polling Director John Della Volpe.

Over the years, we have seen that young people with at least some college experience are almost twice as likely to vote as those who have never attended college. Turnout among college educated young people in 2004 was 59 percent while turnout among those with no more than a high school diploma was 34 percent. More importantly, 67 percent of college students said that as a result of the 2004 presidential election they are more likely to get involved in politics in the future. Our mission to engage young people is more important than ever before.

We have seen this new younger voter momentum be sustained so far through the 2008 primary election cycle. According to research from CIRCLE at the University of Maryland, youth voter turnout doubled, tripled, and even quadrupled in numerous states during this year's primaries and caucuses. We have every reason to expect solid turnout in the general election in November.

According to our most recent poll conducted this past summer, 62 percent of young voters report that they are excited about the upcoming election, including 69 percent of 18 to 24 year olds currently in college.

So how do we make sure that young people – including those on college campuses – receive every opportunity to participate in this and future elections?

It's important to first recognize how college students vote. College students are much more likely than any other segment of the population (except the military) to vote by absentee ballot.

Our 2003 IOP poll found that 39 percent of college students prefer to vote in their home state. However, to vote in their home state while at college usually requires a vote by absentee ballot, and one-third of those students said at the time that they did not know or were unsure how to do so.

Just weeks before the 2004 elections, our polling data showed well over half of college students who planned to vote in the '04 elections would not be voting in person at a polling place. Forty-two percent of students reported they would be voting by absentee ballot, and another 14 percent reported they planned on "early voting." Post-election survey data from CIRCLE at the University of Maryland showed 37 percent of college students did indeed vote by absentee ballot, and 78 percent of college students registered to vote in their home state said they "preferred" to be registered there.

In light of the fact that absentee voting is of special importance to college voters, in 2003 the Institute of Politics developed the “Guide to Absentee Voting,” a web-based document that is constantly updated and available online at [www.iop.harvard.edu](http://www.iop.harvard.edu). This guide is an interactive state-by-state information center about how to vote by absentee ballot.

We are also using new technologies to help first-time voters. For example, the IOP launched a new web-based initiative, specifically for the 2008 presidential primaries called “No Vote, No Voice” (<http://www.novotenovoice.com>), aimed at increasing youth turnout at the polls.

The project featured a Facebook.com application young people could download to their online profiles. Using the application, youth who “pledged” to vote in an upcoming presidential primary or caucus were sent important state-specific voting deadline reminders to their Facebook.com page, including those for registering to vote and sending in an absentee ballot.

In 2003, the IOP gathered 18 other colleges and universities to create the National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement, a nation-wide consortium of colleges and universities dedicated to youth civic engagement. Representatives from each of the colleges gather annually to share information on how to best register, educate and mobilize young voters. Young leaders from each of the colleges come together for training sessions and information sharing regarding best practices on getting their campus registered and mobilized.

One of the most important things that all of the colleges have learned over the years is that it is critical to work with University officials and integrate your efforts with the school’s freshmen academic registration efforts in the fall of an election year. Having a presence at a mandatory academic registration for freshmen allows us to get hundreds of students registering for classes to also register to vote and fill-out mobilization “contact” cards so we can follow-up.

Since 2004, Harvard’s Institute of Politics has conducted HVOTE - the “Harvard Voter Outreach and Turnout Effort,” a campus-wide voter registration and mobilization project whose goal is to provide Harvard students with the information and tools they need to cast their ballots. Harvard students go door-to-door in Harvard dorms and houses to register their fellow students and provide information on absentee voting.

Both of these efforts helped us register over 500 Harvard students as well as assisting another 400 in completing absentee ballot request forms in the past week alone.

In addition, this summer Eric Hysen, a sophomore at Harvard College created a new website for the IOP called “Campus Voices” which can be found at [www.campusvoices.org](http://www.campusvoices.org). This site allows students across the country to voice their opinions on the political process but also provides links to all the information that young people need to register including links to a variety of nonpartisan sites that will provide

state by state registration information, confirmation of registration, information on absentee ballots and location of polling places.

All this said, it is important to note that most universities do not have an organization like the Institute of Politics with professional staff on campus that can work with student leadership to ensure college students get the information they need. Toward this end, the Institute recently hosted students representing 49 colleges from 42 states at the "National College Conference for Political Engagement" to help students learn what they need to do to get-out-the-vote on campus. This important 2-day event was an opportunity for campus leaders from around the country to convene, share and learn strategies, ideas and techniques for mobilizing their campuses for the November elections.

The absentee ballot process for students across the country can still be difficult to navigate. State laws for absentee voters are diverse and can be especially difficult for first time voters – a lack of uniformity and clarity in deadlines, voter identification requirements, and other information make voting confusing and difficult for our nation's students.

Creating a more simplified registration and absentee ballot voting system would help sustain increased electoral participation – particularly among younger Americans. For example, many absentee ballot voters mistakenly believe that by submitting a voter registration form, they are also officially requesting an absentee ballot – unaware that a separate form is required to do so. Making the absentee ballot application and submission process clearer would help students understand what they need to do to participate.

Finally, we need to make sure students have the information they need to vote, and targeting voter education sections of state election websites toward students would help make voting by absentee easier. Although some states already provide some of the following, voter confusion could be curtailed if elections websites from all 50 states each included: detailed information on the absentee ballot voting process (including identification and residence requirements), application and submission deadlines, downloadable absentee ballot application forms that can be completed online, frequently asked questions, and a ballot application tracking system.

In conclusion, we all have seen – in just the 2008 presidential primary season alone – how much impact the youth vote can have on the outcome of major national elections. We know they are excited about voting, we just need to do all we can to ensure doing so is as easy and streamlined as possible. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.