

Ensuring the Rights of College Students to Vote
Statement before the Committee on House Administration
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Thank you members of the Committee and Chairman Brady for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Sujatha Jahagirdar and I am the Program Director for the Student Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) New Voters Project.

The Student PIRGs are the nation's largest student civic engagement organization. Our New Voters Project is the oldest and largest grassroots non partisan effort to mobilize young voters in the country. Since our inception 25 years ago, we have registered millions of young voters, 500,000 in 2004 alone. This election year, as we speak, 85 PIRG organizers are working in 24 states on 150 campuses across the country running massive voter registration drives that pair on the ground and on line voter registration drives in an effort to ensure the voice of students is heard in election booths across the country.

Background on Student Voting

Young voter participation is essential to our democracy. Making up more than a fifth of the electorate in 2004, millennials born between 1980 and 2000 will make up a third of the electorate by 2015.¹ Because voting habits are established early, the participation of this generation in the political process will lead to a healthier democracy for decades to come. Recognizing the importance of their participation in the political process, in 1972, Americans granted 18-21 year olds the right to vote. For two decades subsequently, youth vote rates decreased, fueled by a 'cycle of mutual neglect' in which political campaigns failed to focus resources on turning out a demographic saddled with low turn out rates. Young people in turn, feeling this neglect, reciprocated with even bigger declines in turnout.

Over the past several election cycles, however, the tide has finally turned. The youth vote is on the rise. Between 2000 and 2004, young voter turnout rates increased by 11 percent, three times the increase among the general population.² Between 2002 and 2006, the youth vote increased again by two million votes, while general turnout increased only slightly.³ Turnout results in 2008 escalated this trend – in states where we possess sufficient comparison data, youth turnout rates doubled this primary season.⁴ Visiting campuses and talking with student leaders across the country over the past several months, the excitement among the nation's college and university students is palpable.

The reasons for this reversal range from the increased use of technology to an increased allocation of campaign resources across the board toward reaching out to and talking to young voters. While pundits and pollsters will likely debate the sources of this trend for years to come, one factor behind this trend is indisputable: For nearly a decade, experts have documented a rise in the civic engagement culture of

1 Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Youth Voting in the 2004 Battleground States, August 2004, downloaded from http://www.civicyouth.org/research/areas/pol_partic.htm, 23 September 2008

2 Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, The Youth Vote 2004, July 2005, downloaded from http://www.civicyouth.org/quick/youth_voting.htm, 23 September 2008

3 Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Youth Voter Turnout Increases in 2006, June 2007, downloaded from www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS07_2006MidtermCPS.pdf, 23 September 2008

4 Student PIRGs New Voters Project, "Youth Vote Turnout Comparisons 2000-2008," compiled from Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement calculations available at www.civicyouth.org

young people. Students are volunteering in greater and greater numbers, and over the past several election cycles, this increasing culture of civic engagement has spilled over into the political arena.

As policy-makers, local leaders and higher education institutions look at this trend, we should ask ourselves one question: How do we keep this momentum going? How do we ensure that student voters turn out in bigger numbers this year and for years to come?

Despite the importance of resolving this question and continuing this trend, numerous barriers to student voting persist. Over the next few minutes I will outline these barriers to the committee, suggest ways to remove them and thereby send a message to student voters that their civic engagement and participation in the political process is not only welcomed, but vigorously encouraged.

Restrictive Voter Identification Laws

Every state in the country requires its citizens to present proof of or swear to residency in order to cast a ballot. Unfortunately, identification laws that impact students are inconsistent across the country and many states and local registrars enforce identification requirements that create unnecessary barriers to student voting.

For example, Indiana guidance, newly implemented this year, explicitly states that student ID from a private institution may not be used for voting purposes.⁵ Drawn from a new state law that requires voters to present Indiana or federal ID at the polls, the law had serious consequences for student voter in the state during the primaries.

In just a few hours a small team of Student PIRG New Voters Project staff, for instance, documented a dozen cases of student voters turned away from the polls for a failure to meet these unnecessarily restrictive ID requirements. At St. Mary's College, a sister school to the University of Notre Dame, for example, two young freshmen arrived at the polls excited to vote for the first time. Both students considered themselves Indiana residents, volunteer their time as tutors at local elementary schools and are members of the campus ministry. Arriving at the polls with an armful of ID on the day of the Indiana primary – birth certificates, county registration cards, school IDs and Illinois driver's licenses – both young women were turned away and were not able to cast a ballot that day.

Indiana's restrictive voter ID law sent a message to those two freshmen that day – your vote is not welcome. The law turned what should have been the first lesson of civic education in a lifetime of citizenship into an exercise of frustration and disenfranchisement. And without reconsideration of these restrictive laws and those across the country, student voters will continue to receive this message over and over again.

In direct contrast, guidance issued by the Elections Division of the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board, for example, specifically states that an acceptable form of proof of residence includes a university, college or technical institute identification card that includes a photo. The state does not ask students to overcome any additional hurdles.⁶

5 Indiana Secretary of State, "PhotoID.IN.gov," downloaded from <http://www.in.gov/sos/photoid/>, 23 September 2008

6 Wisconsin Government Accountability Board, Elections Division, "How to Register and Vote on Election Day," downloaded from http://elections.state.wi.us/faq_detail.asp?faqid=121&fid=27&locid=47, 23 September 2008

Restrictive Interpretation of State Law

Hurdles to student voting persist in other forms as well. In Montgomery County, Virginia, last month, a local registrar issued a memo that warned students of dire potential consequences – the loss of healthcare, scholarships and tax status – for registering to vote where they go to school. The warnings, since discredited by the IRS and voting experts alike, created a chilling atmosphere among student voters at Virginia Tech, resulted in worried calls from parents and caused several students to withdraw their registrations in the area.⁷

The Virginia Tech incident was spawned by a confusing state guidance that led to inconsistent rules for student voters across the state. In contrast to the experience of students in Montgomery County, students at the University of Virginia face no warnings of dire consequences for registering to vote. While the Virginia State Board of Elections has since withdrawn much of its confusing guidance, it retains troubling information that has the potential for student voter suppression at the local level arising from the guidance remains.⁸

The Board of Election guidance still allows local registrars to issue questionnaires to students who register to vote. The questionnaires, which could probe a student's tax status, healthcare provider and scholarship sources, could severely intimidate students who seek to register to vote where they go to school.⁹

While local officials in Virginia have received considerable attention, unnecessary restrictions on student voters at the local level extend to other states as well. In Greenville County, South Carolina, the registrar's office incorrectly tells students at Furman University that if they are listed as dependents on their parent's tax returns, they must vote where their parents live.

To prevent a repeat of the Virginia Tech incident and other similar cases around the country, states should withdraw confusing and restrictive guidance for student voters that are subject to gross misinterpretation at the local level and lead to enormous barriers to student voting.

Restrictive Voter Registration Laws

The ability to vote is a basic right and should be easy and accessible. Over the past several decades, this country has made enormous strides toward achieving this goal. Registration deadlines set weeks before Election Day, however, remain as barriers to student voting. In fact, according to Demos, a non-partisan public policy organization, Election Day registration could increase youth turnout in presidential elections by as much as 14 percent.¹⁰

⁷ Elizabeth Reddel, "Warning for College Student voters," Inside Higher Ed, downloaded from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/09/03/voting>, 23 September 2008

⁸ Virginia State Board of Elections, "Registration and Voting Information for College Students," downloaded from http://www.sbe.virginia.gov/cms/Voter_Information/Registering_to_Vote/College_Student.html, 23 September 2008

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ DEMOS, "Voters Win with Election Day Registration," November 19, 2007 downloaded from <http://demos.org/pub1280.cfm>, 23 September 2008

In 2004, for instance, four of the five states with the highest youth turnout in the nation allow voters to register and vote on the same day.¹¹ Based on these results, we believe that same day voter registration policies across the country would significantly boost the youth vote and remove a significant barrier to young voter turnout across the country.

Inadequate Voting Infrastructure

With the youth vote on the rise, it is more important than ever to ensure adequate resources to handle the influx of new voters eager to exercise their civic responsibility for the first time. Often times, however, our voting infrastructure is insufficient to meet the needs of student voters across the country. Among these problems are ballot shortages and a lack of on campus polling places.

In the 2008 primaries, people arrived at the polls in numbers larger than any previous primary – the old record of 35 million votes, set in 1988, was shattered by over 20 million votes.^{12,13} In fact, every state other than Nebraska showed higher turnout than in the 2004 primary.

Even more striking, in many states turnout in the 2008 primary election rivaled or even surpassed turnout in the 2004 general election.

In Ohio, for example, all 88 counties in the state had turnouts in the 2008 primaries greater than 70 percent of the turnout in the 2004 general elections. 17 of these counties had higher turnout in the 2008 primaries than in the 2004 general elections. This turnout level far surpassed an historical average of 50 percent.¹⁴ This heavy turnout resulted in ballot shortages in at least two counties in the state.¹⁵ As my colleague Matt Segal with SAVE will highlight, these ballot shortages in Ohio have created serious obstacles to student voting in previous election cycles.

With record turnout predicted in college precincts this November, it is critical that local elections officials anticipate and plan for a surge in student voters at the polls. A failure to order sufficient ballots, employ sufficient poll workers and ensure sufficient voting machines will have a serious impact on the ability of students to cast their ballots.

Another barrier to student voting across the country is a lack of sufficient on campus polling places. On campus polling places are a simple way to ensure easy and ready access to the polls for students. Despite this, students across the country – many of whom don't own their own cars – must travel off campus to vote, thus creating yet another unnecessary step in the voting process. In addition, polling places situated on college campuses can ease pressure of heavy turnout on poll workers and the local voting infrastructure in student-heavy precincts. Often times, however, local registrars fail to install on campus polling places despite widespread support for it among students, faculty and administrators. Not only does this refusal decrease youth turnout it also misses an opportunity to fulfill an important mandate.

11 Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, *The Youth Vote 2004*, July 2005, downloaded from http://www.civicyouth.org/quick/youth_voting.htm, 23 September 2008; DEMOS, "Voters Win with Election Day Registration," November 19, 2007 downloaded from <http://demos.org/pub1280.cfm>, 23 September 2008

12 <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2008/05/19/primary-turnout-in-2008-nears-but-doesnt-beat-record/>

13 <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/primaries/>

14 This calculation used the 1988, 1992, and 2000 elections, as they were the only years in which both the Democrats and Republicans had contested primary elections since 1980; Data used in calculations taken from <http://www.dispatchpolitics.com/live/content/insight/stories/2008/02/10/delegatelist.html?sid=101>, accessed on 08/01/08

15 Ian Urbina, "Ballot Shortages plague Ohio Primary: Heavy turnout compounds voting problems," *New York Times*, March 4, 2008, downloaded from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23475436/>, 23 September 2008

What better way to fulfill the university mandate to provide a civic education than to provide on campus polling places where students can learn their first lesson of citizenship?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I'd like to once again thank the committee for the opportunity to testify before you. The good news today is that the youth vote is on the rise and enthusiasm among students for engaging in the political process is bubbling on college campuses across the country. As policy makers and as a society we can take several concrete steps toward removing barriers that prevent students from turning this enthusiasm into true citizenship. To encourage this exciting trend in youth participation, election officials should install campus polling places, enact same day voter registration, eliminate restrictive ID laws and ensure fair interpretation of law. With these changes we can ensure that the voice of students is heard loud and clear at the ballot box this year and for years to come.