



Student Association for Voter Empowerment

Testimony of Matthew Segal

Executive Director

Student Association for Voter Empowerment

On “Ensuring the Rights of College Students to Vote.”

Before the House Administration Committee in the United States Congress

Good afternoon Chairman Brady, Ranking Member Ehlers and the Committee members; I thank you for inviting me here today and am particularly grateful for the opportunity to testify on such an essential and pressing topic. I want to thank your committee staff, Chairman Brady, with whom I have had the pleasure of working with to put together this hearing. And I want to thank my friend, Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky, for her leadership in joining Senator Dick Durbin and Congressman Steven LaTourette to introduce the bipartisan “Student VOTER Act of 2008.”

My name is Matthew Segal and I am the executive director of the Student Association for Voter Empowerment, otherwise known as SAVE. A national non-profit organization founded and run by students, SAVE’s mission is to increase youth voter turnout by removing access barriers and promoting stronger civic education. I speak here today representing a constituency of roughly 10,000 members on over 30 college campuses across the country.

Almost four years ago as a 19 year old college student, I entered the Rayburn Building to testify before a House Judiciary Committee panel about the 10-hour long voting lines at Kenyon College, in Gambier, OH, where I recently graduated. I told the panel then that “voter disenfranchisement had occurred,” and that we should never make voting this “arduous a task” ever again. Unfortunately, today, I have little good news to report about the legislative steps we have taken since then in order to guarantee an accessible and participatory voting system for our nation’s college students.

Many of the student voting problems I will address today were compiled in a hearing SAVE held last summer as well as through various reports we have received since then. I ask the Chairman for unanimous consent to submit our 58-page hearing transcript in the record.

As we all know, the first step we must take in order to vote is to register; and in some cases, students face overt legislative attempts to prevent them from registering at their college or university. For example, SAVE heard testimony that every year a bill is introduced in the Maine state legislature prohibiting students living in college owned

housing from claiming residency.¹ While the bill has not yet passed, its purpose is unclear other than to encumber the rights of thousands of college students who wish to vote in their new communities. According to the former vice-president of the Maine College Democrats who testified before our SAVE committee, the state legislator who introduced this bill claimed it would cut the potential for voter fraud—despite being unable to present any previous evidence of voter fraud in college districts throughout Maine. He also went so far as to say that college students do not have “a vested interest in the state of Maine” and that they would dilute the voting power of long-term residents in their counties. Now I know several college students who attend school in Maine and they all swear to me that they care about their state, but more importantly, college students have a legal right to vote where they attend school should they live in that state for 30 days—regardless of whether or not their authenticity is questioned.

Fortunately, this particular bill did not pass, but many local Boards of Elections across the country effectively practice the discrimination that members of the Maine state legislature preach. Since state statutes expressly prohibit the use of a post office box for registration purposes, officials frequently turn student voters away by failing to recognize dormitory addresses as legitimate residences. Finally, several instances of election officials presenting residency questionnaires to students have been reported.² In 2004, the board of elections in Williamsburg, Virginia asked students to complete a questionnaire relating to the location of their parents’ home, possession of property outside the town, and their place of worship.³ Such detailed information was not required of other residents and was collected most likely to establish a reason to reject a student’s registration form.

Misinformation campaigns are another example of what hinders youth voter participation. Whereas my colleagues can speak to the recent instance of this at Virginia Tech, flyers were also printed and posted around the University of Pennsylvania in 2004 containing deceptive information about voting laws. The posters, which claimed to quote a *Chicago Sun-Times* article, warned of serious consequences for out-of-state students who voted in Pennsylvania such as loss of scholarships, grant money, financial aid and their driver’s licenses.⁴ The key difference between Penn and Virginia Tech, however, was that the posters at Penn did not appear until after the registration deadline. Several students were therefore intimidated out of voting completely because it was too late for them to register for an absentee ballot.

Whereas long lines or deceptive flyers create a clear graphic image of voting barriers, perhaps the most insidious obstacle for young voters are stringent Voter ID laws. SAVE signed onto the Supreme Court Amicus brief against the voter ID legislation in Indiana. In addition, we have unfortunately had hundreds of our members in Ohio negatively

¹ Testimony of Chris Appel, *Student Association for Voter Empowerment Hearing on Voter Irregularities*, July 25, 2007.

² Rosenfeld, *Count My Vote*, 36.

³ Testimony of Zach Pilchen, *Student Association for Voter Empowerment Hearing on Voter Irregularities*, July 25, 2007.

⁴ Testimony of Cynthia Padera, *Student Association for Voter Empowerment Hearing on Voter Irregularities*, July 25, 2007.

affected by voter ID provisions. 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.⁵ As a result, young voters are forced to rely upon alternative forms of identification. The substitutions for a photo ID however, such as utility bills, are not easily obtainable for students because colleges and universities generally pay all the bills for students that live in dormitories or on-campus apartments. We thereby estimate that literally 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. This, of course, lowers voter efficacy or confidence, which is devastating for any young voters. If we are going to maintain voter ID laws in general, then SAVE firmly encourages all states to recognize college and university IDs as an acceptable alternative. Ohio, among many other states, does not.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not briefly address long voting lines we have encountered. I find it curious that many of the long lines reported in 2004 and 2006 took place in heavily populated student communities. Kenyon students waited 10 hours; Oberlin students waited 5 hours; Denison- 4 hours; Bowling Green- 3 hours... the list continues. In some instances, the intent here might have been egregious; but in most instances, Boards of Elections allocate voting machines or resources on the basis of past voter turnout and are not prepared for an increase in youth participation, which we have now steadily seen in the last 8 years of midterm and presidential elections. At my alma mater, Kenyon College, there were 2 voting machines allocated for 1300 registered voters, one of which broke down for a while. Other precincts throughout Ohio had 6 machines for 600 registered voters. Let me ask this question: what standards or safeguards are in place to ensure that Kenyon College 2004 can never happen again? Most states still do not have a quota or ratio of how many machines or ballots they allocate per number of registered voters. Simply put, we need these safeguards.

In closing, I want to say that SAVE is fully committed to protecting student-voting rights and removing the unique and challenging barriers that our young Americans face when attempting to vote. SAVE has now partnered with EVOCA voice services, so that any young person can use their mobile phones to call our 1-866 number and upload audio accounts of their voting experience online. We have also partnered with Campus Advantage, a premiere residential life organization, to launch studentvotingrights.org, which we also encourage elected officials and the media to visit so they can continue to monitor young voter access stories.

Yet again, I thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for inviting me here today and I look forward to updating this committee on student voting accounts throughout the coming weeks and months. More importantly, I also look forward to achieving meaningful bipartisan election reform legislation with you as the coming months and next Congress unfolds.

⁵ Ben Adler, "Activists: Ruling Hurts Youth Voters," *Politico*, April 28, 2008.