

**Testimony of Lauren Burdette**  
**Student**  
**University of Pennsylvania**  
**On “Ensuring the Rights of College Students to Vote.”**  
**Before the House Administration Committee in the United States Congress**

Chairman Brady, Ranking Member Ehlers, committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today at this important hearing on “Ensuring the Rights of College Students to Vote.” Thank you also to the Student Association for Voter Empowerment for encouraging me to speak on behalf of student voters. My name is Lauren Burdette, and I am here to represent my perspective as a student leader at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On Penn’s campus, there is a huge student-led effort to register other students to vote – we collaborate with all student groups on campus by attending their general body meetings with blank voter registration forms. We have had a lot of success reaching out to students who are involved in groups on campus – our efforts are currently ramping up to try to reach those students who are not involved in groups and those who aren’t plugged into the online environment. We have a table on the main campus walkway every day between 10am and 4pm where students can register and drop off their completed forms. We hang posters and flyers throughout campus on a weekly basis and advertise on our website, listservs and Facebook page. Penn does not allow dorm canvassing, although we are staging weekend off-campus housing and fraternity/sorority house canvassing. Overall, we’ve had a lot of success working alongside Penn’s administration and other student groups to promote voter registration at Penn this semester.

Some of the problems we’ve run into, however, have serious potential to hamper student voting. The bureaucracy and inefficiency of the Philadelphia Board of Elections is staggering. The voter registration deadline is typically one month before the actual election – Pennsylvania

does not have same-day registration. The biggest problem students face is not knowing whether their registration form was processed before the deadline passes. It generally takes 4-6 weeks once a form is received by the Philadelphia Board of Elections before a voter registration card is sent out. Since most students do not return to campus until the beginning of September, even if they register during the first week of classes (which many do not), they might not receive their card until after the deadline. If something is wrong with their form and it is not processed, the Philadelphia Board of Elections does not notify them, therefore it will be mid-October before the students realize their form did not go through, and often it is not until they actually reach the polls. At this point, they are unable to vote normally in the election, but under the 2002 Help America Vote Act, these students should be able to vote provisionally on Election Day.

Unfortunately, many poll workers are not trained properly and most are not well versed in voter registration law. In the 2008 Pennsylvania primary, several Penn students who registered to vote were not on the voter rolls and were turned away at the polls by uninformed and untrained poll workers instead of being given the option to vote provisionally. This is an egregious problem especially in Pennsylvania as it is a critical swing state in all presidential elections, but more importantly, it illegitimizes the entire voting process for students, making it less likely that they will vote in the future. I do not think this is a concerted effort to disenfranchise students – rather, it is ineffective training and an uninformed group of poll workers unintentionally preventing students from exercising their full rights under the law.

There are other examples, however, of a much more complicated misinformation campaign that results in students not knowing their full rights under the law and purposely not voting because of these incorrect beliefs. Many students are told that voting at their college residence will cause them to be taken off their parents' health insurance, will prevent their

parents from being claimed as a dependent on tax returns, or will cancel their federal financial aid, none of which are true. Still other students are told that they must vote absentee if they are going to vote at all. While some students manage to navigate the complicated absentee ballot system successfully and turn in their ballots in time, many of them do not get their ballots turned in on time or filled out correctly and are thus not allowed to participate in either their home state's election or their college state's election. Beyond silent misinformation campaigns, there are overt examples of false information being posted around campuses and in the community. I have an example of a flyer that was plastered around the 37<sup>th</sup> street SEPTA stop at Penn's campus that says, in a rather bipartisan manner, that anyone who has an outstanding parking ticket will be arrested if they try to vote on Election Day. Clearly this letter is not serious, and I personally do not believe it is targeting Penn students, but instead is targeting employees who work at Penn or at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania who take SEPTA to work. Regardless, the only spot these have been found (so far) is at the trolley stops on Penn's campus. We are continually combating false information, and it makes the job of registering students and turning them out to vote much more difficult.

Another complicated situation I've run into is trying to get students who are studying abroad the required information about voting absentee, either in their home state or the state where they attend college. Most college/university Office of International Programs do not give out the addresses of the students studying abroad for privacy reasons, but the result is that there is no coordinated effort to educate the students abroad about the time requirements of turning in their forms. We had particular trouble at Penn until we contacted our Undergraduate Assembly, several members of whom convinced the necessary staff of the importance of this effort and

agreed to send not only information about voter registration deadlines, but also the applications for absentee ballots.

A final factor that makes voter registration and voting itself difficult for students is their mobility. Most students change residences each year they are in college, which means they need to re-register each time. This is a time-consuming, confusing, and often unknown requirement for voting, and if student organizations like ours did not exist on campus to help facilitate this process, many of these students would not be able to vote. One perennial problem is that voter rolls have multiple individuals listed living at the same address (dormitories have an exceptionally high turnover rate). This process makes figuring out who actually lives there and is therefore eligible to vote very difficult. To combat this problem, for the first time this year we are telling college students to put their room numbers in the “Apartment Number” section of the form. No one typically does this because a college student’s room number is not part of his/her address like a normal apartment is – mail is delivered to a box number which is *different* from the room number. By ensuring the room number is listed, we can verify without a doubt who actually lives in the room and who owns the box number should any of the individuals on the voter rolls be questioned.

A major part of an easier voter registration system for students lies in allowing for same-day registration on college campuses everywhere. This will alleviate many of the problem students face by allowing them to change their address at the polling place, to receive accurate answers to any questions they may have, and, most importantly, to ensure they have the same right as every other citizen in the United States – the right to vote.