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Youth Voting: State and city approaches to early civic engagement

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Just before the city council in Hyattsville, Md., voted to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year-old residents in local elections, 15-year-old Sarah Leonard stood in front of a crowded room and argued that the lawmakers “should lower the voting age to 16 so that more young people can get started being active in their communities, which will continue with them for the rest of their lives.”¹

When 17-year-old students in Chicago, Ill., were asked why they would be exercising their newly approved right to vote in primary elections, they gave answers like: “I would like to be a good citizen,” “I want to vote for people who will actually benefit the city,” and “I have the right to make history.”²

Opportunities for youth participation in city and state elections, such as those occurring in **Maryland** and **Illinois**, are becoming a part of the policymaker’s toolkit to create engaged citizens and lifelong voters. This report highlights new efforts by state and city leaders to encourage youth voting within their boundaries.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

In the past few years, a number of states and municipalities have considered or enacted policies permitting youth under the age of 18 to preregister to vote, or to vote in primary, municipal or school board elections.

Efforts to encourage early activism might create engaged citizens and lifelong voters, draw young people into the voting process while motivation is still high and have a “trickle-up” and “trickle-down” effect on family members.

Some evidence has shown that when given the opportunity to vote, 16- and 17-year olds have higher turnout rates than adults.

Civic education and participation

Although a quality civic education is critical for academic achievement and engagement and contributes to the development of career skills³ and adult civic responsibility,⁴ many students are not provided with enough opportunities for civic learning inside or outside of the classroom. For most students, opportunities for real world experiences and direct engagement with the political process are limited, if they exist at all. Not surprising, then, is the continued documentation of inadequate civics proficiency for students under the age of 18,⁵ and the less-than-remarkable voter turnout for young people aged 18-29.⁶

In response to inadequate civics knowledge and engagement, state policymakers are working to provide more robust civics programs in schools through revised civics standards, course and graduation requirements, and assessments. In addition, states and cities are creating opportunities for real world engagement through new youth voting efforts.

Although lowering the voting age in national elections would require a Constitutional Amendment (last done in 1971 when the voting age dropped from 21 to 18),⁹ in the past few years a number of states and municipalities have considered or enacted policies permitting youth under the age of 18 to preregister to vote, or to vote in primary, municipal or school board elections. Additionally, most states continue to encourage youth participation during election season by allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to serve as election judges.

Youth Voter Turnout

19.9% of 18- to 29-year-olds cast ballots in the 2014 midterm elections, the lowest youth turnout rate in 40 years.⁷ Youth turnout for the 2012 presidential election was also comparatively low, with only three presidential elections since 1972 having lower turnout rates.⁸

Benefits of early engagement

Proponents of youth voting efforts argue that 16- and 17-year-old students are eager, independent and sophisticated enough to vote, and that efforts to engage these young voters before they turn 18 may result in positive and extended benefits for their community. Proponents argue that efforts to encourage early activism will:

- **Create engaged citizens and lifelong voters:** Students have a better understanding of the concepts being relayed in their civics textbooks when they are given opportunities to participate in the political process. Students who learn about voting in high school¹⁴ and students in high schools with strong civic climates¹⁵ are more likely to vote as young adults and to continue voting thereafter.
- **Draw young people into the process while motivation is still high:** When young adults leave home, the influence of their parents' strong voting habits decreases and the influences of their peers' weaker voting patterns increases.¹⁶ One study found that 18-year-olds were far more likely to vote than 19-year-olds, and that every month of age between those years results in a decline in turnout.¹⁷ Permitting young adults to vote or register to vote earlier might help ease reduce the low "first vote turnout" of young adults.
- **Have a "trickle-up" and "trickle-down" effect:** Political communication and activism at school can stimulate political communication and activism at home. Research indicates a trickle-up effect, in which student-initiated political discussions at home lead to increased parental civic engagement and voter turnout.¹⁸ When these young voters become adults with families, a trickle-down effect could also result as their habitual engagement with the political process is passed down to their children.¹⁹

Teens and Voting

Studies have found that 16- and 17-year-old voters are as neurologically and socially mature as young adults who are allowed to vote,¹⁰ that the quality of their choices are similar to those of older voters¹¹ and that no strong association exists between their voting preferences and those of their parents.¹² Some evidence documents increased political interest and turnout among teens after they have been granted the right to vote.¹³

For these and other reasons, groups such as the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), the National Youth Rights Association and FairVote continue to advocate for efforts that engage youth in state and municipal elections.

Youth voting in the states

States and cities across the country are encouraging young people to participate in elections by allowing them to register early and to vote in primary or municipal elections.

Early registration

Preregistration policies permit individuals as young as 16 to complete voter registration forms so that they will be included on the voter rolls when they turn 18. Although most states allow residents to register before they turn 18 if they will be 18 on or before the next election, preregistration allows young people to vote even if they will not be 18 on or before the next election.²⁰ Preregistration policies are currently in place in at least 12 states and the District of Columbia and have been debated in at least 19 other states over the past five years.²¹

Hawaii and Louisiana

In 1993, **Hawaii** became the first state to allow 16-year-olds to preregister to vote.²² Although recent legislation recommending²³ and mandating²⁴ state education agency outreach to students in high schools have failed to pass, the Hawaii Office of Elections conducts preregistration activities in Hawaii's high schools "under the auspices of their general mandate to maximize registration of all eligible voters."²⁵ The agency's Young Voter Registration Program distributes registration packets to high schools statewide and recruits student workers to conduct preregistration drives. Additionally, through We Vote Hawaii, K-12 students are able to cast ballots in an online simulation of the state's general elections.

In 2014, **Louisiana** became the first state in the nation to have an automatic preregistration system for youth under the age of 18. HB 501 amended the state's preregistration law, which originally only allowed 17-year-olds to preregister, to include 16-year-olds applying for a driver's license.²⁶ Included in this law is the provision that each driver's license application submitted by a 16-year-old serves as an application for voter registration unless the applicant opts out or fails to sign the form. In addition, Louisiana's longstanding Commission on Civic Education, whose mission is to educate students about the importance of civic engagement and promote collaboration amongst civic organizations in the state, appoints 21 youth members to the Louisiana Legislative Youth Advisory Council to "examine and facilitate communication between youth and their legislators on issues of importance to teens."²⁷

17-year-old primary voting

At least 25 states encourage youth participation in the political process by allowing 17-year-olds to vote in caucus and primary elections.²⁸ "Suffrage at 17" laws permit young people who will be casting their first vote in a general election to play a role in the nomination process. Although 17-year-old caucus and primary voting is sometimes permitted in state law and affects all 17-year-olds in the state, in some cases the right is extended by individual state parties and therefore only affects the 17-year-olds registered to a particular party. For example, all 17-year-olds registered as Democrats or Republicans in Maryland can vote in their partisan elections,²⁹ but in **Washington** only 17-year-olds who are registered as Democrats can participate.³⁰

Illinois

In 2004, teachers and students from a high school in Lincolnshire, Ill., visited a high school in Davenport, **Iowa**, and watched as 17-year-olds participated in their first caucus. A seed was planted and five years later Suffrage at 17 legislation was introduced in Illinois. Student activists learned a few lessons in civics when the legislation failed to progress because of questions about the bill's constitutionality and because bipartisan support was lacking.³¹ Between 2009-13, the network of support in Illinois strengthened. Illinois' Suffrage at 17 bill was signed into law in 2013.³² In the 2014 primary elections, 17- and 18-year-olds in Chicago had greater turnout than 19- to 45-year-olds, a result described as "remarkable" by the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners.³³

Voter Registration

High school voter registration programs throughout the states support efforts to preregister qualified students on campus and encourage youth turnout on Election Day. Examples of school-based efforts include preregistration drives, Rock the Vote school assemblies, step-by-step voting tutorials and social networking campaigns.

"We learned firsthand that active citizenship creates new opportunities for active citizenship so that civics becomes a lifestyle for our students, not just another class."³⁴

– *Andrew Conneen, social studies teachers and Illinois' Suffrage at 17 chief visionary*

Municipal voting

Young people across the United States are looking to two Maryland cities that have extended the right of 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in municipal elections and, as a result, play a more meaningful role in shaping their communities. Although in many cases, changes in municipal law must be approved by the state legislature, student-led efforts in places like San Francisco, Calif. and Lowell, Mass., are gaining momentum. If passed, San Francisco would become the largest city in the U.S. to permit 16- and 17-year-old voting.

Takoma Park and Hyattsville Maryland

In 2013, 16- and 17-year-olds in Takoma Park, Md., became the first in the nation to receive the right to vote in local contests and earlier this year 16- and 17-year-olds in Hyattsville, Md., became the second. Early evidence from Takoma Park indicates the success of city youth voting efforts. In the 2013 election, the turnout of the newly enfranchised voters was double the turnout of voters older than 18, and 72 percent of voters surveyed post-election supported the new lower voting age.³⁵

School board elections

Though not yet a reality in any state, groups throughout the country are forming coalitions to support the youth vote in school board elections. Individuals elected to local school boards make decisions about school operations on behalf of students, but the students do not have a say in who is representing their interests. As a result, students and their supporters in states such as **New Mexico** and **Colorado** are pushing for legislation that would allow 16- and 17-year-olds to register and vote in school board elections only.

Youth Governance

Although no state permits students to vote in the general election for their local school board members, many states have passed “youth governance” policies that include students as members of their state boards of education, allow students to participate in legislative advisory councils and require student input on school safety policies. In many of these cases, students elect their peer representatives.

Final thought

State legislators throughout the country are working to pass policies that support quality civic education in schools and create engaged citizens and lifelong voters. Many are beginning to realize that robust civics programs must include real world engagement with the election and policymaking process. Early pioneers are adopting policies that support youth suffrage in local elections and connect them to the process while motivation is still high. These policies, when bundled with higher civics standards and assessments, might lead to a better, more enriching civics experience that continues to impact students long after they receive their diploma.

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