Voting Rights for 16 and 17 Year Olds

Establish voting rights for 16 and 17 year olds in municipal elections

Background

Voter turnout is incredibly low across the nation, but even lower among young voters. CIRCLE, a leader in youth civic engagement, estimates that eligible voters ages 18-29 voted at a rate of about 22.2% in the 2014 midterm elections, compared to the already historically low national rate of 36.4%. The 18-29 demographic made up only 13% of those who voted in 2014, yet makes up 21.2% of the citizen population. In Maryland, 18 to 24 year olds were registered at the lowest rate among eligible voters in the 2012 presidential election. These trends in turnout are even more exaggerated in municipal elections, which highlights the need for policy action to increase voter turnout—specifically among young voters where turnout is lowest.

Currently, nearly half of states allow 17-year-olds to vote in primaries if they will be 18 at the time of the corresponding general election. On an international scale, several nations have expanded suffrage to 16 and 17 year olds with success—the most recent example being the Scottish independence vote in September, 2014. In May of 2013, Takoma Park, Maryland became the first U.S. voting jurisdiction to expand suffrage to residents ages 16 and 17 in general municipal elections. In Takoma Park’s 2013 municipal election, turnout among eligible voters under age 18 was double that of eligible voters ages 18 and older.

Policy Action

It is time to engage young voters earlier: Voting rights should be expanded to 16 and 17 year olds in municipal elections. Empirical evidence suggests that the earlier in life a voter casts their first ballot, the more likely they are to develop voting as a habit. By lowering the voting age to 16, young people will be engaged meaningfully in the democratic process while they are taking civics courses, and before they leave their home communities for college. This is key for young voters, who have a much more difficult time registering and voting once they leave home.

While one’s first reaction might be to question the ability of young voters to cast a meaningful vote, research shows that they are ready. Research shows that 16 and 17 year olds are as informed and engaged in political issues as older voters. It is time that they are empowered to put that knowledge to good use at the polls, and make voting a habit in their formative years. These young citizens are old enough to drive, work without restrictions on their hours, and pay taxes—they should also have a voice in their local government. To truly recognize voting as a fundamental right and address the low voter turnout that currently plagues young voters, establishing municipal voting rights for 16 and 17 year-olds is a great start.