

17-Year-Old Primary and Caucus Voting

2014 POLICY GUIDE



State Policy / Political Party Policy

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This commonsense and increasingly popular policy allows citizens who will be 18 years old by the general election to vote in that election's corresponding primary or caucus.

The Problem: In more than half of the states, 17-year-olds who will be 18 by the time of the general election cannot vote in the primary associated with that election. This prohibition is illogical because it keeps those who may cast a vote in a general election from having a role in determining who will be on the ballot in that election. It also makes it harder to introduce some young people to the opportunity to vote when they live at home in their long-time community. This delay contributes to eligible voters under 30 years old participating at lower rates than older voters.

The Solution: Granting voting rights in primaries to 17-year-olds who will be eligible to vote in the general election is fair and sensible. By implementing 17-year-old primary voting, states and parties can reach out to young voters earlier, promoting civic education and lifelong voter participation.

17-year-old primary voting may require a change to state statutes or the state constitution, but it may also be possible without either, as some state parties have implemented this policy by changing internal rules. State parties have broad authority

over their nominating contests and often have the right to decide who is included in their primary elections. Political parties can request to allow 17-year-old primary voting by asserting their First Amendment freedom of association rights. For privately-run caucuses and conventions, parties can act now to enfranchise 17-year-olds, as done already by major parties in states like Alaska, Kansas, Minnesota, North Dakota and Washington.

Success Stories: 17-year-olds can vote in primaries and/or caucuses in twenty states: Alaska, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Virginia, Vermont and Washington. In statewide ballot measures in 2008 and 2010, voters in Connecticut and Vermont approved 17-year-old primary voting by an average of 72%. Having 17-year-old primary voting has an impact. In Maryland, nearly 13,000 17-year-olds registered to vote in its 2008 primary. When Illinois implemented it in 2014, 17-year-old turnout was comparable to turnout of voters in their 40s.

Key Facts

The 26th Amendment prevents states from denying suffrage to 18-year-olds, but it does not prevent states from establishing 17-year-old primary and/or caucus voting, as done in more than 20 states.

Voters in statewide ballot measures in Vermont and Connecticut approved this change by an average winning percentage of 72%.

Fiscal Impact

The fiscal impact of implementing this policy is negligible. Voter registration practices would need updating, but voting infrastructure changes are unnecessary.

The state and parties may choose to spend money on civic education, but this would be discretionary.

Related Reforms

- Voter Preregistration
- Civic Education
- Lower Voting Age in Localities
- Voter Guides
- Automatic Registration

Part Two Resources

- Model Statutory Language
- The Law of 17-Year-Old Primary and Caucus Voting
- Sample Letter of Support