

Automatic Voter Registration in High Schools and Colleges

2014 POLICY GUIDE



State and Local Policy

August 2014

Partnering with elections officials, high schools can pre-register students. Colleges can register all eligible voters as well using existing databases and “opt out” procedures.

The Problem: The typical “opt in” model for voter registration, under which nobody can vote until they affirmatively register, contributes to incomplete and inaccurate voter rolls, particularly among young people. Less than 60% of eligible voters under 25 are registered to vote despite having just been in our schools.

The Solution: High schools and colleges are an ideal place to introduce young people to their role in our democracy. High schools can incorporate voter preregistration systems into their curriculum – perhaps during school registration or as a part of the history and civics curriculum. In some schools, educators can do this on their own, while others would require a change in state or county policy. Schools could use their databases to make registration automatic, with an “opt out” provision – schools already know a student’s citizenship status, place of residence and age. Each preregistration would include the student’s birth date, and as each

preregistered student reaches voting age, the database would activate their voter registration. At the college level, states and counties could work with universities to collect students’ registration data during enrollment. Because the majority of students are of voting age upon entering college, universities can automatically register them, again with an opt-out provision. By incorporating voter registration into standard campus activities like orientation and class registration, colleges can register thousands of students to vote, and also help already-registered students with updating voter addresses or requesting absentee ballots from students’ home states.

Such policies can ensure that our nation’s young voters are eligible and ready to participate in our democracy once they reach voting age. Ideally, these policies would be accompanied by substantive civics curriculum and voter guides about local, state and national elections.

Key Facts

According to the *New York Times*, university-sponsored attempts to make voting easier for students are being tested in at least 60 colleges.

Northwestern University has developed the UVote Project, which aims to help colleges and universities integrate 50-state voter registration into official school activities like orientation programs, residential life, or class registration. As a result of the initial implementation of the UVote model in 2011, nearly 90% of Northwestern’s incoming class started school registered to vote.

Individual high schools can take action to ensure students get registered. As of 2013, Meadow Bridge High School (WV) has had 100 percent of its senior classes register to vote for 12 straight years.

Fiscal Impact

The cost of this policy would be minimal, including potential one-time costs to facilitate systematic voter registration. Existing methods would not be affected.

Related Reforms

- Automatic Voter Registration
- 17-year-old Primary Voting
- Voter Pre-Registration
- Democracy Passport