

Youth Voter Pre-Registration

2014 POLICY GUIDE



State Policy

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Voter pre-registration encourages young people to feel more engaged in our democracy and facilitates their participation in elections.

The Problem: More than 40% of eligible voters between the ages of 18 and 24 are unregistered – and not able to vote – despite most being recently in the public school system where administrators easily had access to enough information to assess their eligibility to vote.

The Solution: A growing number of states are establishing a uniform voter “pre-registration” age of 16. These pre-registered voters are defined as “pending” until they reach voting age, at which point they are automatically added to the voting rolls. Existing policies, both in schools and the DMV, can make pre-registration easy and efficient. Public outreach about when to register is also simple: you can preregister after turning 16 and vote after turning 18.

In a 2009 study, Dr. Michael McDonald of George Mason University found that, when accompanied by raising awareness about the law, pre-registered voters in Florida and Hawaii voted in higher numbers than those who registered at the age of 18.

Success Stories: Voter pre-registration typically has been passed into law with bipartisan support. As of August 2014, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Washington, D.C. have voter pre-registration for 16 year olds. California and Oregon have passed pre-registration at 17. No state implementing voter pre-registration has reported difficulties with their law.

Over time, youth voter pre-registration eases burdens on elections officials and makes particular sense given that age 16 marks the last year of compulsory school education in most states, and is often the age when many people apply for a driver’s license. Louisiana’s 2014 law makes pre-registration the default for 16-year-olds at DMV. Through the ‘Motor Voter’ legislation, all citizens are registered to vote at the DMV when applying for or renewing driver’s licenses unless they ask not to be registered.

Key Fact

Establishing 16 as the age for voter pre-registration would not change the voting age. With voter pre-registration, any 16 year-old could register to vote when applying for a driver’s license and in many high school civics classes.

Fiscal Impact

Pre-registration does not require a new registration database system nor any new software, equipment or personnel. In fact, in many states, pre-registered voters are already put into the voter registration database as “pending” and are transferred to “active” status upon reaching the eligible age. Registration forms may need revision, meaning implementation can be tied to when new forms to be printed. Additional voter education would be optional.

Related Reforms

- 17 Year Old Primary Voting
- Civic Education
- Lowering the Voting Age
- Automatic Registration

Part Two Resources

- Model statute
- Fact Sheet