High School Voter Registration:
Facts for Electoral Reform Organizations

The 100% Registration Project: The goal of this project is to create a system for educating all students about the voting process and registering them to vote before they leave high school. In addition to addressing the problem of low voter registration and turnout in the United States, especially among young people, implementation of this project would also help your state by teaching students the importance of civic participation and help election administrators improve the quality of voter rolls and reduce problems related to the current registration system.

Problems with current voter registration systems: Under existing laws, governments provide access to voter registration materials but do little to educate new voters or encourage citizens to participate in elections. Consequently, a large percentage of voter registration is performed by private organizations such as community groups, political advocacy organizations and political parties in the months preceding major elections. This system results in:

- A registration overload for election officials before each election
- A training overload for these officials due to registration organizations needing to have their registrars deputized
- A large number of registration forms with incomplete or inaccurate information due to poor instructions from registrars and/or carelessness from people being asked to register at shopping malls, grocery stores, sporting events, etc.
- Incomplete voter rolls due to people in areas not targeted by registration drives being unaware of or missing registration deadlines
- Inaccurate voter rolls due to people unintentionally registering multiple times or not receiving proper instructions for removing their old registration when registering at a new address
- The possibility for forging or discarding registration forms
- A lack of education about our democratic process
- A lack of civic and political participation among youth
- A lack of youth outreach, especially in non-swing states

Many states are addressing partial solutions to some of these problems such as prohibiting registration drives from using quota-based payment systems. However, these solutions look only to alleviate certain symptoms of the systemic problems while ignoring the underlying structural causes of these problems. The 100% Registration Project proposes a structural change in our voter registration system that will create cleaner and more complete voter rolls while also easing the administrative burden on election officials and facilitating increased voter participation and a healthier democracy.

The Solution: Register all students and educate them about the voting process before they leave high school.
This will address problems under the current system by:

- Allowing your state to create a healthier democracy and better voter rolls
- Bringing in registration forms at regular intervals each year instead of in a big rush before national elections
- Reducing the number of registrars who need training before each election
- Reducing the reliance on registration drives and therefore reducing the possibilities for forging or discarding registrations

- Providing a better environment for giving instructions and completing registration forms, thereby reducing the number of inaccuracies currently found on registration forms
- Increasing youth civic engagement and political participation, especially on local issues affecting their school and community
- Over time, creating complete voter rolls which, when combined with HAVA-mandated statewide databases, would reduce the likelihood of inaccuracies due to omissions and registrations at multiple addresses

Why it matters: Given that fewer than three in four eligible voters are registered to vote, high school registration is an important step toward cleaner and more complete voter rolls. Equally importantly, it is an important framework for youth political engagement. Recent research suggests that voting is a habitual behavior. Young people who develop a habit of voting regularly are likely to remain frequent voters, while those who don't are likely to remain non-voters. The effect of current participation habits will be felt for decades, not just years. One key to increasing turnout rates over the long term is to engage more young people in the political process.

Studies show that simply showing young people how to vote provides a turnout boost. Because high school is one of the few experiences common to most citizens, it is an ideal place to educate young people on local election procedures and issues, something that large-scale voter registration and mobilization organizations are not always able to do. A high school voter registration and curriculum program also provides the framework for additional civic education efforts that school might wish to pursue, including introducing student to the role of local and state governments in making policy affecting the lives of young people.

How it works: Under current laws in most states, 17-year-olds are allowed to register to vote as long as they will be 18 years of age by the next election. Therefore, most high school seniors are able to register before they graduate. It is a simple matter for schools to create an ongoing program that would register eligible seniors each year. Here is how it works:

- High schools will distribute voter registration forms to students
- Students will be required to return a completed registration form. This requirement can be included as a small part of a current community service requirement or as a graduation/advancement requirement
- The school will be responsible for submitting these forms to local election officials

We also need to work with state officials to lower the registration age in order to allow this program to reach younger students and those who leave school before their senior year.

Make it happen: What legislators can do:
- Pass legislation lowering the minimum registration age
- Fund pilot programs
- Make this system into a statewide program

Create a program that can serve as a model for other states