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### **H 7106: Youth Voter Pre-Registration**

Allowing voters to pre-register to vote at 16 is a common sense, non-partisan policy, with broad and ever growing support in Rhode Island. Consider these points:

**The Registration Gap:** In the 2004 election, 81 percent of registered 18-25 year olds voted, compared to the national average of 88 percent. But, while the national registration rate was 72%, only 51% of those youth voters were registered. The registration gap, illustrated in the accompanying chart, is the “key difference” between those groups, according to the US Census Bureau. **Youth voter pre-registration addresses the registration gap by creating clearer, simpler registration opportunities.**

**The Voting Habit:** Electoral analyses and academic studies have shown that past participation is a major factor in determining future participation. In a 2003 study, researchers showed that participation in the previous election increased the probability of voting in the next one by up to 47%, as much as can other well-known factors like education and income level, and parental voting behavior. **When young people are registered, they tend to vote. When young people vote as soon as they are eligible, they start patterns of participation that are the heartbeat of democracy.**

**The Best Practices Dilemma:** 16 and 17 year olds are driving, working and paying taxes. State law identifies youth civic engagement as a priority, for example through high school registration drives and civics courses. But the current, non-uniform registration age makes engagement less effective. Structured environments like schools and the DMV offer the prospect of cleaner registrations with less human error and more learning. **Pre-registration would make the process simpler and more systematic for students and administrators, catch more young people at the DMV, and greatly boost the effectiveness of civics education by tying it directly to participation through pre-registration.**

**Implementation:** Pre-registration would require small changes to the voter registration form, and to the central voter registry software, both of which the State elections division has indicated they can do without any risk or problem.

**Broad Support:** Hawaii, Florida, and Puerto Rico allow 16 year olds to pre-register to vote. Other states, like Oregon and Maine, allow pre-registration for 17 year olds. This reform is also under consideration in Maryland, Michigan and California. **More importantly, this legislation has been passed by both Houses of the Rhode Island General Assembly twice, in 2006 and 2007. Local endorsers include the RI AFL-CIO, Common Cause RI, Clean Water Action, AFSCME Council 94, Youth in Action, the NEARI, the RI AFT, Teamsters Local 257, the Brown College Republicans and the Rhode Island Young Democrats.**