



FairVote RI
145 Wayland Ave, Providence, RI 02906
Ph: (401) 529-3982 * Fax: 360.933.2456
ari@fairvote.org * www.fairvote.org/ri

Testimony in support of H 7104
Ari Savitzky, FairVote Rhode Island Director

When young people vote, democracy wins. By ensuring that young people can vote in primary elections, we encourage greater general election participation, and jump-start the process of civic engagement. In H7104, we have an opportunity to clarify a grey area in the law, energize young voters and protect voting rights.

Pundits claim young people are uninterested in and apathetic about the political process, but surveys show this could not be further from the truth. According to a recent Time Magazine survey, 74-percent percent of 18-29-year-olds say they have paid attention to the 2008 presidential race, up from 42-percent in 2004 and 13-percent in 2000. In addition, a Rasmussen survey points out that 49-percent of this group says they are “passionate and deeply committed to a particular Presidential candidate,” nineteen points higher than the general public, which is only at 30-percent.

Yesterday’s Rhode Island presidential primary saw a boom in overall turnout, but particularly among young people. 18-30 year olds increased their share of the electorate from 8% in 2004 to 13% yesterday, according to CNN’s exit poll.

How does participation work? Simply put, if you voted in the last election, you are more likely to vote in the next one. 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, and parental voting behavior.

The argument, for example, that younger voters are less informed, is particularly faulty. Penn State Political Science Professor Eric Plutzer, who conducted another study on the issue, notes that, “virtually all major works on turnout have concluded that voting behavior is, in part, a gradually acquired habit.”

Plutzer told the journal *Research Penn State* that:

"The informational approach is like telling my six-year-old daughter that she shouldn't play baseball until she understands the 'infield fly rule.' But if she goes ahead and participates in baseball, she'll gradually learn the rules, the terminology, even the trivia. It's the same with politics. Convince a young citizen to vote, and he or she will read the newspaper differently, recognize the names of people on the ballot when they're mentioned on television or by a neighbor, and eventually become highly informed. Get them to the polls once, and they will likely vote again and again."

In short, voting is a habit, and habits form early.

When young people form patterns of participation earlier, we have much to gain in both the quantity and, crucially, the quality of participation: in higher election turnout and interest, in broader understanding of the rules and methods of registration and voting as voters get educated earlier...

More than that, allowing 17 year olds to vote in primary elections is a matter of basic fairness and good elections practices. Everyone who is eligible to vote in a general election should be able to vote in the primary. In Rhode Island, we allow anyone who will be 18 by the general election to register to vote- **the registration system would not have to be modified at all.** In fact, H7104, beyond ensuring full voting rights for first time voters, would eliminate a grey area in current Rhode Island election law.

This bill is supported by Common Cause RI, and the Secretary of State's office, in addition to FairVote.

Ensuring that all general election voters are able to vote in the preceding primary is also good for candidates, and for the political system. More involvement and energy in the primary process means stronger general election candidates and an opportunity for candidates to seek the broadest possible support, and energize their party's young voters in the primary process.

Right now, 18 states or state parties explicitly allow anyone who is registered and eligible to vote in the general election to vote in the preceding primary. State's which ensure the voting rights of young people in this manner include Iowa, Maine Minnesota, Ohio, Oregon and Virginia, to name a few. In many other states, like Rhode island, there is no definite policy.

In Maryland, where the State Attorney General had recently overturned a rule which allowed eligible 17 year olds to vote in primaries, FairVote and the MD Democratic and Republican parties responded, after investigation, requesting that The MD AG review the December 2006 decision in light of their first amendment freedom of association rights under *Tashjian v. Connecticut* (1986) and other Supreme Court decisions that establish the right of the political parties to define voter qualifications for their own primary elections. The response from the MD AG and the State board of elections was favorable, and the policy was reinstated.

This pushback started with a young woman from Maryland who noticed the change, and wanted to right to vote in full. Describing the beginning of her successful mission, Sarah, who will be 18 in July, told the Washington Post that "I thought that was one of my rights as a citizen of Maryland – I had assumed that when I registered to vote, it'd be no problem."

The young people here today are asking for something very simple: to have the same rights as every other voter to participate in primary elections.

H7104, by ensuring their right to participate, will benefit us all, and it is in that spirit that I encourage this committee to consider and recommend for passage this common-sense legislation. Again, when young people vote, democracy wins.