

**Student Forum: Election Irregularities and the  
Future of Voting Rights for Young People**

**Rayburn House Office Building  
Rm. 2226  
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**Testimony of Adam Fogel-Right to Vote Director, FairVote**

Thank you for inviting me here today. I appreciate SAVE putting this hearing together and bringing the important issue of student voter disenfranchisement to the public's attention.

My name is Adam Fogel and I'm the Right to Vote Director at FairVote. FairVote is a national non-partisan, non-profit election reform organization based in Takoma Park, Maryland, seeing to provide an equally meaningful and secure vote for all Americans. My program focuses on the goal of establishing a universal Right to Vote in the U.S. Constitution and national, state and local reforms that further that goal.

Last year, I served as the Pennsylvania Field Director for Young Voter Strategy's Voter Registration Project that registered over 500,000 new, young voters in the 2006 election cycle. YVS funded a diverse group of organizations throughout the country, including Redeem the Vote, Women's Voices Women Vote, National Council of La Raza and the National Council on Black Civic Participation. It also funded Allegheny College's Center for Political Participation, for whom I worked over the summer to register students at community colleges in Ohio and Pennsylvania.

After the Pennsylvania voter registration deadline, which is a month before the election, I traveled to Maryland to help another group sponsored by YVS, called Maryland Votes—Maryland's deadline is two-weeks before the election. Maryland Votes registered over 8,500 young people across the state and over 2,000 students at the University of Maryland in College Park.

The campus in College Park has two voting precincts. One is Ritchie Coliseum—where some students living in fraternity and sorority houses and off-campus apartments vote, but the vast majority of voters are non-students and faculty who are members of the College Park community. The other polling place is the University's Stamp Student Union, where virtually all of the voters are students. On Election Day, 2,171 people were registered to vote at Ritchie Coliseum and 2,311 were registered at the Student Union.

My role during the day was to monitor the polls—answer any questions students may have—and track voter turnout at each location. I also provided the phone number—866-OUR-VOTE—to students who were not sure where they were registered. In addition to providing students with basic information, I documented any difficulties students had when they tried to vote.

The way these two precincts functioned on the University of Maryland's campus was as if they were in two different states—or two different countries.

The community precinct had nearly a dozen machines—with at least two or three of them always unoccupied. The student precinct only had only four machines and some students waited for over two hours to vote.

About 20% of voters—mostly students—voted provisionally at the community precinct. At the Student Union, nearly half voted by provisional ballot—with the most frequent reason being that the student’s name did not appear on the rolls, although they registered by the deadline.

At the community precinct, the Election Judges were shutting down the machines and doing their final tallies by 8:30 pm. At the student precinct, the line stretched down the hallway and the final votes were not even cast until well after 10 pm—after the networks had already projected both the governor’s race and U.S. Senate race.

You could explain away this disparity by blaming inadequate training of election judges, unexpectedly high voter turnout or simply a misappropriation of machines—but these easy answers do not fully address the scope of dysfunction present in our patchwork election and voter registration system.

In this country, the government does not share the responsibility of ensuring full and accurate voter rolls through universal voter registration. This opens the door to partisan organizations whose primary objective is targeting voters who are sympathetic to their candidate or cause—leaving many unaccounted for—and non-partisan groups whose canvassers chief concern is meeting their quota for the day so they receive a paycheck.

Most private organizations start registering voters the summer before the General Election—with an emphasis in the weeks leading up the registration deadline— this places an additional burden on county boards of election who have to hire temporary—often inexperienced—staff to input all of the new registrations before Election Day.

Why did such a high percentage of students cast provisional ballots in College Park, although they registered to vote before the deadline? It was because our system is broken—too many registration forms too close to the election means some people are simply not going to get on the rolls in time.

We’ve read about what happens as a result of this casual approach to voter registration: canvassers submit fraudulent forms, registration applications disappear in people’s trunks and get left on clipboards and names that belong on the rolls are missing on Election Day. Partisan groups pressure first-time voters to register with a certain party and many neighborhoods that these private groups avoid are left behind.

The quick-fix—the band-aid approach—is instituting fines on individuals and organizations that mishandle forms. This may create a disincentive for canvassers who register Joe Montana and Bugs Bunny. But this does not solve the underlying problem of overworked county election officials and a patchwork system that does not give everyone an opportunity to register to vote, regardless of where they live or their parents’ voting behavior.

Congress has attempted to expand voter registration through the 1993 National Voter Registration Act and the 1998 Amendments to the Higher Education Act, but weak enforcement of these laws have limited their effectiveness. Stronger enforcement of registration laws that expand access, systematic voter registration in high schools and instituting a national uniform advance registration age are at the core of a sensible voter registration policy.

Having full and accurate voter rolls is a common-sense goal for our nation.

All students should have an opportunity to register to vote before they leave high school—regardless of if they graduate or not. Registering to vote in the non-partisan atmosphere of a high school, where students receive information about the mechanics of voting, should be required in every high school in America. In many states, this is difficult because the advance registration age is 17 or 17½—meaning most students are not even eligible to register until the second semester of their senior year. Setting a national uniform advance registration of 16 or perhaps even younger would solve three problems at the same time:

First, it would ease the burden of county election officials who are inundated with registration forms in the weeks leading up to the deadline—because with advance registration, schools would register students year-round.

Second, advance registration in high schools would decrease the need for private, partisan organizations who exert influence on young voters to register with a certain party because most students would register in their classroom.

Finally, setting a uniform advance registration age would give students more time to learn about the candidates and issues and make a more informed decision when they reach voting age and are automatically added to the voting rolls.

In addition, Congress should expand the NVRA to advance-register 16 and 17-year-olds who are applying for their driver's license. Young people should be just as excited about registering to vote as they are to get behind the wheel—it makes sense to combine these two events in a young person's life.

I want to conclude by thanking this distinguished committee for your work and for listening to my testimony this morning. I hope this process results not only in a shift in policy, but a shift in priorities, where we can rely on our government to ensure that all young people have an equal chance to register to vote. I hope we will be able to move beyond our outdated “opt-in” system and make the default position active citizenship and political participation, while giving those who don't want to vote an easy way to “opt-out” of the process. And I hope we continue to advance youth poll worker programs, begin educating new voters through robust civics classes and combat voter registration fraud through inclusively and accountability.

Thank you.