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6930 Carroll Ave., Suite 610
Takoma Park, MD 20912 – (301) 270-4616
(301) 270-4133 (fax) · info@fairvote.org
www.fairvote.org

**Testimony of Adam Fogel, FairVote Right to Vote Director
Maryland Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
Senate Bill 671: Elections - Voter Registration and Voting – Age
March 12, 2009**

Thank you the opportunity to testify today, in strong support of S.B. 671. This important bill will create uniform standards for voter registration in Maryland and provide more young people with a chance to participate in the political process.

My name is Adam Fogel and I'm the Right to Vote Director at FairVote, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Takoma Park. FairVote has supported this legislation for the past three years in Maryland and has seen similar legislation pass in a number of other states, the most recent being Florida.

S.B. 671 is a bill that, at its most basic level, is a technical fix—it resolves a discrepancy between state law and existing administrative practice. As the State Board of Elections explains in their written testimony, the fiscal impact of this measure is zero because the MVA already allows non-voting age customers to pre-register to vote. While this practice can continue without legislative action, the bill before you today is needed to create uniformity and a greater sense of fairness in the voter registration system. We need to ensure that all of Maryland's youth—not just those with the means to drive—have an opportunity to register to vote before reaching voting age.

Setting a uniform voter registration age of 16 will improve the current system in two important ways. First, this policy will create the space necessary to allow high schools to conduct systematic voter registration drives. Instead of partisan or interest groups registering new voters on the street, students will have the opportunity to register to vote in the nonpartisan atmosphere of a high school classroom. Students registering at 16 or 17 will have plenty of time to learn about the candidates and issues before voting, but they will also have a chance to learn the mechanics of participation—something many young people leave high school without knowing. Since the age of compulsory education is 16, students leaving high school without graduating will also have the same opportunity to register as their peers who complete high school.

The second issue this policy will resolve is the last-minute rush of voter registration applications county boards of election receive before the voter registration deadline every election cycle. Groups that register thousands of new voters have been known to hold onto the voter registration forms until days before the deadline, making it difficult for the county boards to process all of the forms before the election. Setting a uniform registration age of 16 will make voter registration a year-round activity, where county boards will no longer be inundated with last-minute rushes and be forced to hire temporary, often inexperienced staff who are prone to unintentional clerical mistakes.

S.B. 671 will create more equality in the voter registration system and will increase opportunities for young people to register to vote. This bill will open the door for teachers to focus on civic education in their classrooms and will move Maryland on the path to a more complete and accurate voter roll.

Thank you.