



**Testimony of Adam Fogel, FairVote Right to Vote Director
Maryland Senate Education, Health and Environment Committee
Senate Bill 292: Elections - Voter Registration and Voting – Age
February 25, 2010**

Madam Chair, members of the Senate Education, Health and Environment Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of Senate Bill 292—a bill that will set a uniform voter registration age of 16 in Maryland. My name is Adam Fogel and I'm the Right to Vote Director of FairVote, a nonpartisan, nonprofit, election reform and voting rights organization based in Takoma Park.

For the past three years, this bill has been debated in both houses of this state's legislature. This committee has held hearings on the bill each year, but it has failed to get through the legislative process and onto the governor's desk. When this bill was first introduced, the only state to have a preregistration age of 16 was Hawaii. Today, Florida, North Carolina, Rhode Island and the District of Columbia have joined the list of states with 16-year-old preregistration. In addition, several other states, including California most recently, have set a uniform voter registration age. More than a dozen states have debated this proposal since this bill was first introduced in Maryland.

S.B. 292 addresses a very simple problem with Maryland's voter registration system—the lack of a uniform voter registration age. Currently, the law states that a person can register to vote if they will be 18 before the next general election. The problem with the current policy is that the “next general election” changes depending on where you live. For example, when there is a general election in Baltimore City in an odd-numbered year, 16-year-olds cannot preregister to vote during that year. However, in neighboring Baltimore County with no general election, many 16-year-olds are allowed to preregister to vote. This lack of uniformity creates confusion for our newest voters, dissuades high school-based voter registration drives and makes developing a statewide message about when to register to vote impossible.

Passing S.B. 292 will build on existing administrative practices that encourage and increase voter registration. 16 and 17-year-olds getting their driver's license at the MVA will have the same opportunity to register to vote as everyone else. Local boards of election can work with schools to conduct system-wide voter registration drives in the educational atmosphere of a classroom—where civics education programs can complement the policy by promoting an informed electorate. Without a uniform voter registration age, young people in Maryland will continue to be denied civics opportunities that exist in other states.

Three years ago, Maryland had a chance to be at the forefront of the movement of increasing youth participation through the voter preregistration policy. Today, as dozens of states consider enacting youth preregistration, Maryland is at risk of falling behind the curve. Maryland's 18 to 24-year-old voter registration rate is below the national average and is in danger of falling further if policies are not enacted now to increase voter registration opportunities for our youth. I urge this committee to favorably report S.B. 292 and finally enact this policy to welcome in a new generation of Maryland voters.