

Policy Briefing: Advance Voter Registration in Rhode Island



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Voting and Democracy

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I. Introduction

[FairVote](#), a non-partisan non-profit based in Washington DC and operating since 1992 as the Center for Voting and Democracy, seeks as one of its core missions to expand registration and education for our democracy's next generation. Rhode Island, over the last two years, has been at the forefront of one of the most innovative policy solutions to the question of how to transmit democracy: a uniform voter registration age of 16.

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. This policy briefing details how pre-registration improves current best practices, summarizes the research on youth voting and voting as a habit, discusses the technical issues surrounding implementation and makes suggestions for the future. If you are viewing the document in digital form, please click through the hyperlinks for more information.

It is our hope that this document will help inform policymakers, allowing them to appreciate the impact that pre-registration could have in Rhode Island, and engage with the issue on its merits. Having passed in the Rhode Island General Assembly twice in the past two years, we hope that youth pre-registration can enjoy even greater support, and can finally become law, in 2008.

II. Best Practices: Defining Rhode Island's dilemma

Two of the most basic registration opportunities defined in Rhode Island law are [voter registration drives](#) in high schools and colleges, and voter registration at the [Department of Motor Vehicles](#) (DMV). Rhode Island also encourages the registration of voters who are 17 years old and will be 18 by Election Day.

In exploring voter registration opportunities, the Voters First Advisory Commission focused on these points of civic engagement. The commission's draft white paper on expanding Voter registration opportunities also provided several recommendations in line with the relevant statutes: encouraging voter education during driver's education courses, and developing a program to train college and high school administrators as registration agents.

In seeking to define best practices for approaching the education and registration of young voters, there are other statutory sources for guidance. [RIGL § 17-19-23.3](#) allows for sixteen year olds to serve as "trainee election officials." [§ 17-9.1-31](#) provides for an 18 member board to advise the state on voter registration and "help recruit and train volunteer registrars." [§ 17-19-53](#) affirms the rights of parents to take children into the voting booth with them, to teach them democracy by example. [§ 16-22-2](#) sets standards for civics education in Rhode Island, with one core standard being to teach "the rights and duties of actively engaged citizenship."

Thus, in ways even beyond mandating high school and college registration drives, as well as registration at the DMV, Rhode Island law reflects a core, idea of best practices for voter registration outreach: connecting engagement and education with registration and participation. **The dilemma is that while we have identified the points of civic engagement where voter education and registration opportunities are most effective – in high schools, and civics classes, at the DMV or in driver's ed – we only make voter registration available to a non-uniform slice of students, new drivers and young people.**

Secretary of State Mollis' college and high school registration drives – as one of many examples – have provided great opportunities for young people to get engaged. But Rhode Island's lack of a uniform voter registration age makes it harder to run effective voter registration and education programs. Because the age to register is constantly shifting based on proximity to the next election, we confuse potential facilitators, and miss a broad swath of young people. More than that, we miss crucial opportunities to tie voter education and voter registration. A uniform registration age of 16 makes high school registration drives easier for students and administrators, catches all young people at the DMV, and greatly boosts the effectiveness of civics education by tying it directly to civic participation through the opportunity to pre-register.

Many states are considering instituting structural changes to close the registration gap. Hillsborough County Elections Supervisor [Buddy Johnson](#), who pushed for the recently passed advance voter registration law in Florida, notes, “most teens consider a driver's license their first - - and most exciting -- step to freedom. I [wanted] to make it easier for them to take another exciting step toward freedom by pre-registering to vote as they get their driver's license.”

Pre-registration does not lower the voting age – it lowers the effective engagement age. In many other ways – from the age of compulsory school attendance to child labor laws to getting a driver's license – Rhode Island law recognizes the liminal position of 16 and 17 year olds. Yet, even as they assume other rites and responsibilities of adulthood – a part-time job complete with taxes, a driver's license – they are unable to take a tangible first step towards assuming their democratic responsibilities.

Pre-registration, then, solves the best practices dilemma. Allowing young people to pre-register to vote at nonpartisan, sanctioned points of civic engagement – like at the DMV, or in a high school civics course – gives young people the opportunity to take advantage of Rhode Island's pre-existing voter registration regime. Pre-registration would boost the effectiveness and efficiency of current best practices, and make registration at points of civic engagement more standardized by freeing them from electoral deadlines.

III. Crunching the numbers: Voting is a habit

The oft-repeated myth is that young people don't vote. But it's not quite true. Young people vote when they're registered, but they tend to be registered at much lower rates than average.

Take the [2004 election](#), in which the potency of the youth vote was both touted and maligned. 2004 was a high turnout year for all demographics, and that included 18-24 year olds: 81% of registered 18-24 year olds voted in the 2004 election. But, while the national registration rate was 72%, only 58% of youth voters were registered.¹

There is, then, not so much a participation gap as a registration gap. State data seems to bear out a similar tale. In 2004, about 60% of registered 18-25 year olds voted in Rhode Island, compared to about 70% all registered voters. But, a rough calculation from census data and the RI voter list reveals that perhaps as few as 40% of eligible Rhode Island 18-25 year olds were registered to vote in the 2004 election, well below both the state average for all voters and the national average for young voters.

¹ Young Voter Strategies, [Voting is a Habit](#), February 2007,

The link between registration and participation is clear: only registered voters can vote. But electoral analyses and academic studies have also shown that past participation is a major factor in determining future participation. 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.² Professor [Eric Plutzer](#), who conducted another study, notes, “virtually all major works on turnout have concluded that voting behavior is, in part, a gradually acquired habit.”³ Plutzer told a Penn State research journal 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."⁴

[Voting is a habit](#), and habits form early. Researchers who study turnout have identified a period of transition between non-voters and habitual voters, in which they register, participate, and then continue a pattern of participation. **The numbers show that young, registered voters vote, and repeat voters tend to vote for a lifetime. The cumulative effect of pre-registration, combined with early voter education, could narrow the registration gap, and foster the culture of lifelong participation to which our democracy aspires.**

IV. Implementation: Modifications and technical issues

The first draft white paper on Expanding Voter Registration Opportunities from the Voters First Commission noted several steps, which would be necessary to implement pre-registration:

Current law allows for registering 17-year-old students as long as they will be 18 by next election. Law is being reviewed in general assembly to allow 16 and 17 year olds to register regardless of when they will turn 18. If this change becomes law, the CVRS will need to be modified accordingly. The voter registration form will also need modification as the current oath prohibits them from registering.

Suggestion: If law is enacted, make necessary modifications.

These two modifications- to the central voter registry, or CVRS, and to the registration form – could be accomplished easily and effectively.

The CVRS could be modified to enable pre-registration in several different ways. Most basically, the program would need to be changed to allow 16 year olds to register (the software currently rejects them). The CVRS modifications could also be done by adding an “eligibility date” column to the CVRS, or by expanding the existing module that keeps 17 year olds’ status as pending to include 16 and 17 year olds who would remain pending through the election. Another way to accomplish this would be to add a module triggering a screen, a letter, a query and a report designed to facilitate the pre-registering of voters. Pre-registrants would then receive a letter after

² Gerber, Green, and Shachar. *Voting may be habit-forming: Evidence from a randomized field experiment*. American Journal of Political Science v. 47, pp. 540-550. 2003

³ Plutzer, E. *Becoming a habitual voter: Inertia, resources & growth in young adulthood*. American Political Science Review v. 96, p. 42. 2002.

⁴ Fergus, Charles, [Why don't people vote?](#) Research Penn State, October 27, 2004

pre-registering, and a standard notification letter sent out to all pre-registrants in January of the year they become eligible.

After discussing the technical issues with Jan Ruggiero in the Secretary of State's Elections and Civics division, we believe that these modifications could be easily implemented. The cost could be up to \$20,000 for the one-time software modification, but it probably would be considerably lower. [Maine](#), which uses the same software vendor as Rhode Island, already allows for pre-registration at age 17. By using Maine's existing program to modify our system, Rhode Island would not have to pay for additional software development. The process could be even easier because Rhode Island already records the birth date and date effective of each registering voter. FairVote is committed to working with the Elections Division to help find the simplest, most cost-effective solution for modifying and updating our system.

The registration form, as well as the electronic form at the DMV, would also need to be modified. Currently, in compliance with HAVA, Rhode Island asks registrants to check a box that says that they will be 18 by Election Day. The appropriate language for a new oath already exists: Hawaii's official, HAVA- and NVRA-compliant [registration form](#) uses the following oath:

"I am at least 16 years of age. I understand that I must be 18 years old by Election Day to vote."

While any changes to the Rhode Island language would be submitted to the national Elections Assistance Commission, Hawaii provides a clear precedent for legal, HAVA-compliant registration form language. In fact, the EAC lists the requirement as defined by Hawaii law on their [universal voter registration form](#). The EAC also recognizes the practice of other states that register voters before they are eligible to vote.

Pre-registration could also give Rhode Island a cleaner voting list, by cutting down on human error. Young voters would be much more likely to pre-register at the DMV, using the computer form, or type in their info online and print it. They would also be more likely to register at points of civic engagement like a classroom or driver's education course, where they could ask questions. **Pre-registration is a cost-effective step toward greater standardization, which means a cleaner, more accurate data set. Pre-registration could also save money and minimize human error by allowing students to register year round at points of civic engagement and education, helping order the chaos of private, partisan voter registration, which can swamp boards of canvassers in the run-up to the voter registration deadline.**

V. Suggestions: Rhode Island as a leader

With pre-registration, Rhode Island has the opportunity to be a national leader. California, among many other states, will be considering a similar measure this year, and Florida just passed one last summer. Hawaii and Puerto Rico have done it for years for all citizens by the time they turn 16.

[Passing pre-registration into law](#) is the first step. **But Rhode Island can take further steps to maximize its impact after passage, including:**

- Make the necessary changes to the CVRS and registration form to allow young people to pre-register;
- Make the necessary changes to the computer registration system at the DMV
- Record data on pre-registration to quantify its effect over the course of future election cycles;

- Capitalize on the excitement of the 2008 election by pre-registering young people;
- Tie pre-registration to the state's civics curriculum, as well as to existing high school registration drives and education programs, and to driver's ed.;
- Share information and best practices with other states in the process of passing advance voter registration laws.