Testimony for SB0647
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee, Thursday, Feb. 20, 2020
Election Law - Institutions of Higher Education - Voter Registration and Voting by Students (Student Voter Empowerment Act of 2020)

POSITION: FAVORABLE

Maryland PIRG is a state based, non-partisan, citizen funded public interest advocacy organization with grassroots members across the state and a student funded, student directed chapter at the University of Maryland College Park. For forty five years we've stood up to powerful interests whenever they threaten our health and safety, our financial security, or our right to fully participate in our democratic society. That includes a long history of working to help students register and vote.

We should make every effort to increase voter participation by making voter registration and the act of voting simple and accessible to all eligible voters. Unfortunately, many eligible Maryland voters, especially young Marylanders, are not voting.

Thanks to the important work of this committee, Maryland has made great strides to modernize our voter registration systems through same-day voter registration and automatic voter registration. The Student Voter Empowerment Act adds another important tool to help ensure participation.

Voting serves as a building block to more active involvement in civic life. In Maryland PIRG's 45-year history of working with young people and running non-partisan voter registration drives, we have found that most young people want to and intend to participate in voting, but as new voters, they often struggle to navigate the voter registration system or forget they need to update their registration every time they move.

In the 2016 presidential election, turnout in Maryland as a percentage of the voting population was at its lowest in 24 years. In 2018, [turnout of voters under 29 was at 36% compared to 53.4% of all eligible voters](#) turned out. While this was an increase of 10% in youth voter participation since the last midterm election, it is not good enough. [Numerous studies](#) have shown that voting is habit forming, and youth who vote are more likely to become life-long voters.

Rishi Shah, Maryland PIRG Democracy Associate
rshah@marylandpirg.org @rishiyshah

Likewise, [young people who are registered to vote turn out in high numbers, very close to the rate of older voters](#). The voter registration gap in young people is a driving force in low youth voter participation. In 2018, [only 54% of Marylanders aged 18-24 were registered to vote, compared to 66% of all Marylanders](#) over the age of 18. In order to increase civic participation we need to help young people get registered to vote and ensure they have the tools and information they need to turn out on Election Day.

During the 2018 midterm elections, for example, Maryland PIRG students helped register and turn out more than 2,800 University of Maryland students to vote. Election after election in states across the country we have found that if we ask students to vote and help them navigate the system, they will.

We should reduce the barriers faced by young people trying to register to vote and go to the polls. The Student Voter Empowerment Act ensures that:

1. Universities with over 4,500 undergraduate students will have a polling location on campus;

2. Universities will post the link to the online voter registration form on the website students use to register for classes to keep it visible;

3. Public universities will have a student voter coordinator, who will take point on forming a plan to support student voter registration and ensure students have information about voter registration and how to vote, including locations, dates, and transportation options on Election Day.

Maryland should take this opportunity to step up and be a national leader on democracy issues. We can encourage first time and young voters, increase civic participation, and build a more functional democracy.

We respectfully request a favorable report.

Student Voter Empowerment Act
Increasing Student Voter Participation
Delegate Luedtke (HB235) and Senator Lam (SB0647)

We must do more to increase youth voter participation.
- In 2018, national turnout of voters under 29 was at 36% compared to 53.4% for all eligible voters. [1]
- Numerous studies have shown that voting is habit-forming, and youth who vote are more likely to become life-long voters. [2]

The voter registration gap drives low youth voter participation.
- In 2018, only 54% of Marylanders aged 18-24 were registered to vote, compared to 66% of all Marylanders over the age of 18. [3]
- Young people who are registered to vote turn out in high numbers, very close to the rate of older voters. [4]

What the bill does:

1. Public universities must provide a voter registration link on the homepage of the website students use to register for courses.
2. Universities with more than 4,500 undergraduate students must have a polling location on campus.
3. Public universities shall designate a staff member to be the student voting coordinator and develop a "student vote plan" which:
   - Comes from collaboration with faculty, staff, and students at the university.
   - Includes voter registration and education about how to vote including locations, dates, and transportation options on Election Day.
   - Supports student organizations aimed at increasing voter registration and participation.

Maryland PIRG
Standing Up To Powerful Interests

Contact:
Rishi Shah
Democracy Campaign Associate
rshah@marylandpirg.org

[1] Misra, Jordan. "Voter Turnout Rates Among All Voting Age and Major Racial and Ethnic Groups Were Higher Than in 2014," 23 April 2019, United States Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/04/behind-2018-united-states-midterm-election-turnout.html.
[2] "Voting is a Habit," February 2007, Young Voter Strategies, https://www.rockthevote.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/research/rtv_voting_is_a_habit-2007.pdf
[3] "Reported Voting and Registration by Age, for States: November 2018", US Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-583.html
[4] "Youth Voting," CIRCLE, https://civicyouth.org/quick-facts/youth-voting/.