

To: Representative Fields and Representative Kreiss Tomkins and Committee Members

My name is Amy Gallaway. I am a high school civics and CTE teacher in the Fairbanks Northstar Borough and the 2020 Alaska Teacher of the year. I am writing in support of HB250 "Voter Registration Age". As citizen legislators, you are acutely aware of the necessity of having an informed electorate that is representative of the entirety of the state and not just certain demographics. Allowing non-partisan early voter registration at 16 will empower educators to teach how to register to vote and demystify the process. Academic studies from NCSL and electoral analyses show that voting behavior is habit-forming. If you vote, you will likely keep voting. If you don't vote, you probably won't start. It's important to engage prospective voters early on to create a habit of voting and civic engagement.

Registration is a critical step to protecting the integrity of our elections, but it shouldn't be a barrier. While some say it is "easy", I can tell you from 21 years of teaching civics, students find voter registration HARD and most parents don't teach it. Schools are the perfect place to teach how to register to vote because we are already teaching the power and necessity of the vote. By lowering the registration age, teachers could provide the option for all students to register to vote alongside their civics lessons and preregistration drives can be designed to operate on an ongoing basis, even when there is no scheduled election, making learning relevant and empowering students.

Lowering the registration age will empower educators to amplify the relevance and significance of the vote. Average voter turnout in annual municipal elections hovers between 15-21% and for state elections between 44-48%. In the 2018 election, only 6% of 18-24 year-olds voted. This is not just disheartening, it is unhealthy. Living in a representative democracy demands the government represent the voices of all its constituents. The less that happens, the more apathetic and disengaged our communities become. While low voter turnout is disheartening, the composition of the electorate is most critical to a healthy republic. As Scott Kominers, a junior fellow in economics at Harvard stated, "Representativeness and increased turnout go hand-in-hand only when we make voting equally easy for everyone. The less people's decisions about whether to vote are correlated with how they will vote, the more representative our democracy will be." Early registration will help make voting "equally easy".

Every year I ask students why they think people don't vote. They say, "One vote doesn't really matter, people don't care, and it is HARD to vote". Last week while teaching a lesson on public policy and voter turnout, I had a group of students who were goofing off and generally not caring. They were talking about the basketball game, their jobs, Snapchat, but definitely not voter turnout. So, I "teachered" my way in to get their attention and then got a little sassy. I asked, "Well, since young people vote in such low numbers, should the voting age be increased to thirty?" I thought this would outrage them. To my surprise, at least 15 students said, "Sure, it doesn't really matter anyway." To add salt to my wound, four students even offered to give up their vote altogether; they decided only the people who care should vote. This is the reality in most classrooms in Alaska. By allowing 16-year-olds to register to vote, educators can lower one barrier- how to register. Then use it alongside effective civics programs like Kids Voting, We the People and iCivics. If we want to make elections fully representative, we need to make the distribution of voting costs and benefits independent of party lines. Simplified voter registration does that. 14 states, including Florida, Louisiana, Hawaii, and Oregon permit preregistration beginning at 16 years old. Alaska should be number 15 so our students can help save the republic.

Sincerely,

Amy Gallaway

HB 250 16-year-old voter registration

Kids Voting is a voter-education program committed to developing the life-long habit of informed voting in students.

The opportunity to pre-register to vote at the age of 16 supports the likelihood of students voting in the future. If that pre-registration occurs in the context of a civics education class or through the Kids Voting program, students are more likely to make informed voting decisions.

Once young people have voted, they are statistically more likely to vote again, establishing a regular habit of voting. These young voters may also positively influence their parents and other adult family members to vote, thus increasing voter turnout. At first glance, Alaska's system of automatically registering all recipients of Permanent Fund Dividends at voting age seems to be a solution to ensuring that citizens register to vote. However, it does not have the same impact as allowing 16-year-olds to personally pre-register, so they may be more fully invested in the voting process.

The late Senator John Lewis stated, *"The right to vote is precious, almost sacred. It is the most powerful nonviolent tool or instrument in a democratic society. We must use it."*

Peggy Carlson

President, Kids Voting North Alaska



March 2, 2020

Letter of Support for House Bill 250

Dear Representative Grier Hopkins,

We write to thank you for introducing House Bill 250 to allow voter pre-registration starting at age 16. We urge our elected leaders in the Alaska State Legislature to support this exciting piece of legislation which would allow for greater participation of young Alaskans in the electoral system.

The Alaska Center Education Fund believes that a healthy democracy is one in which all Alaskans feel agency in their community and have access and means to make their voice heard. HB 250 offers an exciting tool for teachers, parents, mentors, and students to begin an early conversation about civic engagement. Pre-registration for young Alaskans does more than increase the number of young people on the voter rolls; this legislation provides an important entry point for the next generation of Alaskan leaders to affect change in their lives and in their communities.

Since 1998, our Alaska Youth for Environmental Action program has engaged over 5000 youth aged 14-18 from communities across Alaska in leadership and civic action. Each year, we bring 20-25 youth from villages and cities across Alaska to our Civics & Conservation Summit in Juneau to learn from each other and engage with their legislators. Our youth trainers and delegates plan every element of the summit, choosing focus bills, leading trainings on the political process, and preparing for meetings with legislators. Teens have described these experiences as powerful in shaping their views of the political process, and a high percentage continue engaging their communities after graduating the program. The majority of our participants are not yet 18 and are very eager for the time they can register to vote.

We know firsthand that young Alaskans are capable of transformative leadership in their communities long before they turn 18. Eve Downing (17), from Soldotna, first started her involvement with AYEА at age 15. Since then, she has been a trainer at multiple summits,

worked a community engagement internship with Cook Inletkeeper, and traveled to D.C. to talk to our state delegation. Cassidy Austin (17), from McCarthy, is a leader in our Anchorage chapter of AYEА, and in just two years of involvement with AYEА has engaged directly with state and federal legislators and mobilized hundreds of youth to get involved in the political process through rallies, letter writing, and more. She recently mentioned to us her 18th birthday party is also going to be a voter registration party.

We've seen that when young people become involved in our political process, they begin a lifetime of engagement and bring their friends, families, and communities along with them. Young Alaskans are seeing issues in their community and are taking action to address them long before they turn 18. They deserve to participate in and help shape the decisions that affect their future.

We urge the Legislature to pass HB 250 to make our democracy more accessible to all.

Sincerely,

The Alaska Center Education Fund Staff:

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Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony regarding HB250.

“A republic, if you can keep it.”

Ben Franklin’s now famous words spoken at the conclusion of the Constitution Convention in 1787 carry authenticity today. These words acknowledge the fragile nature of representative democracy that is dependent upon citizen participation. It is the government’s responsibility to protect and promote the right to participate, whether it is by speech, by petition, or by the vote. In this light, I support HB250’s providing a process of pre-registration for 16 year olds. By engaging young people in the election process, HB250 strengthens our democratic republic. Studies have shown that voter turnout is enhanced when voter registration is streamlined.

HB 250 instills in our youth the importance of voting to maintain democratic institutions and provides the foundation for creating a robust electorate, both principles guiding our founding fathers in their efforts to provide a strong and lasting democracy.

Sincerely,

Maida Buckley