

HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE
April 22, 2025
4:09 p.m.

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CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Foster called the House Finance Committee meeting to order at 4:09 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Neal Foster, Co-Chair
Representative Andy Josephson, Co-Chair
Representative Calvin Schrage, Co-Chair
Representative Jamie Allard
Representative Jeremy Bynum
Representative Alyse Galvin
Representative Sara Hannan
Representative Nellie Unangiq Jimmie
Representative Frank Tomaszewski

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative DeLena Johnson
Representative Will Stapp

ALSO PRESENT

Representative Andi Story, Sponsor; Honour Miller-Austin, Staff, Representative Andi Story.

PRESENT VIA TELECONFERENCE

Lem Wheelles, Civics Teacher, Anchorage; Carol Beecher, Director, Division of Elections, Office of the Lieutenant Governor; Kathleen Wallace, Acting Director, Division of Motor Vehicles, Department of Administration.

SUMMARY

HB 21 VOTER PREREGISTRATION FOR MINORS

HB 21 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

Co-Chair Foster reviewed the meeting agenda.

Co-Chair Schrage relayed that the committee would hear the capital budget the following day.

#hb21

HOUSE BILL NO. 21

"An Act relating to voter preregistration for minors at least 16 years of age; and relating to confidentiality of voter registration and preregistration records of minors at least 16 years of age."

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Co-Chair Foster asked the sponsor and her staff to come to the table and introduce the bill.

REPRESENTATIVE ANDI STORY, SPONSOR, introduced herself.

HONOUR MILLER-AUSTIN, STAFF, REPRESENTATIVE ANDI STORY, introduced herself.

Representative Story reviewed the bill with prepared remarks:

House Bill 21 seeks to increase youth civics education, knowledge and interest about the voting process by allowing 16-year-olds to pre-register to vote. Voting is fundamental to a healthy democracy for our state and country.

Many adults are concerned about a lack of civics education and engagement for our youth, which can contribute to a lack of knowledge by youth about their government and involvement in the voting process. And indeed, across the nation, young people (age 18-29) typically have the lowest voter turnout of any age group. This is especially true within Alaska where the voter turnout in 2020 general election, we ranked amongst the bottom 10 states with a youth voter turnout of 45.70%.

Currently, 90 days before their 18th birthday, Alaskan youth can register to vote. This is a time when many youths are facing graduation, work, and post-secondary

decisions. Many may be moving for school or a job and not sure where to register. So, finding the time or motivation to register can become more difficult, which leads to lower youth registration and turnout.

House Bill 21 seeks to address these concerns by allowing 16-year-olds to preregister to vote and providing easy access to the process.

At 16, young people are living at home with family or guardians, and attending school, often times taking a government class, making it a good time to ensure youth have support in the voter registration process. The questions surrounding registration is not as confusing when they have someone at home or school who understands the system and can help them through the process.

Research shows that when young voters do register, they are likely to turn out to vote. And those who vote, develop the habit of voting in elections. States like Florida, Louisiana, California and Colorado have already implemented preregistration with great success, increasing youth voter turnout.

This bill would follow federal law and automatically provide an opportunity to register those youth who get a driver's license at the DMV. A driver's license is a big rite of passage for 16-year-olds, and combining the opportunity to register to vote at the same time provides easy access. If they choose to register at that time. The youth who would preregister were put into a pending status and filed away until 45 days before their 18th birthday. The Division of Elections would verify their address and their residency by mailing them a postage paid return envelope, requesting confirmation of the address. This would be returned and signed before a voter registration card and polling place information can be mailed to them with a receipt.

This bill also importantly corrects a flaw in our statute it establishes that the address and telephone number of any person under the age of 18 who registers or preregisters to vote shall remain confidential and not be subject to public view. Currently 17-year-olds who preregistered to vote do not have this protection.

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Representative Story continued explaining the bill with prepared remarks:

The impact of this bill goes beyond just making voter pre-registration available. By allowing 16-year-olds to preregister, we are giving access and civic opportunities to prepare the next generation to actively participate in their democracy. This bill bolsters our state's commitment and policies that engage young people in the democratic process.

Co-Chair Foster outlined his plan for hearing HB 21.

Representative Story corrected the second reference to the 90 day period in the sponsor statement that inadvertently read 45 days.

Ms. Miller-Austin reviewed the sectional analysis of the bill (copy on file):

Section 1: This section introduces two new subsections to AS 15.07.040, allowing individuals who are at least 16 years of age but under 18 years of age to preregister to vote.

- Subsection (b): Establishes the eligibility criteria for preregistration, a person aged 16 may preregister by providing the necessary information under AS 15.07.060(a). Instead of declaring that they will be 18 years of age or older within 90 days of registration.

- Subsection (c): Outlines the process by which the division ensures accurate registration information prior to a preregistered individual reaching voting age. Ninety days before the preregistered individual turns 18, the division must send a nonforwardable notice to the individual's registered mailing address. This notice will request confirmation or correction of their address and include a prepaid, pre-addressed return card.

- o The notice will specify that the individual must return the card within 45 days.

- o Failure to return the card within the deadline may result in the individual not being registered to vote.

- o If the individual returns the card, the division will complete their voter registration upon their 18th birthday and issue a registration card.

Section 2: Amends AS 15.07.195 to add new subsection (e) to read,

- The address and telephone number of a person under 18 years of age who registers or preregisters to vote are confidential.

Co-Chair Foster asked to hear from invited testimony.

LEM WHEELS, CIVICS TEACHER, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), provided testimony in support of the legislation. He shared that he taught Government at Diamond Highschool for twenty one years that included teaching students how to register to vote. He discussed the unique challenges for current 18 year olds to register to vote. He observed that young people were typically excited to vote for the first time but did not think about it until they turned 18 and often forget to register. They miss their chance to vote in their first election. He shared an example of one of his students' disappointment when he missed the 30-day registration window before an upcoming election. The situation happened on the same day Representative Story had reached out to him about HB 21. He explained that if the bill were to pass, students would be able to register as early as age 16 but would not be able to vote until 18 years of age. He believed that it would solve one of the biggest problems with first time 18 year old voters. He indicated that not all of his students were old enough to preregister when he taught the class. He emphasized that if adopted, HB 21 would allow all of his senior year class to preregister. He viewed the bill as a good way for young people to get engaged with the republic. He thanked the committee.

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Co-Chair Foster asked for a review of the two fiscal notes.

CAROL BEECHER, DIRECTOR, DIVISION OF ELECTIONS, OFFICE OF THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR (via teleconference), reviewed the published fiscal impact note from the Office of the Governor allocated to the Division of Elections [FN2 (GOV)]. She explained that the total estimated General Fund (GF) cost was \$15,042. The amount was derived from an Alaska population estimate of 16-year-olds at 10,303 in 2024. Assuming all 10,303 preregistered to vote, the cost to mail the non-forwardable notice would be \$7,512 (10,303 x 0.73 postage), with an additional cost of \$7,512 for the postage prepaid return card for a total estimated annual cost of \$15,042.

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Co-Chair Foster asked for a review of the second fiscal note.

[Secretary Note: There was no one available to review the second fiscal note.]

Representative Galvin appreciated the impetus of the bill. She directed a question to Mr. Wheelles. She asked if he told students which candidate for vote for. Mr. Wheelles answered that he did not care what students' political views were. He cared that they thought about how to vote and that they registered. He added that he discussed the timing of elections, the lengths of terms, etc. He wanted his students to make up their own minds on who to vote for. He emphasized that it was not his place to influence his students' political views. Representative Galvin thanked Mr. Wheelles. She directed a question to the sponsor. She asked if it would become part of the process for DMV forms. Representative Story replied affirmatively. She offered that the DMV form would include an optional check box for voter registration at age 16.

Co-Chair Foster asked Ms. Beecher for comments.

Representative Galvin repeated her question and also wondered what a "non-political" mailer was. Ms. Beecher clarified that she stated a "non-forwardable" notice would be sent out.

Co-Chair Foster recognized Representative Tomaszewski had joined the meeting.

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Co-Chair Foster returned to the second fiscal note. He asked for an explanation.

KATHLEEN WALLACE, ACTING DIRECTOR, DIVISION OF MOTOR VEHICLES, DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATION (via teleconference), answered that the published fiscal impact note for the Department of Administration allocated to Motor Vehicles [FN 1 (ADM)] cost \$45 thousand in Designated General Funds for FY 2026. She explained that the bill would require the Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to update its programming and had estimated they would not exceed 300 hours. The costs assumed \$150.00 per hour at 300 hours totaling the one-time fee of \$45,000.

Representative Bynum was trying to grasp the necessity for the bill. He reported that the state already had mechanisms available for people to register to vote. He listed the ways individuals could register to vote including the Permanent Fund Dividend (PFD) application that had an automatic voter registration component. He did not understand the purpose for the bill. He reviewed items that had been important to him when he was a teen: obtaining a drivers license, registering to vote, and registering for Selective Service. He noted that Alaska's educational system was providing instruction about voter registration and wondered what the bill would accomplish.

Representative Story replied that one of the reasons she believed it was critically important to give 16 year-olds the opportunity to preregister was due to the lack of civics education and the decline in civics. She believed that the preregistration was "civics in real time." She believed that it was an opportunity for youth to learn the responsibility of voting to help shape democracy. She had learned from other states that preregistration helped entire families vote due to it generating a household discussion about the preregistration instruction. The bill would help build young voters in Alaska, which had the lowest young citizen vote. She had been dismayed to discover that more people were not exercising their right to vote. She believed that it was essential that registering to vote should become a "right of passage." She relayed that 17 states had adopted voter preregistration and noted that more people were voting in those states.

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Representative Allard noted the state's current financial difficulties. She remarked on the bill's fiscal impact. She asked if once a 16-year old preregistered, would they automatically be able to vote at age 18. Representative Story answered that 90 days before a preregistered person turned 18, DMV would send a mailer confirming the person's address and the person would need to return the mailer. Upon receipt of the mailer, the person would receive their voter registration card. Representative Allard asked if youths were taught whether they wanted to be a Democrat or Republican, etc. at the age of 16. She also mentioned her concern over security breaches. She did not think the voter registration system was broken. She reiterated her concern about security breaches and shared a story when 130 thousand Alaskan voters' information was released to the public. She referenced Representative Story's statement about the lack of civics classes but believed that today's children were "getting live time civics classes" through social media and had a lot of exposure to politics. She agreed with Representative Bynum's comments. She thanked the sponsor.

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Representative Story explained that the preregistered addresses were put in a pending file at the Division of Elections and were not released to the public. She indicated that the bill closed a loophole where currently, 17 year olds' information was available. She asked to hear from Mr. Wheelles.

Representative Allard asked about the loophole.

Representative Story deferred the question to Ms. Beecher.

Ms. Beecher responded that currently when a 17 year old preregistered, 90 days before their 18th birthday they were considered registered to vote and active for registration. Therefore, when someone received a voter list they could see the 17 year old's information. Representative Allard asked about marketing. She asked if a preregistered youth was vulnerable to marketing. She inquired whether their information was in the division's computer.

Ms. Beecher answered that if the bill passed, the preregistered 16-year olds' information would be kept in a sequestered list and would not be available to the public. Representative Allard believed that there were still security breaches at the Division of Elections that had not yet been fixed. She asked for a guarantee that voter information would never be breached. Ms. Beecher answered that subsequent to the incursion Representative Allard referred to the division moved to the level of protection recommended by the state's Office of Information Technology in addition to multiple other actions for protection that the division undertook i.e., penetration tests and regular status reports. She would not be able to give 100 percent certainty the system could not ever be breached because she did not think that was ever possible for any system. She offered that the division adopted the enhanced security measures recommended by Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and the firewall by the state's Office of Information Technology.

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Representative Allard directed a question to the DMV. She wondered why the preregistration information was directed to the DMV. Ms. Wallace replied that nothing was added to a driver's license when anyone registered to vote at present. The voter registration information was collected and transferred to the Division of Elections. She characterized DMV's role as a "middleman." Representative Allard remarked that the middleman cost money and should be cut out. She deduced that the bill merely moved preregistration from 90 days to two years and the DMV was merely the middleman. Ms. Wallace replied affirmatively. The division would collect the information needed for the Division of Elections to house the information.

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Mr. Wheelles informed the committee that he taught students about the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 known as the "Motor Voter Act." He noted that federal law required DMV to offer the opportunity for citizens to register to vote when individuals obtained a driver's license. He discussed the concept of political parties with his students and their role in the democratic systems that was part of the recently updated Alaska Standards for Social Studies adopted by the state Board Of Education. He

explained that his instruction included how a political party worked, and the platforms of the five major political parties in the country, letting students draw their own conclusions. He indicated that government courses were not currently required by state law, and it was a district decision whether Civics was offered.

Representative Tomaszewski appreciated Representative Story's bill. He understood that currently a 17.5 year old could register to vote. Representative Story replied in the negative and clarified that it was currently 3 months prior to a person's 18th birthday. Representative Tomaszewski noted that the bill was expanded by another year and three quarters. Representative Story nodded affirmatively. Representative Tomaszewski ascertained that at age 18 with the PFD application the person was registered to vote. Representative Story nodded affirmatively. Representative Tomaszewski asked for confirmation that if an 18 year old registered to vote less than 30 days before an election they were disallowed to vote. Representative Story responded that a person was able to vote when they turned 18. She confirmed that a non-registered 18 year old was automatically registered when they filled out their PFD application.

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Ms. Beecher replied that the list sent to the Division of Elections would not register someone who applied for the PFD if they were not 18 when they filled out their application. Representative Tomaszewski asked when the last day was a person could register before an election. Ms. Beecher answered that current law required registration 30 days before an election in order to vote in that election.

Representative Bynum thought that the requirement for civics education should perhaps be changed. He cited:

AS 15.07.060. (a) (12) a certification that the applicant understands that a false statement on the application may make the applicant subject to prosecution for a misdemeanor under this title or AS 11.

Representative Bynum wondered if a 16 year old was capable of legally meeting the standard and if the sponsor had considered the scenario.

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Representative Story answered in the negative. She determined that a 16 year olds worked jobs and registered to drive. Therefore, they would be familiar with the statute. She deferred to Mr. Wheelles.

Mr. Wheelles was unable to provide comment.

Representative Story indicated that she had been told the offense was a misdemeanor.

Representative Bynum stated the ability for a 16 year old to reason legal matters was much different than an 18 year old. He believed that registering to vote was a serious responsibility and wondered what impact it would have on 16 year olds. He asked if it had been considered that instead of the preregistered 16 year old receiving a card checking on their address they received a reminder to register to vote instead. Representative Story answered that the Division of Elections felt verifying addresses was critically important since people moved often in Alaska. Representative Bynum reiterated current law allowing 17 year olds to register early. He repeated his question regarding creating a reminder system instead and asked if it had been considered. Representative Story replied that she looked at the other 17 states that currently allowed 16 year olds to preregister to vote. She reported that those states had not had any problems. She would like to join that group of states and felt that 16 year olds were capable of preregistration. She offered that many things were happening three months prior to a person's 18th birthday and believed the prospect of voting would create excitement.

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Representative Hannan appreciated Mr. Wheelles. She noted that the crime in statute was about lying on a registration form. She informed the committee that she had taught American Government. She shared a story about a student wanting to make false statements on forms believing that a juvenile record was sealed. She informed students that a juvenile record was only sealed from the public but not law enforcement and any infractions must be reported. She reminded the committee that 16 year old drivers were responsible for their legal actions and were not treated

any differently than a person who was 18 or older, She believed that the legal obligations were clearly conveyed to and understood by a 16 year old. She voiced that the preregistration was "not a new creation of 16 year olds having an obligation to be truthful, honest, and accurate about the information they present."

Co-Chair Foster thanked the bill sponsor.

HB 21 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

Co-Chair Foster reviewed the schedule for the following day.

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ADJOURNMENT

5:02:14 PM

The meeting was adjourned at 5:02 p.m.