

# Legislative Analysis

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## PRE-REGISTRATION TO VOTE AT AGE 16

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**House Bill 5792 without amendment**

**Sponsor: Rep. Steve Bieda**

**Committee: Ethics and Elections**

### First Analysis (5-6-08)

**BRIEF SUMMARY:** The bill would allow young people to pre-register to vote beginning at age 16 years of age.

**FISCAL IMPACT:** House Bill 5792 would have no significant fiscal impact on the State of Michigan or local units of government. Any fiscal impact would be related to increased administrative workload and computer programming changes that would be necessary under the provisions of the bill.

### **THE APPARENT PROBLEM:**

Most states in the United States set five or six conditions on voter registration. Generally, voters must be U.S. citizens, 18 years of age by Election Day, not be in jail, never been convicted of a felony or declared "mentally incompetent," and not claim the right to vote in another state.

The majority of states allow young citizens to register to vote at age 17 1/2, or a few weeks before their 18th birthdays. However, in two states--Florida and Hawaii--young people can pre-register to vote at age 16; the issue is pending in Rhode Island and Wisconsin. In an additional five states--Louisiana, Maine, Ohio, Oregon, and West Virginia--advance registration is possible at age 17. Usually, pre-registration occurs when a young person applies for a driver's license. (In Rhode Island, pre-registration is also part of the state's high school civics curriculum.) Then when their 18th birthday nears, the secretary of state forwards to them a voter registration card, allowing them to vote in the next election.

Among voters nationwide, those aged 18 to 24 years of age have the lowest percentage of voter registration. According to FairVote, a non-partisan, non-profit based in Washington D.C. and operating since 1992 as the Center for Voting and Democracy, "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." As evidence they note that "2004 was a high turnout [election] year for all demographics, and that included 18 to 24 year olds: 81 percent of registered 18-24 years voted in the 2004 election. But, while the national registration rate was 72 percent, only 58 percent of youth voters were registered." FairVote's study demonstrates that there is more of a registration gap than a participation gap. See [Background Information](#).

The connection between voter registration and participation is, of course, clear since only registered voters can vote. Further, past participation is a major factor in determining future participation, since studies show that voting is, in part, a gradually acquired habit.

To better ensure that more Michigan residents can acquire the habit of voting, legislation has been introduced to allow voter pre-registration at age 16 in Michigan.

### ***THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:***

House Bill 5792 would amend the Michigan Election Law (MCL 168.496a) to allow young people to pre-register to vote beginning at age 16.

The bill specifies that a person could pre-register to vote at a Secretary of State Office, if he or she met all of the following requirements:

- Was at least 16 years of age but less than 17 1/2 of age.
- Had been issued either a graduated license to operate a motor vehicle or an official state personal identification card.
- Was a citizen of the United States.
- Had been a resident of Michigan for at least 30 days.

A person who pre-registered would become a registered elector at age 17 1/2, and would become eligible to vote on his or her 18th birthday.

Under the bill, the Secretary of State would be required to provide the pre-registration form; add the required voter registration information to the Qualified Voter File for each person who was automatically registered; and, transmit that information to the clerk of the city, township, or village where the pre-registered elector resided when he or she turned 17 1/2 years of age. When the local clerk received the information, he or she would send the pre-registered elector a voter identification card. (If the voter identification card was returned to the clerk, the clerk would reject the voter registration.)

### ***BACKGROUND INFORMATION:***

To read in its entirety the "Policy Briefing: Advance Voter Registration in Rhode Island" published by the Center for Voting and Democracy, visit the website of FairVote at [www.fairvote.org](http://www.fairvote.org)

### ***ARGUMENTS:***

#### ***For:***

Proponents of the bill argue that pre-registration for 16-year-olds promotes a "culture of participation" among younger citizens, a phenomenon corroborated by studies in political science. Registering 16- and 17-year olds before they are eligible to vote at age 18 significantly increases their likelihood of voting later. Since past participation is a major

factor in determining future participation, and because voting behavior is a gradually acquired habit, it is important to help young citizens form that habit early.

According to FairVote, electoral analyses indicate that there is a registration gap, not a participation gap--young voters do vote when they are registered. FairVote also notes that "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. Consequently, 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."

***POSITIONS:***

The Secretary of State supports the bill. (4-29-08)

The Michigan Campaign Finance Network supports the bill. (4-29-08)

The Michigan Municipal League supports the bill. (4-29-08)

The Michigan Association of County Clerks supports the bill. (4-29-08)

The Municipal Clerks Association supports the bill. (4-29-08)

The Michigan Nonprofit Association supports the bill. (4-29-08)

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■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.