Fighting Young Voter Apathy: Automatic Voter Registration for College Students in Virginia

By Evan Baines, Roosevelt @ Mason

Thesis
Young people are statistically less likely to be registered to vote. The Commonwealth of Virginia should mandate that all state universities and community colleges provide automatic voter registration for students, thereby increasing voter registration and participation by young people.

Background Analysis
The United States suffers from low voter turnout in elections. In particular, voters between the ages of 18 and 35 have much lower turnout rates than other age demographics. The current youth voting bloc, Millennials, is actually the largest living American generation. While the 69.7 million Baby Boomers make up the largest generation of eligible voters, Millennials are not far behind with 69.2 million eligible voters. Despite this, in 2012 only 46 percent of Millennials voted as opposed to 69 percent of Baby Boomers. In Virginia, only 52 percent of 18- to 27-year-olds were registered to vote for the 2012 election, and only 47 percent of 18- to 27-year-olds reported voting. Researchers chalk low turnout up to civic apathy among young people and the fact that voting is not a normative social behavior. Voter registration obstacles, like deadlines and procedures, have been shown to affect younger voter participation. In a study by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), 22 percent of young people said they did not register to vote because they missed the registration deadline, while another 6 percent said they did not know how to register.

Talking Points
• Millennials are the largest living American generation and 69.2 million of them are eligible to vote.
• In Virginia, only 52 percent of 18- to 27-year-olds were registered to vote in the 2012 election, and only 47 percent voted.
• Twenty-two percent of young people reported that they did not register to vote because they missed the registration deadline, and another 6 percent did not know how to register.

Policy Idea
In order to eliminate registration barriers for young people and foster civic engagement and voter participation, the Commonwealth of Virginia should require all of its public universities and community colleges to establish systems where its students are automatically registered to vote when they sign up for classes. The university or college should also provide an option for students to opt-out of the automated process. The legislation should mandate the state provide support for private educational institutions if

KEY FACTS
Ø This registration program would reach approximately 389,364 students enrolled in public institutions of higher learning in Virginia.
Ø Establishing an automatic registration system for college students in Virginia would be cost-effective and limit fraud and inconsistencies.
Ø Automated registration for students would foster habits of civic engagement and participation that could increase voter turnout rates in the future.
Ø California has successfully enacted legislation to mandate automatic voter registration systems at public institutions of higher learning.
they independently decide to join the automatic registration system.

**Policy Analysis**

This proposed system would reach the approximately 389,364 students enrolled in public institutions for higher learning in Virginia, providing them an opportunity to register online when they sign up for classes. This system would be similar to the “motor voter” mechanisms enacted by the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993, which lowered registration costs by requiring states to provide registration opportunities when eligible voters interact with certain state government entities. An automated registration system for students would also lower the costs of registering. In 2016, the state of California adopted a similar policy through the Student Voter Act, which requires the state’s public universities and colleges to develop systems that allow enrolling students to submit a voter registration application to the California Secretary of State online.

In response to recent concerns over possible fraud and application mistakes surrounding third party registration drives, automated registration for students is a low-cost solution that establishes a uniform system of registering voters en masse. Civic participation and voting at a young age is crucial to developing life-long habits of civic engagement, and the system proposed here facilitates and promotes engagement. To construct this system, there would be limited costs that include institutions redesigning their existing class registration platforms to include a registration questionnaire. However, an automated registration system for students would likely lower registration costs for the state and would be consistent with the goal of maintaining a healthy, participatory democracy.

**Next Steps**

At the university level, coalitions of student groups and allies throughout Virginia should grow grassroots support for this policy by networking and lobbying their respective administrative bodies, including university administrators and student government. While much of the major reform will fall under the purview of the Virginia legislature, these coalitions should work with their institutions in the meantime to develop systems that make it easier for students to register to vote, within what is allowed by law. These institutions’ systems will provide test cases and examples to help sway legislators. At George Mason University (Mason), the author will lobby the Student Senate to pass a resolution of support for an automated voter registration system, and do the same with the Faculty Senate and president of the university. The endorsement of these groups will be instrumental in building support in the Virginia General Assembly, which must approve the policy. The author will speak to state legislators including Delegate David Bulova and Senator J. Chapman Petersen, who represent Mason in the Virginia legislature. Once approved by the General Assembly, educational institutions will reform their online class registration systems to include a voter registration option for students.

**End Notes**


3 Cynthia J. Bogard, Ian Sheinheit, and Renee P. Clarke. “Information They Can Trust: Increasing Youth Voter Turnout at the University.” PS: Political Science and Politics 41, no. 3 (July 2008): 544, JSTOR.

4 Fry 2016.

5 Bitecoffer and Kidd 2016.

6 Cynthia J. Bogard, Ian Sheinheit, and Renee P. Clarke, “Information They Can Trust: Increasing Youth Voter Turnout at the University,” 544.


8 Benjamin Highton. “Voter Registration and Turnout in the United States,” Perspectives on Politics 2, no. 3 (September 2004): 511, JSTOR.


12 Cynthia J. Bogard, Ian Sheinheit, and Renee P. Clarke. “Information They Can Trust: Increasing Youth Voter Turnout at the University,” 541.


14 State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.