Promoting Wholly Representative Primary Elections

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THESIS
To reduce voter disenfranchisement, ensure primaries represent the general electorate, and promote civic engagement, Michigan election law should be changed to allow 17-year-olds, who will be 18 by the date of the general election, to vote in the primary.

BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS
In a 2016 survey of experts, Michigan was ranked 41st in perceptions of electoral integrity. However, an overlooked issue is the process by which the state assigns primary voting rights. Current Michigan law restricts all voting to adults age 18 and older. While this is not an issue in general elections, it poses a problem for primaries. By restricting the vote, 17-year-olds who will be 18 by the time of the general election are unjustly excluded from the primary voting process.

In Michigan’s current political climate, this has the potential to be perceived as a partisan issue. In reality, this is a representation issue. Voting privileges would not be extended to any individual not already in the general electorate. As of now, 22 states have made changes to their constitutions, voting laws, or party structures to make their primaries wholly representative. Both red and blue states, from Mississippi to Vermont, have implemented this change to begin expanding voter turnout and increasing democratic access.

With current voting practices, 17-year-olds, who will be 18 by the time of the general election, are denied their right to participate in the choosing of candidates. Through stopping the cycle of voter disillusionment and giving a voice to young voters, Michigan will allow a larger portion of the population to participate in the democratic process.

TALKING POINTS
• Primaries work best when they are wholly representative of the general election population.
• Research shows that teens are ready to vote as early as age 16, making little to no difference in the readiness of 17-year-old electors.
• At the age of 17, soon-to-be voters should be awarded the same civic opportunity to choose candidates as the rest of general electorate.

KEY FACTS
• Primary voting at 17 has already been implemented and proven in 22 other states.
• Voting is habit based. Voters are 25 percent more likely to vote in a subsequent election if they voted in a previous election.
• A 2012 study shows that extending voting rights to new voters should increase overall voter participation. Those who are closest to the voting age are more likely to vote than those who are one or two years older.
• After voting rights were extended in Illinois, 17-year-old voters turned out at a higher rate than those ages 20-40.
POLICY IDEA

Michigan election law (MCL 168.492) that defines who may register to vote should be amended. Election law currently states, “[Each person] who will have those qualifications at the next election or primary election, is entitled to register as an elector.” An amendment should be made to only require the stated qualification at the next “general election.” This, in turn, fixes the issue by ensuring that the same population of electors has the ability to vote in both the primary and general elections.10

POLICY ANALYSIS

Other states have extended primary voting rights to 17-year-olds in a variety of ways, from amending state constitutions to changing political party rules.11 In Michigan, the best route for change is through amending Michigan election law. This relatively non-disruptive reform will change definitions, not alter the way in which we assign rights. Moreover, this solution is less institutionally demanding than amending the state constitution.

The number of individuals who will be extended voting rights will vary by election. The magnitude of change is dependent on the length between the primary and general. In the 2016 presidential election, the Michigan primary electorate would have included roughly 90,000 more individuals (estimated from two-thirds of those born in 1998).12 With troublingly low youth turnout rates—38 percent in 2006—it’s clear that efforts are needed to increase voter participation.13 Recent studies suggest that individuals who vote in previous elections are 25 percent more likely to vote in the subsequent elections.14 This change could, therefore, increase turnout for years to come by promoting engagement early in life, while also creating a more representative primary system.

We recognize that this policy will, most immediately, have a greater effect in communities with already higher turnout, where there is less concern of disenfranchisement. However, with evidence from Illinois showing that the change in law energizes 17-year-olds to turn out at higher rates, we hope, as time goes on, that this voting will help form habits that will translate to greater participation in all areas.15

NEXT STEPS

We, currently, have submitted a resolution to the University of Michigan Central Student Government. It has had its first read, and we are in the process of ensuring its passage. The support of both Republican and Democratic campus organizations has been essential, so far, in securing broad community support, and we hope to continue this throughout our advocacy process. Our most immediate next step is to begin reaching out to other campuses across the state to demonstrate large student support. Once this support is established, we plan to begin lobbying county commissions to formally support this initiative. Since this is not an issue with large recognition, we plan to use our chapter’s lobby day at the State Capital in March to bring awareness of the issue before the 2018 election, where voting rights are set to be a significant issue.
ENDNOTES

8. “State by State Map Presidential Primaries.” FairVote.