



Oral Testimony of
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Before the
State Government Committee
Pennsylvania House of Representatives

Legislative Hearing on H.B. 520,
"An Act Amending Title 25 (Elections) of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes"
March 14, 2008

- Ms. Chairman, members of the Committee: On behalf of my classmates and myself, I would like to thank you for providing us with this opportunity to come here today. My name is Julia Hazlet and I am a senior at Fox Chapel Area High School in Pittsburgh, PA. I am here to testify in support of House Bill No. 520.

Robert Kennedy once said, "It is a revolutionary world that we all live in, and ... it is the young people who must take the lead."¹

- The Pennsylvania Primary Election date has been the subject of heated discussion lately. Even though Pennsylvania is the 6th most populous state in the nation, historically Pennsylvanians have had little influence upon the selection of the final Presidential nominees². While we enthusiastically give our support to the need to increase Pennsylvania's impact upon the selection of nominees, we feel very strongly that the fluctuating date of the primary election should not be a source of disenfranchisement.
- A lot of confusion, especially in regards to voter registration, can arise from that fluctuation as well. When registering to vote for the first time, applicants are required to indicate that they will be 18 by or on the next election. The problem is how can you be sure? For example, my birthday is March 30 and the primaries for 2008 are set for April 22. Knowing this, I registered to vote and received my voter ID card. However, on the state's website there was a parenthetical notation next to the scheduled primary date, it was listed as: April 22 (considering February 12 or March 4).
- If the date did change, I would suddenly be unable to vote. Would my voter ID card be consequently invalid? To whom do I speak to answer my questions? Can I still vote because I previously qualified? Do I have to re-submit my application?

¹ Kennedy, Robert. "A Tiny Ripple of Hope." Day of Affirmation Address at Cape Town University. Cape Town University, South Africa. 6 June 1966. 10 Mar. 2008

<<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkcapetown.htm>>

Research Note: This text was revised 10/30/06 when a longer audio version was discovered. Thanks to Stephanie Nielsen for bringing the audio and transcription errors to my attention.

² G. Terry Madonna and Michael Young, "The Compelling Case for Moving the Pennsylvania Primaries," (Franklin and Marshall, PA: Center for Politics and Public Affairs), *Allentown Call*, March 26, 2000; <<http://politics.fandm.edu/papprimary.htm>>

- How disheartening it would be; you've gone through the registration process, the sudden delight you feel when your card FINALLY arrives, knowing that now you can vote, and then come election day, because of a flaw in the system you may be ultimately denied.
- My point is that unnecessary confusion could be eliminated by using the date of the general election to determine voter eligibility for the primary election.
- At least nine other states, including Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, & Virginia³ have passed similar legislation to HB 520. North Carolina allowed their 17-year-olds (who will be 18 by the general election) to vote shortly after the 26th Amendment was passed in 1971. When we called the Board of Elections Office for North Carolina, the gentleman with whom we spoke with was surprised that other states did not have this enacted. When asked, he informed us that they had never had any problems occur from allowing qualified 17-year-olds vote in the primary.
- We feel that it simply makes sense that if you are going to vote for the President, you should also be a part of the nomination process.
- Using the general election as the qualification date for both general and primary elections will simplify the voting process tremendously.
- Objections concerning the ability of 17-year-olds to cast an informed vote have arisen. It would be inequitable to take an unfavorable characteristic of the entire population and apply it to only one segment. Harris Interactive was sponsored by the American Bar Association to conduct a study of the civic knowledge of Americans ages 18 and older. The study found the following:⁴
 - The majority of Americans could use a civics refresher course.
 - Just over half (55%) of Americans can correctly identify the three branches of government.
 - ◆ More than one in five (22%) believe the three branches of government are the Republican, Democrat, and Independent branches.
 - ◆ A full 16% of respondents believe the three branches of government to be local, state, and federal.
 - Less than half (48%) of Americans can correctly identify the meaning of the concept of separation of powers.
 - ◆ However, almost two-thirds (63%) report being very or somewhat familiar with the separation of powers principle
 - Nearly three in ten (29%) reported they believe the judiciary advises the President and Congress about the legality of an action they intend to take in the future. (HarrisInteractive⁴)
- So what does this really mean? Reconsider now the question about the checks and balances concept. 82% felt that the concept was important even though more than half of them missed the question.
- What it comes down to is this: There are uninformed voters in every age group. There are eligible voters in every age group who have not registered. There are registered voters in every age group who have not voted. Fortunately, there are well-informed registered voters in every age group, including 18 to 24 year olds, my own age group, that want to or do vote.

³ Bysiewicz, Susan, and James F. Spallone. "Let 17-Year-Olds Vote in Primaries." The Hartford Courant 11 Apr. 2007. 10 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.sots.ct.gov/releases/2007/04-11-07OpEdCourant17OldVoters.pdf>>.

⁴ Harris Interactive, comp. Civics Education. July 2005. The American Bar Association. <http://www.abanet.org/media/docs/divisionofpowers_705.pdf>.

- Admittedly, the 18 to 24 year old segment did have the lowest voter turn out in 2004, but one also has to consider that 81% of those that were registered did vote.⁵
- Segueing into the next element of concern, a myth persists that “the youth don’t vote anyway, so this shouldn’t matter.”
- The U.S. Census Bureau stated the following increases in voter registration and voting rate for the 18-24 year old age group:

While young adults had the lowest voting and registration rates in 2004, they had the largest increase in both rates since the 2000 presidential election compared with all other age groups. The registration rate for 18- to 24-year-old citizens increased 7 percentage points and the voting rate increased 11 percentage points between the 2000 and 2004 elections.” (U.S. 2002-2003 Census Bureau)⁵

- By affixing the qualification to vote in the primary election to the date of the general election, HB 520 addresses an unconsidered disenfranchising consequence of a floating primary date. HB 520 is in harmony with the spirit expressed in the Pennsylvania Election Reform Task Force’s final report to Governor Rendell’s Executive Order 2004-11 of “assuring that the Commonwealth’s election system provides for the greatest level of participation and access...”⁶
- In summation, we feel that:
 - Date changes should not be a source of disenfranchisement.
 - It makes sense that if you are qualified to vote for president, you should also be qualified to elect your party’s nominee for that position.
 - There are many outside factors that contribute to the low turn out rates of 18-24 year-olds, one should not erroneously conclude that this is because we are uniformed and or apathetic.
 - A lot of confusion arises from a fluctuating primary date, including, but not limited to the voter registration process.
 - Having a single qualification date for both elections will simplify the voting process and eliminate some of that confusion.
- Sandra Meucci once said, rather than standing or speaking for our youth, we need to stand with youth speaking for themselves. Today I ask you to stand with us, with House Bill 520, and with all the youth that are finally awakening the passion to assume the leadership roles of this revolutionary world in which we live by participating today in legislative and political processes that influence and impact our daily lives.
- Ms. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you again for your time and attention and for affording me the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill No. 520.

⁵ "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004." U.S. Census Bureau. Mar. 2006. 9 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf>>

⁶ "Pennsylvania Election Reform Task Force Final Report on Executive Order 2004-11", Task (d) Voter Participation, May 12, 2005, 9 Mar 2008 <http://www.dos.state.pa.us/election_reform/lib/election_reform/PERTF_Final_Report_051705_Website.pdf>.