



FOX CHAPEL AREA  
SCHOOL DISTRICT  
COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

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Before the  
State Government Committee  
Pennsylvania House of Representatives

Legislative Hearing on House Bill 520,  
"An Act Amending Title 25 (Elections) of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes"  
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- Madam Chairmen, members of the Committee, I would like to thank you for providing us with the opportunity to speak here today on behalf of both our classmates and future voters everywhere. My name is Natalie Stewart, and I am also a senior at Fox Chapel High School
- February 5<sup>th</sup>. April 22<sup>nd</sup>. November 4<sup>th</sup>. Before this year, these seemingly random dates would have held no significance to a crowd of people. Yet as I say them aloud today, undoubtedly every member of this committee and of the audience has named Super Tuesday, the Pennsylvania Primary, and the 2008 election without even thinking. It is this spirit, this enthusiastic and ardent passion for politics that we can capture by working together to pass Bill 520 now.
- There are essentially two elements of our current political climate which have created the best possible time to pass this bill. The first, and arguably most important, is the sheer number of citizens engaged in the political process.
- This rising participation is, perhaps, most noticeable in the extremely high voter turnout across the nation. Though one may expect that increases are concentrated in the middle age bracket, candidates are receiving the biggest boost from 18-29 year olds or the youth bracket. For example, in 2004 the youth vote surged by 4.3 million votes (from 2000), which was more than double the increase of all voters (1). In this election, states such as Ohio and Texas experienced a nearly 84% increase in the number of under 30 voters from 2000 (2).
- Nowhere has this trend been more visible than in our state of Pennsylvania, where the overflowing registry was filled to the maximum with 185,185 new youth voters (3). Yet these numbers, while illustrating one aspect of political participation, sometimes overshadow other forms of activism, such as door to door canvassing, fundraising, and even blogging. The youth, more than ever, are involved in new forms of campaigning and networking which didn't even exist ten years ago; For example, last November my government class submitted video questions which could have been asked directly to candidates during the YouTube debate. These are the activities where thousands of teens excitedly wait in the ranks for their turn to vote.

- If we can take advantage of this surge in political involvement, and include the hoards of avid and eager potential voters, then Bill 520 will be able to extend rights to as many future voters as possible. However if we wait until interest has relaxed, and teens are no longer clamoring to assert their political opinion, then the Bill will not create the impact which we have hoped and strived for over the past couple of months.
- The second important political feature is the large upswing in voter awareness. According to data released in February by the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES), "public knowledge of the issues ... is increasing as the campaign proceeds." (4) The survey found for example that from January 18<sup>th</sup> to February 5 (after Super Tuesday), 38% more people knew that Senator Obama was against the authorization of the Iraq war from the start (4).
- Knowledge has further increased with the advent of internet campaigning, whether through sites like Facebook and YouTube or through live streaming of debates on CNN. In fact, of the 2/3 of 18-29 year olds who use social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace etc), 27% say that they have gotten information about candidates and the campaigns from them (5). And judging by the utter take over of Facebook in high school, it is safe to assume that seventeen year olds are also profiting from these caches of knowledge.
- When one combines the two elements of our political environment, both the abundance of active citizens and the rise in political knowledge, then the optimal conditions for Bill 520 are laying in front of us. We must capitalize on the wealth of both excitement and awareness, and use these features to advance this bill forward. If the goal of this committee is to foster and promote democracy, then I see no better way than promoting the swift passage of legislation which will not only increase the size of the voting pool but also will lift the political conscience of America.
- If I can speak without statistics, without percentages, and without proportions, today we have talked to you about why the issue of seventeen year olds voting should be passed as a bill, and why, as the saying goes, there is no time like the present to pass it. Whether because of the sensitive nature of the issue, the money involved in solving it, or its extreme urgency, voting rights for seventeen year olds should be granted through the speedy passage of Bill 520. Through all of my political activities this year, whether I was campaigning for Senator Obama or supporting my classmates political aspirations, I have never had the privilege of working so closely with such a group of motivated, passionate and dedicated individuals. I had the opportunity to vote in the primaries this past week, and if I could do anything to share that same pleasure with any one of my seventeen year old classmates, who I know are equally as knowledgeable and worthy of expressing their political

opinions, then I would do it in a heartbeat. Two weeks can not and should not prevent an American citizen from determining his or her future.

### Works Cited

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