



Mt. Lebanon High School

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Oral Testimony of:

Mr. Thomas Chidiac

Mr. John Oxenreiter

Mr. Eric Reidy

**Representing the student body of
Mt. Lebanon High School 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”**

**Testimony provided at Fox Chapel High School on Friday,
May 9, 2008.**

Tom Chidiac – House Bill 520 Testimony

“If liberty and equality,” as Aristotle reminds us, “are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost.” From our Founding Fathers to Jacksonian universal white male suffrage to the 19th amendment to the Civil Rights Act, the arc of American government has bent resolutely towards a simple, democratic ideal; The notion that our republican form of government is enriched when we have as many committed citizens as possible sharing in our freedoms and duties.

As a government and as a people, the United States has led the way in strengthening the beliefs and institutions of democratic action. Today I urge for the speedy adoption of House Bill 520 so that this righteous trend surges forward in Pennsylvania. Already nine other states allow 17 year olds to vote in primaries, provided they’re 18 by the time of the general election. These include states like Indiana, Maine, North Carolina, Ohio and Virginia.

I view these states as having two essential commonalities. First and foremost, none of the aforementioned has experienced anything but highly positive results. Many 17 year olds today study electoral issues to a depth far beyond classroom learning, as has been thoroughly discussed in these hearings. HB520 will only help to strengthen our democratic process through the infusion of young energy and patriotic spirit, as the nine states who have instituted a similar policy have already demonstrated. The second commonality of those states is simple: There is no reason to believe that the benefits touted in places like North Carolina and Ohio wouldn’t be at least as strong in Pennsylvania. The sense of civic duty and democratic action is powerful among the Commonwealth’s young, as is evidenced by the outpouring of teen support for HB520 from Pittsburgh to the Poconos and everywhere in between.

According to Thomas J. Weaver, a deputy secretary in Governor Rendell’s administration, lowering the primary voting age to include 17-year-olds would make about 120,000 young people in the Commonwealth eligible to vote. Taken as a proportion of actual ballots cast on April 22nd, this constitutes a mere 4% of Pennsylvania’s would-be electorate. But when you consider the unquantifiable benefits of increasing democratic participation and the awareness that is in turn raised, there is no substitute for HB520. Only by ensuring that our simple, democratic ideal continues to advance can we hope to make the 21st Century yet another American Century.

Testimony of John Oxenreiter

Regarding H.B. 520

I'd like to begin by thanking you all for the opportunity to be here, and speak in favor of what I believe is a fine piece of legislation that would do a great deal to further our democracy.

I turned 18 on January 22 of this year. I was eighteen on April 22nd when I cast my primary ballot, and I will be 18 on November 7th, when I cast my vote in the national election. I was fortunate enough to be born in time to vote in both elections. But those whose birthdays fall in the six months between April and November, despite being able to vote for their presidential candidate, have no say in who their presidential choices will be. This seems strange; choosing a president, after all, is a far greater responsibility than choosing a presidential candidate. If these young men and women are recognized as having the maturity and the intelligence - not to mention the right under our Constitution - to vote in November, should they not hold the right to determine who they can vote for? According to the Erie Times-News, House Bill 520 would affect nearly 60,000 Pennsylvanians - 60,000 Pennsylvanians who will gain a crucial lesson in applied democracy, as well as a lasting appreciation for their power as citizens to affect change. From the very start of their political life, they will have received the responsibility and the power that they, as citizens, will hold for the rest of their lives. Finally, this idea has been successful across the country. Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio and Virginia have already enacted similar laws, according to the Philadelphia Enquirer, and the results have been positive. For these reasons, I would urge you all to support House Bill 520, and support a more democratic elections process.

House Bill 520 Statement

Eric Reidy

I believe that it is through the continuous questioning and vigorous stewardship of the democratic process that this country has been able to survive. I see this hearing as an installment in that legacy and I'm here to give my best informed opinion on the issue at hand. I believe a proper place to start is with the Constitutionality of this issue. The Twenty Sixth amendment states that "the right of Citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied." This statement sets an age at which voting rights are guaranteed saying that citizens who are over eighteen cannot be denied the right to vote. It does not, however, set a minimum age requirement for voter eligibility. The fact that eleven other states, including Ohio and West Virginia, have passed a similar bill to House Bill 520, and they have withstood court challenges, demonstrates that it is indeed constitutional for seventeen year olds to vote in a primary election provided that they will be eighteen by the general election.

The question then becomes what are the positive and negative effects of House Bill 520. The bill certainly has its critics in Pennsylvania and the concept has its critics around the nation. In Pennsylvania there has been concern expressed that the Bill will be more beneficial to one party than the other. The research that I have done on this issue has shown that this is a bipartisan effort by the youth of Pennsylvania to bring about change that we see as universally advantageous. Furthermore, voting rights are a keystone of our democracy and should transcend party politics.

Another issue that I saw raised in my research by North Dakota Secretary of State Al Jaeger is the question of where the line should be drawn. If seventeen year olds can vote in primaries than why can't sixteen year olds, fifteen year olds and so on? There is legitimate basis to this question that is brought to light by efforts in California in 2004 to rewrite voting laws so that fourteen and fifteen year olds could vote as one quarter of a person and sixteen and seventeen year olds could vote as half a person. I see the California proposal to be flawed in many ways and certainly would not advocate for a system along those lines.

The reason I feel house Bill 520 does not pose the danger of letting the bottom drop out on Pennsylvania voting age is because I believe it is addressing the question of enfranchisement. It is unfair and undemocratic for citizens voting in a general election to not be able to vote in a primary. This bill only provides for seventeen year olds to vote in a very specific instance, fixing the problem at hand, but not leaving the age issue open ended. The democratic primary in Pennsylvania this year serves as an example of why seventeen year olds should be allowed to vote in primaries provided that they will be eighteen by the general election. I do not pick this as my example because of a party or candidate preference. I am using the democratic primary simply to help prove a point.

The democratic presidential primary is incredibly close. Regardless of who the nominee is, nearly half of democrats in the country will not have their preferred candidate on the ballot come November and the opinions of Pennsylvania citizens who were seventeen for the primary, but will be eighteen for the general, will not have had any bearing on who the Democratic nominee will be. This is a disincentive for people just turning eighteen to vote because it creates a sense of exclusion from the full democratic process. By denying voters who will be voting in the general election the right to vote in a primary you are denying them the right to play a role in selecting their party's candidate for the general election. In Pennsylvania it is estimated that between 100,000 and 120,000 citizens who are potential voters in November were not able to

vote in the primary. House Bill 520 will allow, in the future, citizens of Pennsylvania to participate fully in the democratic process.

In order for this to be a worthwhile bill it has to be applicable beyond just this election cycle, and I believe the argument I made above applies in presidential and non presidential elections. I have to admit that my main motivation for registering to vote was to vote in the presidential primary. However, I know that it is part of my civic duty to vote not just for a president, but for state and local officials as well. It was because I was drawn to the ballot by the presidential race that I took the time to inform myself about the other votes I cast on the same day. The act of voting for the first time is truly a powerful experience, and it showed me the importance of voting in all future elections.

I believe that many of the students at my school had similar experiences, but unfortunately many who will be eligible in November were not able to engage in the process because they are seventeen now. We have a crisis of engagement in our country and in Pennsylvania when it comes to the youth and politics. Between 1972 and 2000 the youth voting rate nationwide declined by sixteen percent. In the past several election cycles it has been on the rise, but we need to help foster this trend by engaging as many people as possible in the democratic process. We need to encourage a sense of stewardship of and engagement in our democracy in the next generation, my generation, of Americans and I believe that House Bill 520 is an important step in that process. Please join Governor Rendell, my Pennsylvania House Representative, Matt Smith, and the numerous others in supporting House Bill 520.