



DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

PART FIVE HOT ELECTION ISSUES

HOT ELECTION ISSUES

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT TO ALLOW 17-YEAR-OLDS TO VOTE IN PRIMARIES

This year, Vermont voters will be asked to say yea or nay to amending Section 42 of the state's constitution regarding Voter's Qualifications. The measure would allow 17-year-olds to vote in the primary election provided they turn 18 before the general election:

Every person who will attain the full age of eighteen years by the date of the general election who is a citizen of the United States, having resided in this State for the period established by the General Assembly and who is of a quiet and peaceable behavior, and will take the oath or affirmation set forth in this section, shall be entitled to vote in the primary election.

The Office of the Secretary of State oversees elections so one of the current candidates will be responsible for implementing the new amendment if it is approved. Ballotpedia, a nonpartisan website that discusses ballot issues across the country outlines the position that each of the two major party candidates for Secretary of State hold on the proposed amendment.

Support: Democrat Jim Condos said he supports the proposed measure. In response to concerns that the proposed measure may require some revision, Condos said the legislature can make the procedural changes. The proposal, said Condos, will help encourage youth to participate in the voting process. "The foundation of our democracy begins with our voting. This is about helping to educate our youth, and getting them involved at an early age," he said.

Opposition: Republican Jason Gibbs is opposed to the proposed measure and said the measure should return to the legislature for further revision. "I frankly don't think it's significant enough to justify amending our state's most important governing document," said Gibbs. Additionally, Gibbs argues that

the legislature has not effectively explained or educated voters about the proposed measure. "Voters have a right to know what will be presented to them on the General Election ballot, and to have time to consider and discuss the ramifications of amending our state's most influential guiding document," he said.

What do you think?

WILLISTON STUDENT INITIATES AMENDMENT

From Burlington Free Press article by Tim Johnson, Sunday, October 10, 2010

Sometimes the opinions of high school students matter more than one might think, even though they can't vote. A local high school student, after all, helped spark the initiative to get the item placed on the ballot in the first place. She was inspired to do so by a high school class, no less.

That student was Ellie Beckett of Williston, who was a junior at Champlain Valley Union High School back in 2008, when the presidential primaries were unfolding. In her Advanced Placement class on U.S. government and politics, she recalled in an e-mail, "We were discussing how about 11 other states allowed 17-year-olds to vote in primaries if they would be 18 in the general elections. We talked about how Vermont should adopt this policy."

At the same time, Beckett said, she was participating in a Girl Scout program called Girls Rock the Capitol, in which teenage girls are paired with female legislator mentors for 10 days during the legislative session. One of those mentors was Sen. Jeanette White, chairwoman of the Committee on Government Operations. "When we had some free time," Beckett wrote, "I went with a couple other interns to talk to her and the committee about the discussion that came from my AP Government class and ask how we could make it happen in Vermont. The committee was immediately very receptive to the idea and set in motion the process to make it happen ..."

White confirmed that account and also credited Katie Levasseur, a University of Vermont student who "worked really hard on it, did an internship with me and lobbied many

House members." Ellie Beckett is now following the issue from southern California, where she is a sophomore at Claremont McKenna College majoring in government.

What would you do?

WHAT DO OTHERS THINK?

Many town clerks in Vermont have expressed concern about the amendment's ramifications, and a straw poll at the annual meeting of the Vermont Municipal Clerks' and Treasurers' Association found members generally "not in favor," said president Alison Kaiser. There's doubt whether a 17-year-old can legally take a voter's oath, she said, and some clerks question the notion of "different rules for different voters for different elections."

"It's not that we're opposed to it," said John Cushing, town clerk in Milton and vice president of the association. "The more people get to vote, the better it is." But he said the amendment needs more study and discussion so that the effects can be clarified — such as, whether separate ballots would be necessary for 17-year-olds voting in a presidential primary held on Town Meeting Day.

Senator White pointed out, however, that "Many town clerks do support it." Among them is Deb Beckett of Williston — Ellie's mom. Deb Beckett is on leave — on active duty with the Army National Guard in Fort Hood, Texas, preparing for deployment to Iraq — but she sent some comments via e-mail.

"My initial reaction to this proposed amendment was no way because the voting age is 18, not 17," she wrote. "But after listening to the reasons behind this proposal as explained by Ellie and other classmates from the AP Government class at CVU — it had merit." She added: "As a town clerk in a town with approximately 7,500 voters, I do not feel as though the very limited number of potential 17 year olds in this window would really have much of an impact on our operations on Election Day. It is always encouraging to see our 18-20 year olds actu-



ally vote. By allowing those few the opportunity to take part in the primary it will result in more 18-20 year olds voting in the General Election and I do think this will be one more opportunity to instill in our youth the importance of the voting process and the concept that their voice matters."

Most of the students queried at Burlington High School agreed. "I think it's a really good idea," said sophomore Mikala Burrows, 15, of the amendment. "I believe young people should have a say." "It gives people a bigger opportunity to be able to participate," said junior Melanie St. Andrew, 16. "We need youth to vote to make decisions," said first-year student Joshua Martin, 14. "Doug Racine lost by about a hundred votes. If 17-year-olds could vote, he might still be in."

Several students supported the amendment provided that schools step up civics education. "I think if it were to happen, there should be a little more focus on current issues" in class, said Rocko Gieselmann, 17, a senior. "Some kids don't get out enough to focus on current issues," said Catherine Cane, 17, a senior, "so their opinion might not be so well formed — they might vote according to what their friends or parents say."

That was the objection Andy Springer, 16, had to the amendment. He was the only student who expressed flat-out opposition. "I don't think it's a good idea," he said before getting on the North Avenue bus after school, "because they won't know what they're doing. They'll just vote like their parents."

How would you vote?

ELECTION REFORM & THE HELP AMERICA VOTE ACT OF 2002

The vigor of American democracy rests on the vote of each citizen. Only when citizens can freely and privately exercise their right to vote and have their vote recorded correctly can they hold their leaders accountable. Democracy is endangered when people believe that their votes do not matter or are not counted correctly." Carter-Baker Commission Report 2005.

There has been much progress since the election of 2000 when many Americans recognized for the first time that there were serious problems in our electoral systems. Congress passed the Help America Vote Act in November, 2002 (HAVA) in response to widespread calls for changes in the law to guarantee that every vote was counted, that no one was allowed to vote more than once, that voters wouldn't be improperly turned away from the polls and that all votes would be cast on reliable voting equipment. HAVA is the first comprehensive federal law in our nation's history governing how we run our elections. Congress also provided money to help states in meeting the requirements of the new law.

AMONG ITS MANY PROVISIONS, HAVA REQUIRES:

1. REPLACE UNRELIABLE VOTING EQUIPMENT. States with outdated voting equipment (punch cards and lever machines) were given money to buy new voting equipment.

2. STATEWIDE VOTER CHECKLIST. The law requires states to create a single database with information about every voter to prevent people from registering and voting in more than one town.

3. ACCESS FOR VOTERS WITH DISABILITIES. Every polling place must have some technology available to permit voters with disabilities to vote privately and independently.

4. TRAINING FOR ELECTION WORKERS AND VOTER EDUCATION. States were encouraged to improve their efforts at recruiting and training the people who work at the polls on Election Day, and to provide more extensive voter education to ensure that everyone who is eligible to vote knows what they have to do to vote in their state.

5. PROOF OF IDENTITY. First time voters who registered by mail through motor voter must show proof of identity before their vote can be counted.

6. SECOND CHANCE VOTING. Voters must be given a chance to check for and correct errors before casting their ballots.

7. PROVISIONAL BALLOTS. Citizens who are not on the checklist must be given an opportunity to cast a provisional ballot to ensure that no voter is turned away at the polls.

8. DRIVERS LICENSE REQUIREMENT FOR REGISTRATION. Individuals must include their driver's license number or the last four digits of their social security number on their voter registration form.

9. CREATION OF A FEDERAL AGENCY TO OVERSEE ELECTION REFORM EFFORTS. The U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) was created to give out federal funds, develop guidelines for voting systems, and to study and report on how to improve our elections.

In Vermont, most voters will not notice many changes as a result of HAVA. We vote using a paper and pen, so there is no outdated voting equipment to replace. However Election reform has made a difference in Vermont. For the first time, voters with disabilities will be able to vote privately and independently using the Vote-by-Phone (at the polls) system and Vermont's town and city clerks can use the statewide voter checklist to better manage the voter rolls. Programs to educate voters and election workers will help ensure that the elections run smoothly.

Vermont received nearly 17 million dollars to implement the Help America Vote Act.

TEST YOUR ELECTION IQ

1. What is the name of the new voting system for voters who have trouble marking a regular ballot?

- A.) McVote
- B.) Vote-by-phone at the polls
- C.) Hands-free voting
- D.) I-vote

2. True or False: Campaign finance reports protect the privacy of people who donate over \$100 to a candidate's campaign.

3. By what date must an eligible voter register to vote in order to vote in the general election?

4. True or False: Vermont voters currently must show a valid photo ID when entering the polling place to be allowed to vote.

5. What does the term "contribution limit" refer to?

- A.) The amount of money a donor is allowed to give to a campaign.
- B.) The deadline by which a candidate must receive campaign donations.
- C.) The amount of money allowed in most bank checking accounts.

1) B 2) False 3) The Wednesday before the election. 4) False 5) A

MUMBLE, GRUMBLE, COMPLAIN, WALLOW, HOPE, DESPAIR, WORRY...

VOTE!

Just a reminder: The last one changes things a lot faster.