

“Social justice should be the underlying goal of all humanity.”

-Alan V. Lowenstein, Institute Founder



Testimony of Micauri Vargas
New Jersey Institute for Social Justice
In Support of A3690

New Jersey State Assembly State and Local Government Committee
Thursday, May 11, 2023

Chairman Verrelli, Vice-Chair Swain and members of the Assembly State and Local Government Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

My name is Micauri Vargas, and I am an Associate Counsel in the Democracy & Justice Program at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (the “Institute”). The Institute uses cutting-edge racial and social justice legal advocacy to empower people of color by building reparative systems that create wealth, transform justice and harness democratic power—from the ground up—in New Jersey.

The Institute submits this testimony in support of A3690 – the “New Voter Empowerment Act” – which will allow 17-year-olds to vote in primary elections if they would be 18 by the general election. The Institute has previously supported this policy, and we continue to support it now.

In New Jersey, a significant number of people who can already register to vote when they are 17-years-old¹ and have the right to vote in the general election in November currently do not have a voice in determining who will be on that general election ballot.² As 17-year-olds get to choose candidates in the general,³ it is only fair to allow these 17-year-olds to participate in determining who those candidates will be.⁴

Allowing 17-year-olds to participate in primaries strengthens democracy as they begin building a habit of voting younger. The younger a voter is when they cast a ballot for the first time, the more likely it is for them to continue to do so.⁵ As with any habit, civic engagement takes time to develop.⁶

Also, learning the voting process is likely easier in the spring, in high school, rather than in the fall, when people are adjusting to new jobs or colleges,⁷ and possibly living in a new city or state. Young voters face enough burdens and barriers to the ballot, like arbitrary voter registration deadlines or residency restrictions,⁸ so if there is a possibility that this will increase youth voter turnout, which is historically low, New Jersey should do everything possible to encourage participation.

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do social justice.

There will not be much difference between the decisions these new voters would make at the primary and those they make in a few months when they decide which party to support at the general election.⁹ Those who plan on voting are ready to do so — this will not change just because they turn eighteen.¹⁰

Since the 1980s, 18 states and Washington DC have passed laws allowing 17-year-olds to cast a ballot in the primary who are 18 by the general election.¹¹ Seventeen-year-olds already have the right to preregister to vote.¹² Allowing them to participate in the primaries is the next logical step in strengthening political participation in New Jersey.

We urge you to vote A3690 out of committee today. And then, let's work together to tear down another barrier to voter participation by passing same-day voter registration.

Together, we can make New Jersey's democracy the strongest in the country.

Thank you.

¹ *Preregistration for Young Voters*, NCSL (Jan. 20, 2023), <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/preregistration-for-young-voters>.

² Mike Davis, *Should 17-year-olds vote in primary elections?*, APP. (Jun. 4, 2016, 12:52 PM), <https://www.app.com/story/news/politics/2016/06/03/new-jersey-primary-elections/85294230/>.

³ Phil Gregory, *New Jersey considers letting some 17-year-olds vote in primary elections*, WHY.Y.ORG, (Apr. 6, 2018), <https://why.org/articles/new-jersey-considers-letting-some-17-year-olds-vote-in-primary-elections/>.

⁴ *17-year-old Primary Voting*, FAIR VOTE, <https://archive3.fairvote.org/reforms/universal-voter-registration/17-year-old-primary-voting-2/> (last visited May 10, 2023).

⁵ See Emma Taila, *Commentary: Why 17-year-olds should be able to vote*, THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/opinion/story/2019-09-11/commentary-why-17-year-olds-should-be-able-to-vote>.

⁶ See *id.*

⁷ See Yevgeniy P. Pislar & Rachel Puleo, *Proposition 18: Primary Voting for 17-year-olds Amendment Allows 17-year-olds to Vote in Primary Elections*, CALIFORNIA INITIATIVE REVIEW (CIR): Vol. 2020, Article 6, <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1096&context=california-initiative-review> (citing Alfred Twu, *Why I'm Voting Yes on Proposition 18*, MEDIUM (Aug. 3, 2020), <https://medium.com/@firstcultural/why-im-voting-yes-on-proposition-18-eeca072f7b7b>).

⁸ See generally Yael Bromberg, *Youth Voting Rights and the Unfulfilled Promise of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment*, 21 U. Pa. J. Const. L. 1105 (2019).

⁹ See Taila, *supra* note 5.

¹⁰ See *id.*

¹¹ *Voting Age for Primary Elections*, NCSL (Jan. 20, 2023), <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/voting-age-for-primary-elections>.

¹² *Preregistration for Young Voters*, *supra* note 1.