



Hon. Evan Shanley
Chair
House State Government and Elections Committee
March 26, 2024

Re: Support of H 8046 – An Act Relating to Elections – General Provisions

Dear Chairman Shanley,

The Young Democrats of Rhode Island (YDRI) is a collective of Rhode Island who are under the age of 35, tasked with advocating on behalf of the next generation voters.

YDRI urges the passage of H 8046, which would enable municipalities to allow individuals who are older than 16 years old to be able to vote in their school committee elections. The YDRI board, and our membership, thanks Representative Felix for sponsoring this landmark legislation.

This legislation would allow for students who are older than 16 years old the opportunity and the right to hold their school committee members accountable to the policies they enact, which directly affect their daily lives. In an environment where groups are organizing to ban books, control an individual's body, and work to reduce funding for after school programs, the student body should have a direct voice.

While nationally and locally, voting participation remains low, enacting this legislation would allow for students to develop the habit of voting early in their lives. Having the ability to vote in elections, while in school can allow for students to participate in active decisions to grow their political interest.

Rhode Island, the country, and especially our local communities are better off when a larger percentage of our electorate is informed and engaged.

Thank you for consideration, and the Young Democrats of Rhode Island urge passage of H 8046.

In Solidarity,
Mary-Murphy Walsh
President of YDRI



FAQ on enabling municipalities to allow 16-17 year old with the ability to vote in their school committee elections

Civic Engagement

- There is a disconnect between turning 18 and voting for the first time
 - 43% of high school graduates attend a 4-year college; 20% attend a 2-year college.
 - 18 year olds often leave their home community and must vote absentee
- Unfortunately, 18-29 year olds have the lowest voter turnout
 - In the 2022 election, only 27% of 18-29 year olds cast a ballot while overall turnout was over 45%.
- This legislation would inspire young people to become engaged, lifelong voters
 - Permitting a limited, well-tailored voting opportunity for 16 and 17 year olds while they are still immersed in a school environment with lifelong peers, civics teachers, and mentors ensure students have a well-informed first voting experience.
 - A body of empirical research shows that lowering the voting age to 16 improves voter turnout and civic engagement for life.
 - In Takoma Park, MD, for example, 16 and 17 year olds had a 69% turnout rate in the 2020 election while the city had a 54% overall turnout rate.
 - Social science research demonstrates that voting is a habit-forming activity.
 - Finally, this legislation simply enables cities and towns to decide for themselves if expanding the franchise in school committee elections makes sense in context. Young people could engage in dialogue with their local leaders throughout the state to discuss.

Improving Quality of School Committee Decisions

- In a time where issues before school committees have become fodder for culture war debates, the concrete needs of kids are more likely to be neglected.
- This legislation would ensure that the relationship between school committees are the population it serves is not vicarious, but direct.
 - Students will help ensure the conversation stays on the concrete pedagogical and extracurricular needs of students.
 - Finally, students are directly invested in school quality and bring a critical perspective to all education policy decisions through their classroom experiences.

Several Jurisdictions Permit 16 / 17 Year Olds to Vote

- Maryland enables some cities and towns to amend charters to permit 16/17 year olds to vote in municipal elections. At least five cities have taken advantage of this provision.
- Oakland, CA permits 16 and 17 year olds to vote in school board elections.
- Boston City Council in 2023 voted to permit 16/17 year olds to vote in municipal elections and now await a preemption waiver.



Things you can legally do at the age of 16 (aka “the age of freedom”):

- Obtain your Driver’s License
- Legally work in Rhode Island, thus paying State Income
- Medical age of consent
- Open a bank account
- Give blood to save a life
- File for Emancipation