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Op Ed: Let 17-Year-Olds Vote In Primaries

By: Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz and State Representative James F. Spallone
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This year Connecticut has an exciting opportunity to enfranchise thousands of 17-year-olds and lower the voting age in the state for the first time since 1971.

We're asking all members of Connecticut's General Assembly to support House Joint Resolution No.11 which provides that 17-year-olds who are pre-registered to vote and would turn 18 on or before the general election in November would be eligible to vote in primaries concerning the fall election.

This amendment would encourage young people to register and vote, foster discussion about politics and policy among teenagers and their families, and fix an inequity that exists when it comes to 17-year-olds enlisted in the armed services.

In 1965, you had to be 21 years old to vote. Congress lowered the age to 18 in 1971 because of the Vietnam War: Lawmakers thought it was unfair that someone could serve our nation in combat but not have the right to vote in elections that ultimately determine the nation's fate. Today, as our country is engaged in another war, we believe it's time to once again lower the voting age.

Currently there are 17-year-old Connecticut residents who, through the early entry program, have enlisted in the armed services and are helping to fight a war in our name. Clearly they deserve every right of citizenship that an 18-year-old enjoys.

If this measure becomes law, we would enfranchise as many as 10,000 young men and women across Connecticut. Some of them aren't waiting for their voices to be heard. Teens from Middletown, Essex, Haddam, Deep River, Chester, Stonington, West Hartford, Killingworth and West Haven recently joined us for a news conference at the Capitol to fight for this proposal. Thanks to their efforts the resolution made it out of its legislative committee, something it failed to do in the last two legislative sessions.

Some may wonder if federal law allows Connecticut to lower its voting age and are surprised to learn that the United States Constitution does not deny 17-year-olds the right to vote. The 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution says that the right of citizens who are 18 or older to vote shall not be denied by the United States or by any state on account of age. Taking into account that the Constitution does not bar states from lowering the voting age, some states have done so. Recently, nine states passed measures that allow 17-year-olds to vote in primaries if they will turn 18 by the general election. The states are Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio and Virginia.

There are many reasons for Connecticut to follow suit. Lowering the voting age to 17 for primaries would increase voter participation among young people and help create life-long voters. It is common knowledge that the earlier in life someone learns a habit, the more likely it is to persist throughout life. Voting is no different.

In addition, if voter turnout among youths is increased, candidates and elected officials would be more likely to pay attention to issues affecting young people - this includes funding for higher education, government censorship of the media, and regulation of the credit card industry. Current events make it clear that the stakes of today's elections are high for our youths, from global warming to war and peace.

Skeptics may argue the proposal would benefit Democrats, as younger voters tend to vote Democratic. Of course, in Connecticut the majority of registered voters are unaffiliated, and how people might vote

should not be part of a litmus test as to whether they deserve the right to vote.

In 1965, and then again in 1971, lawmakers changed the law to enfranchise more people and make our democratic form of government more inclusive. After 36 years, we would argue it's time to tweak it again.

Robert Kennedy said in a speech to college students in South Africa over four decades ago: "It is a revolutionary world we live in, and ... it is young people who must take the lead." Those words ring true today.

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