

TO: Joint Committee on Election Laws of the Massachusetts State Legislature

FROM: Dr. Michael S. Cummings, Professor Emeritus of Political Science, CU Denver

RE: Bills H.670 and S.412

DATE: June 19, 2023

The disenfranchisement of minors violates the equal-protection clause of the U.S. Constitution. The basic rationale for democratic government is the right of the people over whom policies are made to hold the policy makers accountable. Democratic voting is therefore an automatic right, not an earned privilege based on political wisdom or virtue. Yet while adults are automatically enfranchised without having to pass any test of political wisdom or virtue, even the wisest and most virtuous minors are implicitly flunked on such a test without even being allowed to take it. As a result, in the U.S. alone, millions of minors who are politically savvier than millions of adults are prevented from voting, while their politically inferior elders get an automatic pass.

Ironically, it is young people—children, tweens, teens, and young adults—who are currently leading the world in working with older allies to combat climate change, promote gun safety, fight racism, oppose discrimination against LGBTQ persons and people with disabilities, and protect democracy from the onslaught of authoritarianism around the world. With a voice that counts, they will be even more effective.

Massachusetts can become the pioneering state in eliminating age discrimination in politics by enacting H.670 and S.412 into law. As part of the study, I recommend my 2020 book *Children's Voices in Politics* (Peter Lang), called by reviewers a “monumental” work “that speaks with a passion and wisdom rare in our moment” and a book that “will become the standard reference text on children’s rights, politics, and activism.”

Children’s enfranchisement will address the chronic problem of “apathy” among the voting public--which is really people’s feelings of disempowerment. The germ of this disease comes from the official disempowerment of people during the most formative 18 years of their lives. Silence is not golden; it is toxic. The political-disengagement malady is not suddenly cured when we turn 18, magically converting us into participatory democrats. Rather, it metastasizes to alienate and silence most adults, who continue to feel that their voice doesn’t count. The 95% leave the 5% who are officials, activists, or lobbyists to do politics for them, leading the great majority to cross their fingers, hold their breath, and say a prayer that the elites will treat them well.

Giving children a political voice that counts, engaging them in creating and participating in an empowered democratic community, is the right thing to do. It is also the curative, healthy thing to do. Thank you for considering my request that you report these bills favorably!