

CHILDREN'S VOTING COLLOQUIUM

Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on Election Laws
In Support of [S.412](#) / [H.670](#) An Act enabling children's right to vote
By Robin Chen, Mother and Co-founder of the Children's Voting Colloquium
June 21, 2023

Chair Keenan, Chair Ryan, and members of the Joint Committee on Election Laws, I'm Robin Chen, a citizen of Massachusetts mothering three kids under age 12, and I support **S.412 / H.670 An Act enabling children's right to vote**, which I filed by request with help from Senator DiDomenico, Martina Matta, Representative Connolly, and Chris Addis.

Some people say that incremental change to voting age is all that's possible. They take this to mean lowering the voting age a bit at a time so the public can get used to the idea. Instead, I see incremental change as building support for designing for universal suffrage. In a way similar to how we accommodate the needs of voters with disabilities, this proposal seeks to accommodate the needs of children of all ages. I'd rather look towards the horizon and iterate on the plan to get there. It's my sincere belief that advocating for *all* children's suffrage sends *my children and their fellow citizens (even the adults)* the message, 'we love and value you and your contributions to our society, and we can help each other better when we cooperate and communicate.' To me, incremental change means that I'll be seeing you again each biennium, with the next iteration of child suffrage bills. Next time, with co-sponsors, with more testimony, with more attention, with more focused energy to get a proposal through the legislative process.

I filed this bill, and I've filed similar bills in prior sessions: in the 191st, An Act lowering the voting age for state and local elections with guardian consent; in the 192nd, An Act to create a commission examining child disenfranchisement and recommending alternatives, and An Act to remove the voting age requirement, to remove that counterproductive barrier.

This session, the bill explicitly enables a child to receive assistance in casting their ballot in person at a polling place only, where they can learn by doing, from a family member they're happy with; or, if they understand the nature and consequences of voting and want to do so privately and independently in a voting booth, they can, consistent with the MA Voters' Bill of Rights.

What's in this bill? Eligibility to register at 18 days. A voter challenge program in

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institutions that serve the expanded age group, to parallel the high school voter challenge program. Observing that minors frequently volunteer information about their address in news publications and when giving public comment, this bill offers under-17-year-olds the *option* to have their name listed on the public voter file. Dr. Silbaugh at BU reminds me that campaign speech can be dangerously unrestricted, so we'll need to be vigilant about helping minors make sense of what they hear - as we need to do already for the vulnerable among us.

Since my husband first opened my mind to the notion that children could be voters, my instinct has been that this is compelling and important to study. To help myself learn deeply about this, I've reached out to the many people who've thought and written about it and acted on their conscience, assembling them into an open international association where it's normal to believe that children have a legitimate claim on the right to vote and that this will improve societies. Because we host discussions, we're called the Children's Voting Colloquium. You can visit our website of video recordings and other resources at www.childrevoting.org.

I'm a suffragist because: I remember being a child and because I believe that it's my duty as a legal guardian to advance my children's interests and ensure they practice responsible citizenship.

Three points:

1. Children have a sense of what's working well and what isn't, and can give feedback. They're likely to raise *new* issues that we hadn't perceived.
2. Voter participation creates healthy communication between Citizen and State as well as between fellow citizens. Northwestern University Law Professor Robert Bennett observed that democracy generates conversations, and I find that to be true.
3. Voter status signals – and results in – respectful treatment and dignity. Gatherings take on heartwarming qualities when under-18s are present and involved.

Political equality across all ages of the lifespan is consistent with the democratic principle. Did you know that US government agencies use the same amount for all ages when they determine the Statistical Value of Human Life for considering safety regulations?¹ Similarly, thanks to the efforts of previous generations of suffragists

¹ [How Government Agencies Determine The Dollar Value Of Human Life](https://www.npr.org/2020/04/20/844444444) npr.org April 2020

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against barriers of property, sex, and so forth, we accept “one person, one vote,” despite wide variations between voters on qualities of wealth, education, and much else. This balances interests and responds to urgent needs for cooperation in these trying times.

I urge the Joint Committee on Election Laws to report **S.412 / H.670 An Act enabling children's right to vote** favorably and in a timely manner. Thank you for your consideration.