

Issue: Vote

Presenters): Rosa Rice-Pelepko, AS Legislative Liaison

Considerations for presenters:

- Describe the issue: What is the problem? What is the solution?
- How does it directly impact and improve students' lives?
- Please provide background information and the current context of the issue.
- Does it have a clear target? If yes, who?
  - o (e.g. a specific legislator, committee, or other agency)
- How will it strengthen and expand efforts within Western?
- How could students build a diverse campus coalition around this issue?
- In what way does it have a local/state/federal organizing and lobbying angle?
- What creative and/or innovative tactics could we employ to engage the media and excite new students around this issue?

The current processes surrounding elections in Washington State, including voter registration and ballot submission, are inaccessible, especially to people that have been historically disenfranchised. Students and young people have often been provided with the least access to these processes, largely leaving the student voice out of democratic decisions. Voter turnout is low at both the state and federal levels and the lack of access to the voting process is largely to blame. These issues directly impact and improve students' lives by increasing the ability for their voices to be heard and represented in our government and reducing the costs associated with the process of voting. Since these costs disproportionately affect people with a lower income, like most students and people with marginalized identities, they decrease voter registration and turnout and therefore the representation of these groups. Making voter registration and ballot submission more open and accessible would provide more opportunity for students' voices to be heard and represented. WWU already has a powerful voter registration drive, these pieces of legislation could help us to do an even better job reaching out to students that we are not currently getting to. In addition to this, the increase in numbers of voters registered directly correlates to the amount of power that we have with legislators in Olympia. The following bills will increase access to voting for students and the population of Washington State.

### **Motor Voter**

This legislation would allow people to pre-register to vote at the department of licensing when they are 16 and 17 years old. Once the person turns 18 they would automatically be registered to vote and would start

receiving ballots in the next election. California and Oregon have both implemented these systems in the few last years.

### **Automatic Voter Registration**

This legislation would ensure that in departments that require proof of citizenship would also automatically register people to vote. Hopefully including institutions of higher education and the department of licensing when the licensing format is updated to include citizenship requirements.

### **Landlord Voter Registration**

This legislation would require that landlords provide new tenants with a voter registration form. Considering that people between age 18-25, a predominantly student age group, move nearly every year this should help make sure that people can keep their registration up to date.

### **Voting Rights Act**

The Washington Voting Rights Act (WVRA) was created to address the systemic exclusion of people of color from the political process. This would provide support to ensure that local elections allow for accurate representation of the district they represent. Recently Yakima, which, prior to the adoption of district voting, had never elected a Latino council member, despite 40% of the district being Latino, spent ~\$ 1 million defending their election system against the ACLU and lost. The WVRA would help to create truly representative districts to prevent these problems, but also creates a different court channel than the federal process that will be more efficient in time and money.

### **Extend Deadline**

This legislation would extend the allow for same-day voter registration through election day. The following states have same-day, in-person deadlines for voter registration: Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin in the early-to-mid-1970s, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Wyoming and the District of Columbia. The arbitrary deadlines currently in place prematurely end voter registration so that only those who know and understand the deadlines are able to participate in elections. These deadlines severely disadvantaged students in Washington. As most of the public colleges and universities operate on quarter systems, the current systems only allow for student voter registration drives to happen in the first two weeks of school which drastically limits the effectiveness of these efforts. County auditors, who would be impacted the most by this change in legislation, have expressed their support for these bills. Extending voter registration deadlines would substantially increase student access to elections.

### **Access for Voters with Disabilities**

This legislation would allow people who are unable to sign their ballot to do a voter registration affidavit once and then simply make their mark or use a signature stamp for their ballots in the future instead of requiring two signatories. Right now, two signatories are required each time someone who is unable to sign their ballot votes. Streamlining this process would greatly increase access to voting for people with disabilities.

### **Automatic Voter Registration for Institutions of Higher Education**

This legislation would require each institution of higher education to automatically register eligible students to vote. This legislation would help to make voting accessible to all student across the state and make voting rights and turnout a priority to institutions. The Associated Students already runs an active voter registration drive, that has been increasingly successful, but legislation is important to support these efforts.

### **Prepaid postage**

This legislation would require return envelopes for ballots to have prepaid postage, essentially abolishing the poll tax currently associated with voting. The people of Washington State should not have to pay for a stamp in order to have their voices heard, voting is a right that should be freely exercised. Requiring a stamps in order for a ballot to be mailed is a barrier to participating in the political process. Prepaid postage on ballots would help take down the obstacles associated with voting and provide better access for all people.

In the last session:

- Motor Voter passed the House and made it to committee in the Senate.
- Automatic Voter Registration passed the House but failed to be voted out of committee in the Senate.
- Landlord voter registration did not make any progress but had bills introduced in both chambers.
- The Voting Rights Act passed the House and did not make progress in the Senate.
- Extending Voter Registration Deadline has made progress in the House, one piece passed, and is being held up in the Senate.
- Access for Voters with Disabilities had a bill introduced in the House, but that bill did not make progress. No companion bill in Senate
- A bill for Higher Education Institutions to have voter registration plans was introduced in the House and Senate and was referred to committee in the Senate but was not heard before the end of session.
- Prepaid Postage bills were introduced but did not make it out of committee in either chamber.

Targets for this issue include but are not limited to:

Chair of House State Government Committee

Chair of House Appropriations Committee

Chair of Senate Government Operations and Security

Chair of Senate Ways and Means

Chair of the House Higher Education Committee

Chair of the Senate Higher Education Committee

As students encounter these barriers and are made aware of how they disproportionately impact young people and people with marginalized identities, they are inspired to change these policies. Most of these bills gained traction in the last biennium and we should be able to quickly get legislation on these bills introduced and build support for these issues early on in session. Therefore, each of these issues are likely to be debated and acted upon in the upcoming session.

Some creative and/or innovative tactics could we employ to engage students around this issue include:

- Doing a video series to let students and legislators know why voting is important to students
- A letter writing campaign to legislators from students about the difficulties of registering to vote and the barriers that prevent students from voting, and pressure from constituents
- Student testimony as to how these issues impact them and why increasing access matters
- Compilation of WWU and other campuses' Vote Work.
- Supporting Ballot Initiatives that push for these agenda items if they are not passed in the legislature.