

Louisiana's New Voter Pre-Registration Law Features Automatic Registration

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Voter pre-registration for teenagers is a commonsense policy that FairVote took national leadership in promoting in the eight states that have passed it since 2005. These laws extend the ability to register to vote to 16-year-olds. Upon reaching voting age, these pre-registrants are automatically added to the voting rolls. To become effective on January 1st, 2015, Louisiana's law focuses on 16-year-olds who are applying for a driver's license, with such young people automatically and accurately pre-registered to vote unless they choose to opt out of being registered.

Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal, a leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016, signed a youth pre-registration bill into law this May, an action confirming the state's position as a frontrunner in registering young people to vote. The bill, [HB501](#), lowers the voter registration age as of 2015 to 16-years-old for those applying for a license with the Office of Motor Vehicles (OMV). This change builds upon [previous legislation](#), which allowed 17-year-olds to pre-register to vote. The 17-years-old requirement is still in place for those registering outside of the OMV.

[Research](#) suggests that laws like HB501 will improve voter turnout among young people, as registration issues are a major reason that so many young adults do not vote. Louisiana already has a substantial youth voter population that may have been boosted by pre-registration. In the 2012 election, 61% of Louisianans voted, ranking behind only 21 states and the District of Columbia, and the state's [youth voter turnout](#) for 2012 was 52.8%, significantly higher than the national average. Thus, this new law could expand Louisiana's already burgeoning youth voter community.

Louisiana's HB501 is unique among pre-registration laws because it requires the OMV to register 16- and 17-year-olds to vote unless they explicitly decline -- making it an example of the "opt-out" approach backed by FairVote over "opt-in" laws. If applied nationwide, an "opt-out" system would register significantly more voters than our current registration system, which requires voters to specify that they wish to be registered. While the current opt-in system assumes that the default voter reaction will be nonparticipation, an opt-out approach makes the default a willingness to be on the voter rolls. This change increases participation in our democracy while protecting the interest of those who do not wish to be registered.

The unanimous passage of HB501 in the Louisiana state senate underscores the bipartisan nature of voter pre-registration and the great potential for a general shift to "opt-out" approaches to voter registration. Florida in 2008 enacted voter pre-registration for 16-year-olds, with an overwhelming majority in its Republican-controlled legislature and the signature of a Republican governor. Colorado, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and the District of Columbia have also passed similar legislation

Louisiana has a history of trailblazing smart election policy, as exhibited by it being the first state to use [ranked choice ballots](#) for overseas and out-of-state military voters in congressional and state runoff elections. HB501 is another innovative law that has the potential to significantly increase the number of young Louisianans who are registered to vote and ultimately participate in our representative democracy.