

Written by The Daily Cardinal Editorial Board

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Under legislation expected to go before the state Senate next week, some Wisconsin 17-year-olds would gain the right to vote in primary elections.

The new bill, sponsored by state Sen. Fred Risser, D-Madison, would give 17-year-olds, whose 18th birthday falls between a primary and general election, the right to vote in the primary.

The bill would cover both local and statewide elections. If passed by the Legislature, the bill would still have to be approved by voters in a statewide referendum to become law.

Opponents to the bill, including state Senate Minority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, dismissed the idea as "ridiculous." Fitzgerald made the absurd argument that "17-year-olds are juveniles" and thus somehow less capable of voting than 18-year-old peers who may differ in age by less than, say, one day.

Contrary to Fitzgerald's contentions, this bill correctly recognizes that maturation is not controlled by a toggle switch. Eighteen-years-olds do not miraculously develop the capacity to make careful electoral decisions on their 18th birthdays. The process of intellectual maturation is long and a few weeks do not make a big difference.

The number of people potentially affected by the legislation is small. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Wisconsin had about 81,000 17-year-olds in 2005. Since the time between a primary and general election in Wisconsin is around six weeks, about 9,300 17-year-olds each year would be affected by the proposed law.

Based on an estimated 25 percent voter turnout for primary elections—averaged across all age groups—2,300 young people, at most, would take advantage of the law. The actual figure would probably be much lower, given young people's historically low voter turnout.

Although the number of people enfranchised by the law would be small, the legislation sends two important messages: First, primary elections are an integral part of the election cycle and need the attention of the full electorate, not just a politically motivated minority. The person who votes in the general election should be part of the process from the beginning.

Second, and most importantly, young voters are a key part of the democratic process, and their participation should be encouraged.

One small but good way to show this encouragement, we believe, is to allow those young people who will turn 18 by the general election to participate in the preceding primary election.

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