



March 20, 2023

Hon. Richard Briggs
Chair, Senate Committee on State and Local Government
774 Cordell Hull Bldg.
Nashville, TN 37243

Dear Chair Briggs and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Fair Elections Center, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to removing barriers to registration and voting through advocacy and impact litigation, and the Center's Campus Vote Project, which educates and engages young voters on voting rights issues and institutionalizes civic engagement at university and college campuses, we write to express our support for SB 285, a bill to authorize the use of identification cards issued by accredited postsecondary educational institutions for voter identification.

In 2022, Tennessee saw its lowest voter turnout in nearly a decade with 38.57% of eligible voters casting a ballot in the midterm elections—this number is down 16% from the last midterm cycle in 2018.¹ Removing unnecessary barriers to voting and enabling more Tennesseans to make their voices heard in the electoral process is an essential component of fostering a thriving democracy. One such barrier to voting in Tennessee is the strict voter ID requirement that prohibits the use of college and university student IDs as voter identification at the ballot box. Tennessee is one of only seven states nationwide with such strict identification limitations.²

Tennessee law currently requires in-person voters to present one of a limited number of photo IDs to cast a ballot. Students in particular are often less likely to possess the required documentation and acceptable identification to satisfy voter eligibility requirements. For

¹ Ian Round, *Two bills would make a dent in Tennessee's voter ID laws by letting students use their college IDs*, TENNESSEE LOOKOUT (Mar. 2, 2021) <https://www.wkrn.com/news/tennessee-politics/less-than-40-of-registered-voters-in-tennessee-turned-out-for-the-2022-midterms/>.

² Ariz. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 16-579(A); N.D. Cent. Code § 16.1-05-07; Idaho Code § 34-1113, *amended by* Idaho H.B. 124, 67th Leg., First Reg. Sess. (2023); Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 3503.16(B)(1)(a), *amended by* Ohio Sub. H.B. 458 (2023); S.C. Code Ann. § 7-13-710; Tex. Election Code Ann. §63.001 et seq.



example, increasingly fewer young people are applying for driver's licenses,³ opting instead for cheaper and more accessible methods of transportation such as Uber and Lyft. In 2021, only 60% of 18-year-olds had a driver's license while over 90% of those over the age of 35 had one.⁴ This generational lifestyle change impacts the ability to cast a ballot in a voter ID system predicated on the tenuous assumption that almost all voters possess certain forms of identification, such as driver's licenses. Tennessee law does permit the use of some generally less common identification cards in addition to driver's licenses, such as state ID cards, U.S. passports, state employee and state retired employee IDs, and military identification.⁵ University issued IDs, however, allow students to utilize a form of ID much more accessible to the vast majority of young voters.

SB 285 seeks to make voting for young people more accessible by permitting them to use student IDs—a common and reliable form of identification—furnished by accredited postsecondary institutions for photo identification at the polls. Student IDs are a secure and convenient means of establishing the voter's identity, upon which Tennessee's colleges and universities themselves depend. Student IDs frequently include robust security features and are increasingly used for crucial functions like granting access to buildings and rooms as well as for financial transactions at on- and off-campus businesses. These reliable, convenient, and secure identification documents should be utilized to better enable young voters to satisfy photo ID requirements for voting.

Notably, Tennessee law currently recognizes the security and validity of some IDs issued by higher education institutions. As written, state law permits faculty and staff to use IDs furnished by state postsecondary institutions to satisfy voter ID requirements even though students at the very same institutions are expressly prohibited from using their photo identification cards which are identical in all material respects.⁶ This discriminatory and differential treatment of students makes our elections less fair and serves no end apart from disenfranchising young voters without Tennessee driver's licenses.

SB 285 would reduce barriers to voting for young people by allowing college and university students to use their school's photo IDs for voter identification and verification. Such IDs are commonly and securely issued by accredited institutions, and Tennessee law already permits the use of many nearly identical college and university IDs by non-student voters. Making voting more accessible to college and university students is vital to increase engagement and participation among a demographic group with traditionally lower relative rates of voter

³ Shannon Osaka, 'I'll call an Uber or 911': Why Gen Z doesn't want to drive, THE WASHINGTON POST (Feb. 13, 2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/2023/02/13/gen-z-driving-less-uber/>.

⁴ *Highway Statistics Series*, U.S. DEP'T OF TRANSP. (2021), available at <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/policyinformation/statistics/2021/dl20.cfm>

⁵ Tenn. Code Ann. § 2-7-112(c).

⁶ *Id.*



participation.⁷ We urge you to support this bill and make exercising the right to vote more accessible for the newest participants in our democracy.

Sincerely,

Patrick Williamson

Counsel

Fair Elections Center

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⁷ See *Understanding a Diverse Generation, Figure 9: Voter Turnout by Age, 1974-2010*, CTR. FOR INFO. AND RES. ON CIVIC LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT (2011), available at http://archive.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/CIRCLE_cluster_report2010.pdf.

