Boosting Voter Participation - with Teen Preregistration?

Local News

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Can getting teens to register to vote at the same time they get their driver's license increase their chances of voting when they turn 18? In eight states, teens can do just that - but Washington isn't one of them. At least, not yet. Legislation has passed in the House (HB 2205) to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to preregister to vote, although not without some debate.

Kim Abel, co-president of the League of Women Voters of Washington, says her group supports the idea, since it goes hand-in-hand with the state's newest high school graduation requirement.

The League's really excited that we worked with the state Legislature to pass civics education - and if you've got students signing up to register to vote, all of a sudden that civics lesson makes a lot more sense to them. - Kim Abel

Oregon has allowed 17-year-olds to preregister since 2007. At the Oregon Secretary of State's office, Andrea Cantu-Schomus says it was seen as a way to increase voter participation among young people.

"Soon as you turn 17, you can register - it's one of those rites of passage here in Oregon. So, for us, really it is engaging voters at an early age, and creating lifetime voters."

Washington already allows 17-year-olds to preregister, but only if they'll turn 18 by the next election. Abel says adding 16-year-olds is a matter of convenience - since 40 percent of Washington voters register at the Department of Licensing.

"And so, if you leave off 16-year-olds, you've left off some of the people that might have registered - or in this case, preregistered to vote - and then lost them to the system until perhaps they're 21, which is when a lot of people that age come back to get a new license."

Voter turnout is historically lowest among 18-to-24-year-olds. But county auditors in Washington have testified against HB 2205 and its Senate counterpart, SB 6128. They say the address information for teens will change as soon as they leave home, making it more difficult to ensure that they'll receive their ballots by mail.