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Written Testimony Against H. 5383

R.I. General Assembly House Committee on State Government & Elections

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee.

Thank you for having me here today to testify on this important issue **against House Bill 5383**. My name is Lillian Gale, and I am a Co-Chair of the Advocacy Committee at Brown Votes, the nonpartisan University-sponsored voting and democratic participation initiative of Brown University, where I am a first-year concentrating in Economics and Political Science.

I come to you today in my position at Brown Votes, having been born and raised in Manahawkin, New Jersey, and attending Stafford Township Public Schools. Manahawkin is a part of Ocean County—a Republican county under New Jersey's Democratic Governor. The requirements of the High School Voter Registrations Law (HSVRL), pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18A:36-27¹ state that high schools must provide voter registration materials, a summary of voter registration eligibility requirements, materials describing the role of a citizen, and materials articulating the importance of voting to all students ages 17 and above. I can tell you firsthand I never received these materials.

That being said, I still registered to vote at 17, but I am a special case—I've understood the importance of democratic participation from a young age. As I now earn a degree at a 4-year university, I join the group of youth that is most likely to civically engage in our democracy, leaving two-year university students and graduates who decide not to pursue a higher education at the wayside². Democratic participation should not be gatekept to the youth who are privileged enough to upwardly motivate through a higher education.

With contemporary politics reaching an all-time high of polarization, it is the time to encourage all to head to the polls—not restrict voter access. Changing the phrasing of 17-9.1-4.1. from *shall* to *may* leaves hosting voter registration drives at high schools up to the local governments. This actively acknowledges that registration drives will not operate at current levels, decreasing the registered youth population in Rhode Island. For many teens without a solid support system at home, this may be the only chance for them to register or for them to realize they may want to.

Mr. Chairman, if there was ever a time to stand up and protect the American democratic process, it is now. We are entering uncharted territory on the federal level, and we must protect the voices of our youth—our future. Registering our youth gives them a chance to be engaged, educated, and the kind of citizens our country was made for—those who advocate for the future they want to see.

Thank you.

¹ <https://www.nj.gov/education/about/counties/docs/HSVRLStatementofAssurance.pdf>

²

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3158614/#:~:text=Findings%20point%20to%20declines%20in,the%20government%20or%20elected%20officials.>