

EMPOWER Act

H.720/S.389

Sponsors:

Representatives Andy Vargas and Dylan Fernandes; Senator Harriette Chandler

The EMPOWER Act gives all cities and towns in Massachusetts the option to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in their municipal elections without needing to pass a home rule petition.

How H.720 supports cities and towns in increasing civic participation:

- The bill does not enfranchise 16- and 17-year-olds until municipalities decide to do so. It allows cities and towns to expand the franchise for their elections at their discretion, and would force those who wish to see 16- and 17-year-old voting to advocate for it locally. In the process, young people who carry out this advocacy would build on their civic skills by engaging with their elected officials and fellow citizens.
- In jurisdictions that use a 16- or 17-year-old voting age, both in the United States and around the world, the data shows that 16- and 17-year-old first-time voters consistently turn out at higher rates than 18- and 19-year-old first-time voters, indicating it is a better time to establish the habit of voting. The EMPOWER Act would allow MA cities and towns to test this in their municipal elections as well.

Why H.720 makes sense for Massachusetts:

- Massachusetts made great strides last year by passing the most robust civic education legislation in the nation, which was signed by Governor Baker in November 2018. The EMPOWER Act gives municipalities the opportunity to go even further in preparing their young people to become informed and engaged participants in the political process, but only if municipal governments make that decision.
- Several local governments have sent home rule petitions to the state legislature in recent years seeking approval to implement this change locally, including Lowell, Cambridge, Ashfield, Shelburne, and Wendell. A petition from Northampton has been approved by the city council and is forthcoming; other cities and towns are also considering the issue
- Justice Louis Brandeis famously called states the “laboratories of democracy.” If states are the laboratories of democracy, then cities and towns are its “test tubes.” This bill gives municipalities the freedom to strengthen civic institutions by testing out innovative ideas

For more information, Contact Kiara Tringali in the office of Rep. Andy Vargas, at Kiara.Tringali@mahouse.gov

See back page supporters of the EMPOWER Act



Endorsements from elected officials:

- 45 co-sponsors in the House and 11 co-sponsors in the Senate
- Boston City Council (unanimous endorsement)