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Testimony Re: Senate Bill 35 -- An Act Relating to Elections -- General Provisions

Senate Judiciary Committee

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Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support of Senate Bill 35 and thank Senator Lawson for introducing this important bill and Senators Kallman, Lauria, Miller, Acosta, DiMario, Euer, Murray, Gallo, and Lombardi for co-sponsoring. This bill would grant 17-year-old young people who have not yet reached the age of 18 the ability to vote in a primary election if they turn 18 as of the date of the general or special election.

Over 18 states, including Vermont, Ohio, and Washington D.C., allow 17-year-olds to vote in primary elections. The state of Nebraska enacted similar legislation as early as 1994. The young people in Rhode Island have already demonstrated their desire to be fully engaged in democracy. In 2018, students sued Rhode Island for failing to teach civics courses and prepare students to participate actively in democracy and society.

Throughout the Nation and Rhode Island, 17-year-olds are allowed to drive, work, and pay taxes. They have also marched for causes they believe in, like safe schools, climate change and racial justice efforts. Allowing them to vote will amplify their voices and potentially increase future voting participation among young adults, a group with historically low voter turnout rates.

Empowering young people to become active voters and responsible citizens will only strengthen Rhode Island's democracy.

Thank you for the leadership the General Assembly has shown in supporting the autonomy of young people and for the opportunity to testify today.

