

ASSEMBLY BILL NO. 3591

To the General Assembly:

Pursuant to Article V, Section I, Paragraph 14 of the New Jersey Constitution, I am returning Assembly Bill No. 3591 without my approval.

This bill would permit any registered voter who is 17 years-old at the time of a primary election to vote in that primary election if he or she will turn 18 by the date of the next general election. Under the New Jersey Constitution, as well as the U.S. Constitution, an individual must be 18 to be entitled to vote.

Last year, I signed P.L.2015, c.222, which permits 17 year-old individuals to register to vote if they were otherwise eligible and would be 18 by the time of the next election in which they expect to vote. As a result of this law, individuals whose 18th birthday occurs just prior to an election would not be foreclosed from voting simply because that close proximity prevented them from registering in time to vote.

This bill seeks to exploit last year's sensible enactment by now allowing those same individuals to vote in primary elections. The intent of P.L.2015, c.222 was not, however, to take a preliminary step toward underage, and potentially unconstitutional, voting. Proponents may attempt to justify this legally-questionable expansion of the franchise by arguing that pulling the lever in a primary is not really "voting" but merely participating in a political party's internal decision making process. However, when I left my polling place after the most recent primary I was given a sticker that said "I voted," not one that said "I participated in an internal political party process."

In addition, the law I signed last year requires that each 17 year-old who registers to vote must be designated in the statewide voter registration system as temporarily ineligible to vote until he or she turns 18. The current bill is inconsistent with this requirement as it allows 17 year-olds to vote in primary elections, but not other elections, such as school board elections or special elections. It seems imprudent to incur costs and summon the resources necessary for oversight to revamp our statewide voter registration system yet again to accommodate this bill, particularly given the limited number of 17 year-old individuals who would qualify to vote in a primary election.

The right to vote is an essential component of a democratic society and I fully encourage the participation of all eligible individuals in our election process. I am, however, unwilling to sanction the expansion of that participation to include voting by individuals less than 18 years of age, and am concerned that this bill sets the State on a slippery path toward further erosion of critical and constitutional requirements for voter eligibility.

Accordingly, I herewith return Assembly Bill No. 3591 without my approval.

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Respectfully,
/s/ Chris Christie
Governor

Attest:

/s/ Thomas P. Scrivo
Chief Counsel to the Governor