

House Bill 4951 as enrolled
Public Act 158 of 1997
Second Analysis (1-5-98)

Sponsor: Rep. Beverly Hammerstrom
House Committee: Local Government
Senate Committee: Government
Operations

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

The Michigan Election Law requires that at every election there be a board of at least three inspectors for each election precinct and "as many more as . . . is required for the efficient, speedy and proper conduct" of an election. The law requires that precinct inspectors be qualified and registered electors of the county in which they serve, have a good reputation, and possess sufficient education and clerical ability to perform the job. Further, a person cannot have been convicted of a felony or an election crime, and no member of the person's family can be a candidate for nomination or election at the election in question. A person also cannot act as an election inspector if he or she has failed to attend a school of instruction or failed to take a required examination.

For a number of reasons, some election officials advocate the appointment of 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds as election inspectors, even though they are not themselves yet eligible to vote. Proponents say this would, among other things, offer an opportunity for young people to participate in the democratic process, perhaps leading over time to larger voter turnout among young people, and would expand the pool of precinct poll workers, who are getting harder to find.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would amend the Michigan Election Law to permit 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds to be appointed to a board of election inspectors if they met the qualifications - - other than being a qualified and registered voter. However, before a 16- or 17-year-old could be appointed, the first three members of a board of election inspectors would have to meet all existing requirements for inspectors, including being a qualified and registered voter. Further, a 16- or 17-year-old would not be eligible to be designated as chairperson of the board.

If a 16- or 17-year-old seeking appointment as a precinct inspector was attending a K-12 school, and if the election fell on a school day, he or she would have to provide a written document from school acknowledging the student's application to become an inspector and excusing him or her from school on the date of service.

The election law currently requires that an election inspector be a qualified and registered elector in the county in which he or she serves. The bill would amend that provision to say, "or, in the case of a local unit of government that lies in more than one county, is a qualified and registered elector of the local unit of government in which the election is being held." (The same residency requirement would apply to a 16- or 17-year-old, except that he or she would have to be a resident -- rather than an elector of the county or multi-county local unit.)

MCL 168.677

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

The bill would have no state or local fiscal impact, according to the House Fiscal Agency. (Fiscal Note dated 9-17-97)

ARGUMENTS:

For:

Allowing 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds to serve as precinct inspectors would be beneficial in many ways. It would provide a valuable educational experience for high school students, including government and civics classes, exposing them to an important aspect of our democratic way of life. It would help to demystify the voting process for young people who will be eligible to vote in a year or

two and perhaps over time increase the voter turnout among the youngest of eligible voters, who now are under-represented at the polls. Some school districts require community service as a prerequisite to graduation, and working at the polls would be an excellent way to fulfill this requirement.

The bill also will improve the efficiency of election polling places. Election officials say it is getting harder to find poll workers with today's working patterns, and the bill would expand the pool of potential inspectors. This will work to reduce the likelihood of voters being discouraged or fatigued by long lines on election day caused by a shortage of poll workers or by overworked poll workers without sufficient breaks. Permitting high school students to serve as precinct inspectors will also offer an opportunity for intergenerational commingling, and, some people believe, add energy and enthusiasm to polling places on election day.

It should be noted that the bill is permissive. It does not require that local election officials appoint high school students. It simply allows them to if they so choose.

Against:

Some educators complain that high school students already miss too much school. Sometimes these absences are for reasons that in and of themselves seem acceptable, such as co-curricular activities and athletic events. Yet the absences add up. This bill, while well-intentioned, provides yet another opportunity for students to be out of the classroom. Further, students might not be well suited for the job of election inspector since there is sometimes intense conflict at polling places.

Response:

The bill contains a provision requiring a student to get permission from school to serve as an inspector. Further, it is the responsibility of the chair of the election inspectors to see that young people are given roles commensurate with their abilities. The 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds will not be permitted to serve as chairpersons.

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■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.