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OPINION

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Editorial

Empowering teens would help overcome voter apathy

State lawmakers will have the opportunity to review two bills that have the potential to revive interest in local politics and drive voter turnout. Both measures would allow teens as young as 16 to vote in municipal elections.

They were scheduled for public hearings before the Joint Committee on Election Laws at the Statehouse today.

Rep. Andy Vargas, D-Haverhill, and Sen. Harriette Chandler, D-Worcester, who filed the Empower Act in the House and Senate, respectively, indicated that at least nine cities and towns in the commonwealth have asked to be given the authority to lower the voting age for municipal elections. A town meeting in Concord passed an article seeking to lower that community's voting age to 17, while other municipalities, including Ashfield and Cambridge, have advocated in recent years to allow 16 or 17-year-olds to cast ballots in local races, but have had no success getting the necessary home-rule petitions approved by the Legislature.

And a lower-the-voting-age campaign initiated by the United Teen Equality Center (UTECE) in Lowell secured Senate

approval in 2014, but that bill stalled in the House, and never received that chamber's support.

"Because of the work our young people did on this campaign some years back, we remain very supportive of the Empower Act," said UTECE CEO Greg Croteau. "We particularly appreciate its emphasis on local control and allowing municipalities to make decisions that they see as best for their communities."

The changes proposed by the Empower Act wouldn't constitute a statewide mandate. Supporters said communities that wanted to decrease the voting age could opt-in under the law, without requiring the passage of a home-rule petition, as is currently the case. And this newest class of registered voters could only partake in municipal races, not in state or federal elections.

But Mass. Republican Party Chairman Jim Lyons and David Tuerck of the Beacon Hill Institute, obviously satisfied with

the sad state of voter turnout in most local elections, dismissed the idea out of hand.

"The proposal to lower the voting age further to 16 years old is frivolous and without merit," said Lyons, while Tuerck called the notion to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds "absurd on its face."

Perhaps this push would seem absurd if adults took their voting privilege seriously, but that's certainly not the case on the local level. Just more than 11% of Boston's voters cast a ballot in the September preliminary elections, while only 16.5% bothered to vote in the November general election.

That's a pattern duplicated by most of the state's cities and towns. One would expect the GOP, which barely registers a political pulse in this state, to welcome the opportunity to engage and woo an expanded electorate, but its age-driven rigidity provides another example

of why that party remains no more than an afterthought.

We see no reason why teens who demonstrate an interest in their communities' politics shouldn't be allowed a say in the process. At 16 or 17, they're

still attending high school in their city or town, and tuned into key community issues.

At 18, the current legal voting age, they're likely away at college, dealing with other concerns.

The Empower Act might not be the right fit everywhere, but in communities with a history of teen political activism, like Lowell, it would provide a positive outlet for that civic enthusiasm.