While there have been many unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud in Wisconsin, about seventy 17-year-olds did vote illegally here in the 2016 Presidential Primary. Social media posts may have mislead the teens, but we should not let this incident discourage young citizens by adding further restrictions on voting.

MADISON – It is unfortunate that about seventy 17-year-olds in almost 30 counties illegally voted in the Wisconsin Presidential Preference Primary last April based on misinformation. In our state 17-year-olds may register if they will be 18 by the next election. Unlike in some other states, you have to be at least 18 to vote in Wisconsin. These young citizens could be charged with a felony, but it appears the district attorneys in most counties have elected not to do so.

Since news of the underage voting was published, people have looked for a scapegoat to blame or used the incident to call for additional restrictions on voting. Let's instead use what we've learned to prevent this from happening again, while still encouraging young people to participate in our democracy and not break the law.

Some have blamed social media posts before the Primary, which blurred laws that differ from state to state, for misleading the teens. We doubt anyone misled them intentionally.

The 17-year-olds who voted believed they were allowed to do so. They truthfully provided their birthdate on the registration form. Yes, they signed a form certifying that they would be "at least 18 years old or will be at least 18 years old at the time of the next election" but they thought "next election" referred to the November election. And in some states citizens who are 18 by the November Election can vote in the Primary.

What about the officials who registered these young voters? Shouldn't they have noticed the birthdate? We have heard that some did and refused to register underage citizens. We have also heard that some were under the same misapprehension as the 17-year-olds.

There have been many unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud and some people allege our system is not equipped to catch illegal voting. Yet our existing election safeguards detected this problem and referred it to law enforcement. It is not easy to vote illegally in Wisconsin. You would risk a felony rap subject to fines or imprisonment– and you could lose your right to vote! Further restrictions on voting are not needed to prevent such problems. Instead we need to maintain a strong Wisconsin Elections Commission to continue to detect and investigate irregularities.

To prevent such incidents in the future, the state needs to invest in more voter education and training of election officials. The best antidote to misinformation is good information. Lawmakers should keep this in mind as they consider the substantial staffing reductions proposed for the Elections Commission.

We do not want to let this unfortunate incident discourage enthusiastic young citizens from participating in our government and contributing to a better future. Teens need to know that, even if they can't vote, they can work on a campaign, become a poll worker, connect people with good information and encourage people to vote. If they do that, we are sure that after their eighteenth birthday they will become lifelong voters.

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