



Youth Civics Foundation

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Learn It. Live it. Lead it.

Why Voting at Age 16 Could Strengthen Our Democracy

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I. Executive Summary

Lowering the voting age to 16 can help boost civic engagement and promote long term voter turnout in the United States. This brief discusses the legal opportunities and actual effects of allowing 16 and 17 year olds to cast ballots in elections. Drawing on research from U.S. cities such as Takoma Park, Maryland and from civic engagement scholars, this paper argues that lowering the voting age would help create a stronger and more representative democracy.

II. Overview

In the United States, youth citizens have to be 18 to vote in federal and most state elections. However, this voting age doesn't account for the growing

responsibilities that young people have at 16. By 16 years old, most teens are allowed to drive, work, pay taxes and can also be tried as adults in court. While given these responsibilities, teens still are not allowed the right to vote. This problem can bring up questions on how fair and representative elections actually are. If 16 year olds are affected by government laws and decisions, shouldn't they be able to have a say?

Many U.S. cities such as Takoma Park, Hyattsville, and Greenbelt in Maryland and Berkeley and Oakland in California, have given the right to vote to 16 year olds in elections including school board elections. Youth turnout in these cities was often greater than older citizens. According to a report by Civic Innovation Center at University of Maryland, 44 percent of 16 and 17 year

olds voted in Takoma Park's 2013 elections, where only 10 percent of voters in general turned out. This shows that if given the chance, young people take voting seriously.

III. Relevance

Youth are constantly being affected by decisions and laws made by governments both local and federal. Things like education funding and safety laws all affect their lives daily. However, they do not have a say in how these problems are solved. Allowing 16-17 year olds to vote in elections would make local governments accountable to younger citizens. It would also help strengthen civics education by letting students use what they learn.

Research from CIRCLE at Tufts University shows that early civic engagement leads to lifelong voting habits. Teens who are allowed to vote during high school and supported by families and schools are more likely to become consistent voters. When young people see themselves as a part of democracy, they will be more likely to vote.

IV. Policy History

The current voting age of 18 was set in 1971 with the 26th amendment and was

lowered during the Vietnam war because young Americans argued that if they were old enough to be drafted, they should be able to vote. After that, there has not been any other amendments that deal with voting age. But local governments have the power to lower the voting age to vote in school elections or city. Takoma Park did it in 2013 and many other Maryland Cities also did. Berkeley, California also allows 16 year olds to vote in school board elections. These changes have looked good. According to a 2024 Maryland General Assembly testimony, voting by 16-17 year olds was almost twice as high as adult turnout. This shows that youth want to show up to vote.

V. Policy Problem

Many people argue that 16 year olds are way too immature or uninformed to vote. However, studies show that 16 and 17 year olds do just as well as older voters when tested on political knowledge. Because many study civics or government, they can even be more informed than older voters.

Critics also say that young voters will be too easily influenced. But influence affects all voters no matter the age. Political ads and social media influence everyone. What's important is that all

citizens should be able to use their right to vote including 16 year olds.

The problems is not whether young people and teens are able but more whether the system helps them. Young people have less reasons to be informed without the right to vote. If we give them the right to vote, young people would want to learn more about democracy and rights.

VI. Policy Change

The easiest policy change would be for states to legalize voting by 16 and 17 year olds in local elections. This wouldn't need a constitutional amendment and could be tested in counties and local levels. A national policy would have to be a constitutional amendment changing the national voting age to 16 but that would be very difficult legally and politically.

VII. Conclusion

Giving 16 year olds the right to vote would overall increase turnout and make governments more representative of youth. Cities that have been able to do so show positive results. During a time when democracy has less people voting, giving young people rights to vote will help bring back voters in the future. A lower voting age can lead to a stronger democracy

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