Expanding the Voting Age to 16 for School Elections: It’s Time to Include Students in Our Democracy

One of the major roles of the US public education system is to prepare young people for the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Our children need to learn about the value of democracy, and we challenge them to play an active role in their communities’ civic life, yet most of them will never have the opportunity to practice the most basic act of civic life - voting in an election - until after they turn 18 and leave home.

In this era of record-low voter turnout and bitter partisanship, we need to ensure that our young people learn positive voting habits early on and practice how to engage in healthy debate and engagement on civic decisions.

“The Sixteen-and 17-year-olds have a stake in local issues, and they are ready to responsibly exercise the right to vote.” (Research from Generation Citizen)

The Facts About 16 Year Olds Voting:

1. Voting young improves lifetime turnout. Voting is habitual. Research suggests that casting a first ballot at 16 or 17 makes it more likely a person will develop a lasting habit of voting over their entire life, and youth voting promotes parents voting, too.¹

2. Voting is effective, practical civic education. Participating in school board elections can teach youth how to research candidates, identify key issues, and debate important topics – all skills that they will need to participate in broader elections.

3. Teen brains are developed enough for voting. Voting is a type of “cold cognition” - thinking used when we are by ourselves and have time to deliberate about options - and studies of cold cognition have shown that the skills necessary to make informed decisions are firmly in place by 16.²

4. Sixteen year olds are educated enough to vote. Studies show that young people demonstrate political efficacy on par with adults and that a 16-year old's political knowledge is comparable to a 21-year old's and comparable any adult's.³

Establish Voting Habits Young or Risk Years of Missed Elections:

The first election a person participates in is key to establishing a consistent voting habit, and a person’s first voting experience leads to their next. Research shows that a person who votes in one election is 25 percent more likely to vote in future elections.⁴ Expanding the voting age to 16 would provide young people the opportunity to participate in at least one local election while in a stable school environment, supported by teachers, parents, and their peers.

Researchers argue the age of 18 is an inopportune time to begin voting because of the many life transitions 18-year olds typically face.⁵ As a result of this instability, the majority of Americans do not begin voting at the age of 18, and therefore, do not establish regular voting habits until later in life.

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The Colorado State Constitution, Article IX, Section 15, states that: “The general assembly shall, by law, provide for organization of school districts of convenient size, in each of which shall be established a board of education, to consist of three or more directors to be elected by the qualified electors of the district.” 

No elector is more qualified than current students from those districts!

Misconceptions About 16-year Olds Voting & Reasons to Support a Change

Constitutionality: There is nothing unconstitutional about 16-year olds voting. “[The 26th Amendment] doesn't say you can disenfranchise people who are under 18… the amendment prevents against discrimination, it doesn't prevent against greater inclusion.” – Nathaniel Persily, professor of law, Stanford University. The same reasoning applies for the CO Constitution.

Youth Turnout: Many think young people will be apathetic voters. But when they've been included, we have seen that 16- and 17-year olds actually vote in at higher rates than legal adults.6, 7

The “Trickle Up” Effect: When 16- and 17-year olds are engaged in voting, research shows it has a positive effect on voter turnout rates for their parents and family members of all ages.4

Fair Representation: School board decisions have great influence on the lives of 16- and 17-year-olds. It’s only right that they be able to vote on the people who make those decisions, and research shows they are mature enough to do so.3

Low Adult Participation: In 2015, less than one third of adult voters showed up to vote in the Denver school board election. We need to do better, and this change can help.

Expanded Voting Age Across the Country and the World:

1. In 2013, Takoma Park, Maryland became the first city in the US to include 16-year olds in all municipal elections - not just the school board. Since then, Hyattsville, MD and Greenbelt, MD have followed suit.

2. The Milwaukee County Board in Wisconsin passed a resolution this year requesting that the state legislature grant 16-year olds the right to vote on school boards. And in Berkeley, California, an effort is already underway to expand the voting age to 16 for school district elections after a voter referendum on the question passed.

3. After single-digit turnout rates in 2015 school board elections, a bill was introduced in the New Mexico state legislature to include 16-year olds in school boards election voting.

4. Internationally, Austria, Brazil, Nicaragua, Scotland, and other nations have included 16-year olds in elections. The UK empowered 16-year olds to vote in its EU referendum.

Jefferson County in 2014 protests showed that it’s time for a student voting in school board elections

The 2014-15 Jefferson County student protests against the school board and the successful recall effort demonstrate that:

1. There is a felt need for this change, and
2. There can be broad public support for student participation in school board politics.

Works Cited