



YOUNG VOICES AT THE BALLOT BOX

Amplifying Youth Activism to Lower the
Voting Age in 2024 and Beyond

A White Paper from Generation Citizen (Version 4.0 – 2024)



WHY SHOULD WE LOWER THE VOTING AGE TO 16?

REASON #1 WE NEED TO MAKE VOTING A HABIT

First and foremost, voting is a habit, and a person's first election is critical to establishing that habit. People who vote in their first election are likely to remain habitual voters, whereas those who do not are likely to remain habitual nonvoters.¹ Research shows voting in one election can increase the probability that a person will vote in the next election by 25 percent.²

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Cities and countries that have already lowered the voting age to 16 have seen much higher turnout rates for first time voters ages 16-17 than for first time voters ages 18-21. Evidence indicates this leads to a long-term boost in turnout. An analysis of the long-term effects of lowering the voting age in five countries found an average increase in turnout of 5 percent in the 20 years following the change in voting age.³

Young people start forming voting habits when they reach the voting age and participate in their first election. While some Americans vote in the first election they are eligible for at age 18 and become habitual voters, the majority of the electorate does not vote upon initial eligibility. In the 2020 election, which saw dramatically increased youth voter turnout compared to 2016, still only 42% of eligible 18-year-olds and 49% of 19-year-olds reported voting, according to the Census Bureau. In the 2022 midterms, those numbers were 20% and 25%, respectively.⁵ These rates are lower than any other age group.

This is partially due to the many barriers to voting that are unique to 18-year-olds. At 18, young people are often adjusting to new responsibilities such as starting college, entering the workforce, or joining the military. They may also struggle to determine the logistics of voting in a new location, either voting absentee or re-registering in a new area. Eighteen-year-olds, in general, face uniquely high barriers to voting and have comparatively little access to supportive resources that can help make voting easy, especially for those who are not in college.⁶

Sixteen-year-olds, however, are in a much better position to be engaged in their first elections. They are in a relatively stable phase of life and oftentimes surrounded by active voters, whether that be older family members or educators. Sixteen is a better time than 18 to establish the habit of voting.

This notion is supported by evidence from the jurisdictions that allow 16-year-old voting, both in the U.S. and internationally. It is also supported by research on the youngest eligible voters. While 18-year-olds as a whole turn out at very low rates, there is some evidence that 18-year-olds who are still in high school at the time of the election do turn out at higher rates than their slightly older peers who are one grade level higher and have already left home by the time of the election.⁷

As researchers behind studies on turnout among the youngest eligible voters concluded, "Today when voters become eligible at 18 years of age, most young voters have had none or few participatory opportunities before leaving home. A younger voting age would create more opportunities for acquiring the habit of voting before leaving home."⁸ Lowering the voting age to 16 would ensure that each new voter experiences at least one election while in high school, assuming two year election cycles. This allows them to establish the habit of voting in a stable environment where families and schools can help students understand the logistics of voting and establish the practice as a lifelong habit.

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Advocates rally in support of legislation to lower the voting age in California, 2019. Photo courtesy of Devin Murphy, California League of Conservation Voters

New research on youth voting in Scotland adds critical empirical evidence to this concept. A 2023 study by Jan Eichhorn and Christine Hübner and published by the University of Edinburgh in cooperation with the University of Sheffield and the think tank d|part investigated the long term impact of the change. They found that “There is a significant follow-through effect in voter turnout among young people who experienced and were allowed to vote in their first election at ages 16 or 17.”⁹ Young voters who were first eligible to vote at age 16 or 17 were statistically significantly more likely to have voted in 2021 than their peers whose first election came at age 18. This shows, concretely, that 16 is a better time than 18 to begin voting if we want to see new voters continue to turn out throughout their 20s.

Lowering the voting age has shown to be effective at increasing turnout among first-time voters, and research demonstrates that once someone cast their first ballot they are likely to continue the habit of voting for years to come. Lowering the voting age can effectively help young people create the habit of voting, increasing overall turnout in the long run.

In Takoma Park’s 2013 elections, the turnout rate for 16- and 17-year-olds exceeded any other demographic.¹⁰ In 2015 and 2017, voter turnout for registered 16- and 17-year-olds was more than double the city’s overall turnout rate.^{11, 12} In 2015,

Hyattsville, Maryland became the second city to lower the voting age. In that year’s election, the turnout rate for 16 and 17-year-olds was a quarter higher than the overall turnout.¹³ In its most recent election, a special election held to elect a city councilmember for one of the city’s wards in the fall of 2020, 16- and 17-year-olds registered to vote turned out at a rate higher than voters ages 18-30 and similar to the overall turnout rate.¹⁴

In 2008, Austria lowered its voting age to 16 for all elections and saw higher engagement from 16- and 17-year old first time voters than from 18-20-year old first time voters.¹⁵ Political engagement among this demographic has continued to increase since. Nearly ten years later, ahead of the 2017 general election, most 16- and 17- year olds said they were inclined to participate in the upcoming election.¹⁶

In 2011, 21 Norwegian municipalities lowered the voting age to 16 for local elections. Once again, voter turnout among 16- and 17-year-old first time voters was much higher than turnout among 18-21 year-old first-time voters.¹⁷

Increased participation is particularly important in local elections, where turnout is especially low and many cities struggle to get even one out of four voters to the polls.¹⁸ Lowering the voting age to 16 is a powerful solution to address this trend.

WHY SHOULD WE LOWER THE VOTING AGE TO 16?

REASON #2: SIXTEEN- AND 17-YEAR-OLDS ARE READY TO VOTE

Research shows that 16- and 17-year-olds have the necessary civic knowledge, skills, and cognitive ability to vote responsibly. A study comparing the qualities associated with voting—such as civic knowledge, political skills, and political interest—among citizens 18 and older and citizens below 18 found no significant differences between 16 year olds and those above age 18. Civic knowledge was determined by individuals' ability to answer questions on U.S. politics and government such as "Which of the two major political parties is most conservative at the national level?"; political skill was determined by individuals' self-reported ability to "write a letter to a public official" or "make a statement at a public meeting"; and political interest was determined by how frequently individuals follow national news.¹⁹

Research also shows that 16- and 17-year-olds have the mental reasoning ability necessary to make informed voting choices. Deciding how to vote relies on "cold cognition," the decision making process in which a person deliberates alone and unhurried, and draws on logical reasoning abilities. Research shows that cold cognition matures by 16, and does not improve as one gets older.²⁰ Research on overall reasoning and cognitive development also shows that there is drastic growth in these areas between ages 11 and 16, significant growth then plateaus at age 16 following this primary development phase.²¹

Additionally, a study on the quality of vote choices among 16- and 17-year-olds in Austria—after the national voting age was lowered to 16 in 2007—concluded that their vote choices were just as consistent with their political preferences as older voters' choices.²² These studies strongly indicate that 16-year-olds are just as ready to vote as 18-year-olds and claims to the contrary are misguided gut reactions.

REASON #3: SIXTEEN- AND 17-YEAR-OLDS HAVE A STAKE IN THE GAME, AND ELECTED OFFICIALS MUST TREAT THEM AS EQUAL CONSTITUENTS

Sixteen- and 17-year-olds work and pay taxes on their income and are affected by the decisions of elected officials today and for the rest of their lives, on issues from education policy to public works projects, climate change, and the national debt. They deserve to have a vote. The most reliable way for ordinary citizens to influence the government is through voting in elections, and by extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds we can ensure elected officials listen to their voices and address their concerns.

This is especially important given the United States' aging electorate and the increasing divergence between the demographics and political interests of younger and older citizens. The electorate is currently the oldest it has been since at least 1970, before citizens ages 18-20 were eligible to vote, and will only get older in the decades to come. The Census Bureau estimates that by 2034, those over the age of 65 will outnumber those 18 and younger for the first time ever, and by 2030, those 65+ will account for more than one-fifth of the population and more than a quarter of the voting age population, for the first time ever.²³

At the same time, young America is becoming more diverse. The public school population already consists of a majority of people of color, and has been since 2014. (In 2020, the public school population was 47% white, 15% Black, 29% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 1% Native American, and 3% 2+ races).²⁴

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These twin trends result in a widening demographic divergence between the youngest and oldest Americans, a phenomenon known as the racial generation gap. The term is defined as “the difference between the percent of those 65 or older who are white, minus the percent of those aged 17 and younger who are white. The bigger the gap, the more demographically distinct the generations.”²⁵ In 1975, the gap was 12 percentage points. In 2015, it was 26 points, a dramatic shift. In some states, it is as high as 41 percentage points. In more than 150 counties, the gap has widened by 20+ points since 1990.²⁶

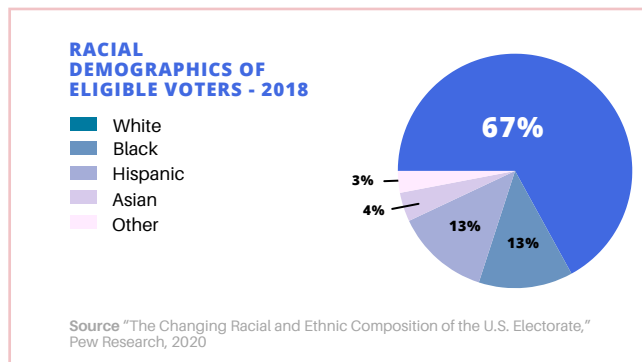
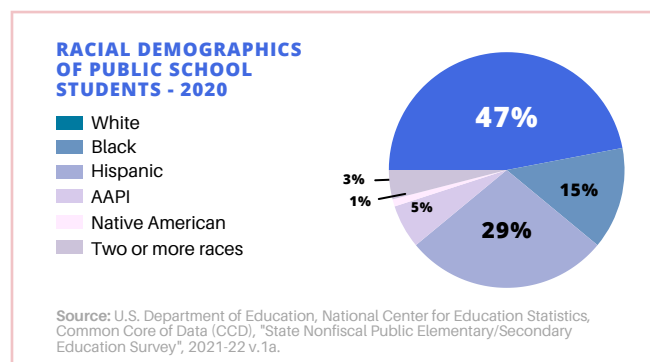
This can have serious consequences, including in education policy. Research shows that seniors are less likely to support spending on youth when the youth are from different racial groups than the seniors. Indeed, states and counties with larger racial generation gaps tend to spend less on public education on a per capita basis. Research published by PolicyLink and the USC Program for Environmental & Regional Equity analyzed the lower 48 states and found a general pattern: “as the racial generation gap increases, education spending declines.” In other words, a “negative relationship between educational spending and the (extent of) racial mismatch between the young and the old.”²⁷

Investing in the next generation is critical to our collective future, and given these dynamics it is

time we give younger people the opportunity to take this future into their own hands by voting in local elections.

Bridging the divide between our generations requires a host of policy solutions and community-based initiatives. The inclusion of 16- and 17-year-olds in the electorate, and the subsequent increase in turnout among voters in their 20s it would spur, would constitute a step in the direction of racial equity and help make sure the interests of diverse young people are represented in a time of historic demographic change. In view of this research, lowering the voting age not only makes political sense; it’s also an imperative from the standpoint of generational and racial equity to ensure that all young people from all backgrounds have a civic pathway to realize—and vote for—the futures they deserve.

We know that elected officials pay most attention to those who vote. Lowering the voting age to 16 would immediately give 16- and 17-year-olds, who work and pay taxes, a say in decisions that affect their lives and how their tax money is spent. Further, it would give a louder voice to a diverse generation of young Americans who are at risk of being overshadowed by historic growth in the oldest cohort of voters as a proportion of the electorate.



WHY SHOULD WE LOWER THE VOTING AGE TO 16?

REASON #4: LOWERING THE VOTING AGE TO 16 WILL STRENGTHEN CIVICS EDUCATION

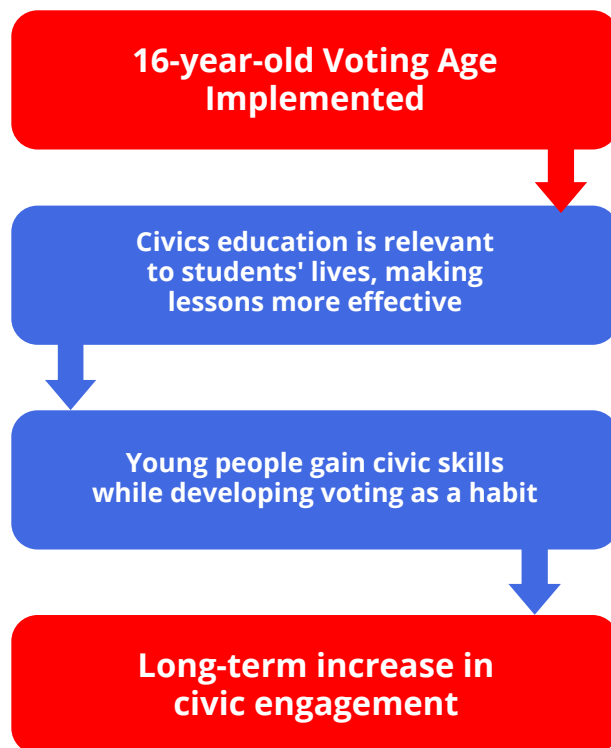
As we call for a lower voting age in the United States, significant initiatives are also underway to strengthen civics education nationwide. This work naturally goes hand in hand with the push to lower the voting age, and together strong civics education and a voting age of 16 have the potential to significantly boost civic engagement.

Prioritizing effective civics education is crucial for increasing long term civic participation. Research shows that people who attend high schools with a strong culture of civic engagement are more likely to vote in their 30s, regardless of their individual opinions on the importance of voting.²⁸ Though schools in the U.S. have largely overlooked civics in recent decades, several states and cities have recently moved to reprioritize it, including in Massachusetts, Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Utah, where state legislatures and in some cases, state Secretaries of State offices, have taken the lead in establishing more comprehensive civics requirements.

A lower voting age would make civics more effective by adding a level of relevance to civics courses by allowing students to directly apply what they're learning in the classroom in their communities. It would encourage schools to teach more civics and that of a higher quality given its immediate implications on students' lives. Allowing young people to vote while they are learning about government, and their role as citizens, in high school civics courses captures the full potential of civics education.

Strong civics education and a lower voting age would mutually reinforce each other to produce the best outcomes in terms of increasing civic engagement. Together, they can help young people gain foundational civic knowledge and skills, and develop a habit of participation.

This is supported by a case study from Austria where voting age reform was accompanied by other measures intended to engage young citizens, including the elevation of the status of civic education in schools.²⁹ Since 2008, when Austria lowered its voting age to 16 for all of the country's elections, turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds has been higher than the previous average for first time voters.³⁰ This success shows the promise of a lower voting age combined with a renewed focus on civic education. Lowering the voting age to 16 can bring civics education to life and help fuel its continued resurgence across the country.



MYTHS ABOUT LOWERING THE VOTING AGE

Like any bold idea, lowering the voting age faces an array of counterarguments, and these deserve adequate consideration. Ultimately, most counterarguments come down to claims surrounding the maturity and ability of 16- and 17-year olds. Youth is a nebulous concept, and, in reality, legal age-based distinctions in our society are arbitrary and based on what is deemed best for society at large, as judged at a certain point in time. Some of the most relevant specific counterarguments are addressed as follows:

MYTH #1: 16-YEAR-OLDS ARE NOT MATURE ENOUGH TO VOTE

Scientists distinguish between two kinds of cognition: “hot” cognition (psychosocial) and “cold” cognition (cognitive). Hot cognition occurs in decisions which are made under the influence of a group, under stress, or in a hurry. Cold cognition, in contrast, occurs in decisions which are made in the opposite conditions, where people have time and resources to make a deliberate, reasoned judgment. While sixteen-year-olds are not very good at making decisions which require “hot” cognition, they are just as good as older adults at making decisions which require “cold” cognition. Voting is an activity that relies on cold cognition. This type of thought processing ability is fully developed at 16, and does not improve as one further ages.³¹ Research also shows that by age 16, young people have the necessary civic knowledge and skills necessary to vote.³²

MYTH #2: THE VOTING AGE MUST BE TIED TO THE AGE OF LEGAL ADULthood

Sixteen-year-olds play an important role in our society. In most states, they can work without any restriction on hours, pay taxes, drive, and in some cases be tried for crimes as adults. The legal age of consent in many states is 16, and the compulsory school attendance age ends at 16 in many states. The legal definition linking adulthood to the age of 18 should not affect voter eligibility. It is also important to emphasize that our efforts are only to lower the voting age to 16. All other legal age limits should be set in accordance to what is best for each individual issue. Our country has set the driving age, in most states, at 16, and the drinking age at 21. Each should be considered on its own merits. For this specific issue, the voting age should be 16.

Figure 1

Psychosocial Maturity (Standardized Composite Scores) as a Function of Age (in Years)

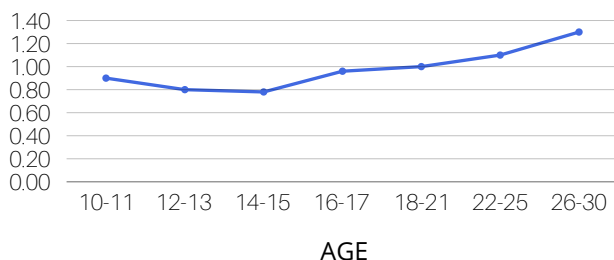
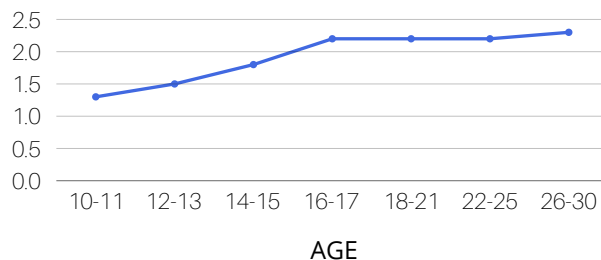


Figure 2

General Cognitive Capacity (Standardized Composite Scores) as a Function of Age (in Years)



Source: Reproduced from: Daniel Hart and Robert Atkins, “American Sixteen- and Seventeen-Year-Olds Are Ready to Vote,” *Annals of the American Academy* 633 (January 2011): 208.

MYTHS ABOUT LOWERING THE VOTING AGE

MYTH #3: LOWERING THE VOTING AGE IS A PARTISAN POWER GRAB

The effort to lower the voting age transcends party lines. The purpose of the effort is to invigorate our democracy by fostering active and engaged citizens. A more lively political discourse—in classrooms and in the broader public sphere—can stimulate ideas from across the political spectrum. The effort to lower the voting age is based on increasing participation in democracy, not promoting any one ideology. Republican legislators from three states have supported or co-sponsored legislation related to lowering the voting age in recent years.³³ In Europe, where discourse on a lower voting age is more developed, politicians from across the spectrum support the idea, and some groups have made affirmative cases for the reform from conservative points of view, such as *The Conservative Case for Votes at 16 and 17*, published in the UK in 2018.³⁴

MYTH #4: SIXTEEN- AND 17-YEAR-OLDS WILL COPY THEIR PARENTS' VOTES

This claim is reminiscent of arguments made by opponents of women's suffrage, who feared women would copy their husbands' votes. The argument is not a legitimate reason to deny someone the right to vote, and, in the case of women's voting, has been debunked as many married couples are increasingly voting for separate candidates.³⁵ Data from the 2014 Scottish independence referendum also suggests this claim is false. A survey conducted prior to the referendum found that over 40 percent of newly eligible young voters had different voting intentions than a parent interviewed.³⁶ This claim will need to be studied more in the United States, but the argument remains an insufficient reason to deny someone the right to vote.



Youth advocates testify on legislation to lower the voting age at a D.C. Council Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety hearing, June 2018.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE INTERNATIONALLY

Initiatives to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds have seen considerably more momentum internationally. At least 16 countries around the world use a voting age of 16 or 17 for local, state, or national elections—including Ecuador, Germany, Austria, Estonia, Scotland, and Argentina. A full list of these countries and their specific voting age policies is in Appendix A.

As mentioned earlier in this report, research on the countries that have implemented 16- and 17-year-old voting shows positive results. In Latin America, the region with the most countries that allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote, research focusing on Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, and Nicaragua shows that people who were able to vote starting at age 16 exhibited greater satisfaction with democracy and trust in government.⁵⁵

Evidence from Europe also supports the notion that 16 is a better age than 18 to establish voting as a habit. In Austria, over the 10 years since a 16-year-old voting age was implemented on the national level, turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds has been higher than 18-20 year-olds, and similar to the electorate's overall average. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds have followed political campaigns to the same extent as other eligible young voters and have exhibited higher levels of satisfaction of democracy, which has a positive effect on turnout.⁵⁶

In Germany, where the voting age is 16 in some states and cities, turnout among 16-20 year olds is higher than citizens up to 10 years older.⁵⁷ Building on this success, the German Parliament approved a motion in November 2022 to lower the voting age to 16 for European Parliament elections beginning in 2024, but not for federal elections in Germany.⁵⁸ In Norway, where 30 municipalities have used a 16-year-old voting age for local elections on a trial basis, 16- and 17-year-old turnout was much higher than turnout among traditional first-time voters ages 18-21.⁵⁹



“Lowering the voting age to 16, in countries that have adopted this electoral reform, has **increased turnout** in these countries above what it would have been in the absence of the reform.”

– Mark N. Franklin, in
Lowering the Voting Age to 16: Lessons from Real Experiences Worldwide,
edited by Jan Eichhorn
and Johannes Bergh

One of the most recent European countries to make the change, Estonia, also saw turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds exceed the overall voter participation rate. This is a remarkably positive result considering turnout among the youngest voters has tended to be significantly lower than the overall rate. Preliminary calculations by Generation Citizen indicate that globally, 7.9 percent of all 17-year-olds are eligible to vote, and 4.1 percent of all 16-year-olds can vote. Enfranchising 16- and 17-year olds is not a new idea, and momentum for lowering the voting age has continued to gain steam across the globe.

CONCLUSION



“Our young people are at the forefront of some of the most existential crises facing our communities and our society at large. I believe that **those who will inherit the nation** we design here in Congress, by virtue of our policies and authority, **should have a say** in who represents them.”

– *Congresswoman
Ayanna Pressley*

More than 50 years after the 26th Amendment extended voting rights to those over the age of 18, the idea of 16- and 17-year-old voting continues to move into the mainstream public discourse on solutions to improve our democracy, while advancing generational and racial equity. The base of research on the topic has grown significantly in recent years, alongside significant growth in political support and legislative progress.

Extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds on the local level can increase turnout in the long run by making it easier for young people to establish the habit of voting, and 16- and 17-year-olds have indeed voted at higher rates than older first-time voters when given the chance, and have continued to turn out at future elections. Lowering the voting age can also catalyze improvements in civic education, and 16- and 17-year olds have shown they are ready to vote and have a stake in local issues.

Critically, lowering the voting age is an effort to help build an inclusive, age-diverse democracy by fostering active and engaged citizens at a time when policy reforms and educational initiatives are sorely needed to strengthen participation and faith in the democratic process.

It is still only ten years since the first American city implemented 16- and 17-year-old voting for municipal elections. The evidence that the policy works continues to build and support for the idea continues to grow among legislators and the public, and these trends are poised to only accelerate in the years to come.

Realizing the potential of the growing movement to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds requires supporting and amplifying the work young people are leading across the country. Following their lead, we will continue to move closer to a day when all 16- and 17-year-olds are eligible to vote, and our democracy is better for it.