

Millions of American citizens have the right to drive, work, pay taxes, and be tried in court, but not the right to vote. These young adults live in American society and are required to obey the laws their representatives set, but have no say in choosing those representatives nor any way to influence the policies they enact. Lowering the voting age to 16, beginning with municipal elections, would enfranchise millions of youth, finally giving them the say they deserve in their government and the future of their nation.

Numerous issues impact 16 and 17 year-olds in a way that they do not impact any other demographic. These citizens are the ones who will be deployed to fight in a war if they choose to join the military, who have to attend low-quality schools that politicians fail to fix, and who will retire years from now when social security will be bankrupt. Today, poverty and unemployment disproportionately affect youth. Approximately 20% of youth under the age of 18 are living in poverty, compared to only 10% of adults.<sup>1</sup> The huge bloc of elderly voters sways policy-makers to address their issues and meet their needs, but youth lack that same power. As a result, politicians fail to address youth issues to the extent that they address adult issues. From 1975 to 1990, government spending per poor senior increased by 50%, but spending per poor child remained the same.<sup>2</sup> It is no surprise, then, that over that same period, poverty among the elderly decreased from 25.3% to 10.5%, while poverty among children increased 14% to 19.9%, with no electoral consequences for politicians.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, on the issue of social security, politicians feel enormous pressure to maintain current benefits, fearing the loss of seniors' votes, but they do not feel that same pressure to save social security so that it will be available to future generations. On other issues, too, politicians fall into the trap of addressing only current concerns, and voters in later years of their life allow their representatives to get away with pushing problems onto later generations. If politicians were made accountable to young voters who will be forced to confront those problems in the future - who will live to see the full consequences of a damaged economy and environment come to fruition - they would finally be forced to come up with long-term, sustainable solutions to secure a prosperous future for the nation.

Lowering the voting age to 16 would not only give youth the same influence over public policy that adult voters enjoy, but would also encourage lifelong political activism. When teenagers begin voting early, voting becomes a habit. The earlier teens begin voting, the more likely they are to continue voting throughout the rest of their life. Even participation in mock elections at school have been shown to increase lifelong voter turnout by 10%.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, if teens form a habit of not voting, that habit will likely continue, leading to nationwide political

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<sup>1</sup> United States, Census Bureau, *Poverty Status of People, by Age, Race, and Hispanic: 1959 to 2014*. (Washington: GPO, 2014)

<sup>2</sup> Paul Peterson, *An Immodest Proposal*. Daedalus Vol. 121 (1992): 157.

<sup>3</sup> Census.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Miklosi, *Respecting, Listening, and Empowering: Three Vital Factors for Increasing Civic Engagement in American Teenagers*. (National Civic Review, 96.2, 2007): 36-41.

apathy and spotty turnout at best.<sup>5</sup> With a voting age of eighteen, youth are given time for that non-voting habit to form. In fact, each additional month of age before an individual starts voting can be linked to a one-percentage point drop in voter turnout.<sup>6</sup> When eighteen year-olds gain the right to vote, they feel less compelled to go to the polls than they would at an earlier age. At the age of eighteen, young adults are in the process of leaving home to go to college, and when the election rolls around in November, they are often living in a different state than they are registered to vote in, meaning that in order to vote, they would have to order an absentee ballot. At home, parents who regularly vote influence their children to do the same, but away from home, the only influence is the collective non-voting habits of their peers, which is why youth who live at home with two voting parents are 18 percentage points more likely to vote than youth who have left home.<sup>7</sup> With a voting age of 16, young adults would be far more likely to begin voting at home and build a habit that could keep them voting for the rest of their lives.

Contrary to the belief of many adults, adolescents are just as capable of making informed political decisions as older voters. Studies have measured the political knowledge of 16 year-olds to be about the same as that of 21 year-olds.<sup>8</sup> If these young adults are believed to have enough maturity and independence to drive and work, then they have enough maturity to vote. Teenagers are not merely pawns of their parents; they have their own distinct political views. In fact, during the Scottish referendum on independence, which allowed 16 and 17 year-olds to vote, over 40% of 16 to 17 year-olds chose a different side than their parents.<sup>9</sup> Even further, giving adolescents the right to vote may encourage them to form independent, educated opinions. In the past, students participating in mock elections were found to have spent more time following the election and discussing politics with their family than they would have otherwise.<sup>10</sup> In the process of preparing to vote, these students increased their knowledge of the election, and through discussion, often increased their families' interest in voting as well. A survey conducted in just five cities found that the mock election program Kids Voting influenced at least 600,000 adults' decision to vote.<sup>11</sup> Those same impacts on both adolescent and adult political engagement would likely be seen if students were allowed to vote in the actual election.

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Plutzer, *Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood*. (American Political Science Review 1.1, 2002): 41-56.

<sup>6</sup> Yosef Bhatti and Kasper Hansen. *Leaving the Nest and the Social Act of Voting: Turnout Among First Time Voters*. (Journal of Elections, Public Opinions and Parties 22.4, 2012): 383.

<sup>7</sup> Yosef, 389.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Atkins and Daniel Hart. *American Sixteen and Seventeen Year-Olds Are Ready to Vote*. (The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 663.1, 2011): 201-222.

<sup>9</sup> Vanessa Barford and Jan Eichhorn, PhD, "Should 16 Year-Olds Get the Vote Following Referendum?" *BBC News*, September 23, 2014, July 25, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-29327912>

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, Thomas J. Editor. *Engaging the Public: How Government and the Media can Reinvigorate American Democracy*. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1980): 160-161.

<sup>11</sup> John Stuart Hall, *Elections and Civic Education, the Case of Kids Voting USA*. (National Civic Review, Spring 1998): 79.



Lowering the voting age to 16 would increase political literacy and civic engagement, while giving millions of Americans a voice in government. Already, progress has been made, and two Maryland cities allow 16 and 17 year-olds to vote. Measures to lower the voting age are under serious consideration in San Francisco, and Washington, D.C, and Colorado and New Mexico may soon allow 16 and 17 year-olds to participate in school board elections.<sup>12</sup> This level – in local and municipal elections – is the right place to start. City councils and local officials can choose to give adolescents a voice in municipal governments, allowing them to play a more active role in their communities. Decisions made at the local level, including those on the school board, often have the greatest impact on the lives of young Americans. Gradually, as more and more municipalities give youth the right to vote, this activism will trickle up to the state and then national level, until all 16 and 17 year-olds have the full voting rights of American citizens.

America’s youth will inherit the nation’s economy, environment, and military. It is time to allow the embodiment of the future to play a role in the present as well.

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<sup>12</sup> Court, Emma. “Lower Voting Age Gains Traction in Some Cities.” *The Wall Street Journal*. November 20, 2015. July 26, 2016. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/lower-voting-age-gains-traction-in-some-cities-1448050034>

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