Lowering the Voting Age to 16 for School Elections: It's Time

One of the major roles of the US public education system is to prepare young people for the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. We teach our children about the value of democracy, and 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 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 form positive voting habits early on and learn how to engage in healthy debate on civic decisions with the support of their schools.

“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 Lowering the Voting Age in School Elections to 16:

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.

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. Research shows 16-year-olds are competent to vote. Studies show that young people demonstrate political efficacy on par with that of adults. A 16-year old's political knowledge is comparable to a 21-year old's and close to average for adults of any age.

4. Sixteen-year olds DO vote differently from their parents. Results from Scotland's independence – in which 16-year olds could vote - showed that 44% of young people had different voting intentions than their parents.

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. Lowering 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. 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 allowed, we have seen that 16- and 17-year olds actually vote in at higher rates than legal adults.

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

**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.

**Low Adult Participation:** As of February 2015 Denver had 471,283 active and inactive voters. In this year's elections only 22% of all voters showed up to vote in the Denver school board election. We need to do better, and this change can help.

Jefferson County protests show that now is the time for a policy proposal

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.

Lowering the Voting Age Across the Country and the World:

1. In 2013, the city of Takoma Park, Maryland became the first in the US to allow 16 year olds to vote in all municipal elections - not just the school board. In 2015, Hyattsville, Maryland followed suit.

2. After single-digit turnout rates in 2015 school board elections, a bill was introduced in the New Mexico state legislature to give 16-year olds the right to vote in school boards. It is expected to be introduced again in 2016.

3. 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 San Francisco, an effort is already underway to lower the voting age to 16 for municipal and school district elections.

4. Internationally, Austria, Brazil, Nicaragua, Scotland, and other nations have given 16 year olds the vote. The UK is currently considering letting 16 year olds vote in its EU referendum.

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Rick Pearson. “17-year-olds voted at higher rate than parents in primary,” Chicago Tribune, May 17, 2014
