Welcome!
We’re thrilled that you’re interested in taking action to help lower the voting age for local elections. This toolkit is meant to give you background information on the issue, help you understand how to approach advocacy on the local level, and give you some pointers on how you can best communicate about the issue.

More resources are available at Vote16USA.org. It’s best to start by looking at the feasibility map and reading through the white paper to see whether your state gives cities the power to lower the voting age on their own, or if cities need state approval. Of course, another first step is to contact us so we can give you more resources, help you understand the legal situation and plan your advocacy, and connect you with others who can be helpful.

Email bklugman@generationcitizen.org or contact us through the website to get in touch.

This toolkit includes the following documents:

- Why Lower the Voting Age?
- Steps to Passing a City Charter Amendment
- Steps to Build Support for a Local Campaign to Lower the Voting Age
- Talking Points and Advice for Media Interviews
- Sample Letter to City Council Member
- History of Efforts to Lower the Voting Age
Why Lower the Voting Age in Local Elections?

Reason #1: We need to encourage effective and relevant civic learning
Lowering the voting age can drive demand for effective civics education in schools, reviving a discipline that is too often pushed to the side. First, lowering the voting age can motivate students to engage with civics classes. Students learn best when the material presented is relevant to their lives, and civics classes fall short when they teach young people how government works without any ability to actually participate in it. Letting 16- and 17-year-olds vote will bring much-needed relevance to civics classes. In addition, lowering the voting age can lead schools to focus more attention on effective civics education. The high school classroom is the ideal place to teach and engage young people about important local issues, and lowering the voting age can inspire schools to take advantage of this opportunity.

Reason #2: Sixteen- and 17-Year-olds have a stake in the game, and politicians must pay attention to them
Youth are affected by local political issues as much as anyone. They also work without limits on hours and pay taxes on their income, can drive in most states, and in some cases, are tried in adult courts. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds deserve the right to vote on issues that affect them on the local level. Further, voting is the most reliable way for ordinary citizens to influence the government. Lowering the voting age would force local politicians to listen to sixteen- and 17-year-olds and address their concerns.

Reason #3: Sixteen- and 17-year-olds are ready to vote
Research shows that 16- and 17-year-olds are intellectually ready to vote. For example, on average 16-year-olds possess the same level of civic knowledge as 21-year-olds. Data from Austria, where the national voting age is 16, further indicates that sixteen- and 17-year-olds are ready to responsibly exercise the right to vote.
Reason #4: We need to make voting a habit
Lowering the voting age can lead to a long-term increase in voter turnout, bringing more citizens in touch with their government and pushing the government to better serve its people. Research shows that voting is habitual. A person who votes in the first election they are eligible for is likely to continue voting consistently, while someone who doesn’t will take several years to pick up the habit. It is clear that age 16 is a better time to establish a new habit than age 18, and data from places that have lowered the voting age shows that 16-year-olds do indeed vote at higher rates than older first-time voters.

Reason #5: Demographic trends hurt youth in elections: lowering the voting age can reverse it
Due to the country’s shifting demographics, it is now more than ever important to increase the turnout rate among young voters. When older voters outnumber younger voters by an overwhelming margin, as some municipalities experience, the interests of young people, such as school funding, can be overlooked. Lowering the voting age is a reform that can create habitual voters who, as they continue voting through their 20’s, can increase the young voter turnout rate and advocate for the interests of youth in local elections.
Steps to Passing a City Charter Amendment

In most cities, lowering the voting age requires an amendment to the city’s charter. The details of the process are different for each city, but in most cities the general steps are as follows. Before starting a campaign to lower the voting age in your city, it is important to do follow-up research and understand the specifics of the process in your city. Vote16USA can assist with this research for individual cities.

Step 1: Place a charter question on the ballot
The charter amendment will ultimately appear as a yes/no ballot question to be decided by the city’s voters at an election. There are usually two main ways a charter question can be placed on the ballot.

• **Option 1: Voter-initiated petition process**
  o Any citizen may propose an amendment, and gather petition signatures to put the proposed amendment on the ballot. The number of signatures required varies, and is usually a percentage of the number of people who voted in the last election. Cities have very strict legal requirements for petitions, and it’s important to follow the procedures exactly.

• **Option 2: City council action**
  o City council members can propose charter amendments, and the council can vote on whether to put the proposed amendments on the ballot at the next election. This is the most feasible process in most cities, since it just requires the support of the council, and the council’s support can help the amendment pass on the ballot.

• **Option 3: Charter commission**
  o Some cities have a charter commission, which is separate from the city council and can propose charter amendment. The specifics vary greatly and it’s best to consult the laws of individual cities.

Step 2: Pass the ballot measure
Once the proposed amendment is on the ballot, more than 50 percent of voters must vote yes to approve it. This is challenging, but can be achieved with a well-coordinated campaign. It’s sometimes possible to borrow strategies from previous successful ballot measures campaigns in the city.
Engage Young People
Efforts to lower the voting age must be guided by those we aim to enfranchise. Building a strong group of engaged young people is a vital first step in a local campaign to lower the voting age, and those under 18 are the best spokespeople for the effort. In some cases, it may work best to have a core group of youth leaders and a broader network of supporters that can be mobilized to support the effort. It is important to establish clear guidelines and expectations for the young people involved. The Youth Empowerment Academy organized by the San Francisco Youth Commission can serve as a model for other cities working to engage young people on the issue.

Get Stakeholders on Board
Lowering the voting age is a new idea for many, and getting endorsements from key stakeholders early in the process can help give the proposal credibility and build momentum. Potential stakeholders to target include: city council members, the mayor, higher level elected officials who represent the city, school board members, other leaders in the education system, leaders of prominent local nonprofits, and those who have led previous successful efforts to pass ballot measures or legislation in the city. Young people can often make the most powerful case for stakeholders to support the effort.

Spread the Word
Spreading the word about lowering the voting age is key to getting a campaign off the ground. Local press can go a long way, and the media is often eager to cover a new idea that showcases young leaders. Outreach strategies should be tailored for individual communities, and it is important that youth leaders remain at the front of the effort.

Work with a Council Member to Introduce Legislation
Since the easiest way to get a charter amendment on the ballot is usually through the city council, it is important to build a strong relationship with a city council member who is excited about lowering the voting age, can introduce legislation, and can be a public leader on the issue.
Talking Points and Advice for Media Interviews

Why should we lower the voting age? Main points:

• Lowering the voting age can lead to a long-term increase in voter turnout, because voting is habitual and 16 is a much better time than 18 to establish the habit of voting. At 18, people are in a state of transition that makes it less likely they will vote. At 16, people can establish the habit of voting in a stable environment. This is crucial, because whether a person votes in the first election they are eligible for strongly influences whether they will continue to vote in future elections.

• We need bold ideas to reinvigorate participation in democracy, and lowering the voting age is one of these potential solutions. Turnout for the 2014 mid-term elections was at a 72-year low and the United States ranks below most other advanced democracies in voter turnout.

• Sixteen- and 17-year-olds work and pay taxes on their income, can drive in most states, and can in some cases be tried as adults in court. In addition, local political decisions have great influence on the lives of 16- and 17-year-olds. They deserve the right to vote on issues that affect them level.

• Voting is the most reliable way for ordinary citizens to influence the government. Lowering the voting age would force local politicians to listen to sixteen- and 17-year-olds and address their concerns.

• Sixteen- and 17-year-olds are ready to vote. Research shows they have requisite civic knowledge and skills, and have the mental reasoning ability necessary to make informed choices.

• Lowering the voting age can encourage better civics education. This is important because only one-third of Americans can name all three branches of government, and schools are failing to prioritize effective civics education as they focus on meeting accountability measures in other subjects. Letting 16- and 17-year-olds vote will make civics classes more relevant to their lives and can lead schools to focus more attention on effective civics education.
Addressing counterarguments:

- Sixteen-year-olds are not mature enough to vote
  - This gut reaction is misguided. Voting depends on “cold cognition,” a thought out decision-making process in which 16-year-olds perform just as well as adults.
  - Sixteen-year-olds can are mature enough to drive, work, and pay taxes. They’re also mature enough to vote.

- Sixteen- and 17-year-olds will just copy their parents’ votes
  - Data from the 2014 Scottish independence referendum suggests this claim is untrue. Over 40 percent of 16- and 17-year-olds voted differently from their parents.

- Lowering the voting age is just a ploy to get more votes for Democrats
  - The effort to lower the voting age transcends party lines. The main goal of the effort is to invigorate our democracy by fostering active and engaged citizens. Greater participation in democracy and a more lively political discourse benefit everyone.
  - The perception that young voters favor Democrats is often overstated—in a 2014 Pew survey, 50 percent of millennials self-identified as political independents.
  - Longitudinal polling data on political ideology shows that millennials are trending conservatively.

- Sixteen- and 17-year-olds are not legal adults
  - Sixteen- and 17-year-olds play a vital role in society. They drive, they work, and they pay taxes. The legal definition linking adulthood to the age of 18 should not affect voter eligibility.
  - Many states already allow 17-year-olds to vote in primary elections.
  - 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. For this specific issue, the voting age should be 16.

- Slippery slope: Why stop at 16? Why not extend voting rights to 15-year-olds or 12-year-olds or even younger?
  - Sixteen has a particular significance in our culture, as it is the age when young people can obtain a driver’s license, work unlimited hours, etc.
  - Some research shows that on a cognitive level, 16-year-olds are virtually indistinguishable from 18-year-olds and slightly older voters, but 15-year-olds are not.
  - At 16, most students have taken or are taking high school civics classes, and it makes sense to let them vote at the same time.
  - Lowering the voting age to 16 ensures that everyone experiences one election while still in school (assuming two year election cycles).

- Preparing separate ballots for 16- and 17-year olds will cost too much to implement.
  - In San Francisco, it is estimated that each new ballot costs $8.50, and lowering the voting age for city elections would cost between $42-85K per election. This is a very small fraction of the overall cost of administering a city election, and a small price to pay for a big investment in democracy.
Where has it been done?

• Two cities in Maryland – Takoma Park and Hyattsville – lowered the voting age for their local elections in 2013 and 2015, respectively. In the elections since, 16- and 17-year-olds have turned out at higher rates than older voters.

• Many countries around the world have voting ages lower than 18, including Austria, Brazil, and Scotland. See Vote16USA.org for a full list.

Things to avoid:

• Arguing by analogy
  o If someone suggests that 16- and 17-year-olds do not have the mental capacity to vote, don’t respond with, “We don’t disenfranchise the elderly or adults with declining capacities.” This concedes that 16- and 17-year-olds may not be ready to vote, and distracts from the main points about giving rights to 16- and 17-year-olds. It’s better to respond directly, not with an analogy.

• Distracting terminology
  o Avoid words that set up a distinction between youth and adults, like “youth,” “adult,” “teenagers,” or “kids.” Instead, stick to the actual ages and talk about 16- and 17-year-olds directly.

• Comparing this to other movements to expand suffrage
  o Don’t compare lowering the voting age to suffrage expansions like the civil rights movement and the women’s suffrage movement. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds are different in that they will eventually be enfranchised at the age of 18. More importantly, these comparisons can be offensive to some people.
Sample Letter to City Council Member

Your Name
Address
City, State, Zip Code
Phone number
[Insert date]

The Honorable [insert title and full name]
Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear [title and last name],

My name is [your name] and I am a [__-year-old student, or parent, teacher, etc.] from [city]. I am writing to urge you to consider [introducing or supporting] legislation to lower the voting age to 16 for municipal elections here in [city].

Two cities in Maryland have lowered their voting ages to 16 for local elections with success, and other efforts are underway across the country, most notably in San Francisco and Washington, D.C. Research shows that this move can improve long-term voter turnout and promote civic education, and that 16- and 17-year-olds are capable of making informed decisions at the polls. Prominent politicians, academics, and organizations support this effort, including Nancy Pelosi.

I am advocating in tandem with Vote16USA, an initiative of Generation Citizen that supports efforts to lower the voting age to 16 for local elections around the country. Vote16USA published a comprehensive white paper in December and was featured in the New York Times, and recently launched a website with more information and the latest news on the issue.

[One or two sentences from your personal perspective on why this is important for your community.]

Are you interested in talking further? I would be honored to speak with you personally about this bold idea to improve our democracy.

Sincerely,

[Your full name]
History of Efforts to Lower the Voting Age

City Level Efforts
The best way to lower the voting age is on the city level – one city at a time. Arguments about lowering the voting age are strongest in the context of local elections, and it is easier to build support on the city level than on a state or national level. Notable city level efforts include:

2000 - Cambridge, MA: Students in Cambridge, MA advocated for lowering the voting age in local elections. The city council supported the proposal, but due to MA state law it also had to be approved by the state legislature. The bill did not advance through the state legislature. The students tried again, aiming for just school committee elections. The city council was supportive but it did not advance through the state legislature.

2003 – Anchorage, AK: A proposal to lower the voting age in local elections was brought to the city council and voted down. It was then put before voters as a ballot measure, and again failed.

2005 – Berkeley, CA: A city council member submitted a bill that would have put the question of lowering the voting age for school board elections to 17 before voters as a ballot measure. The council voted 5-4 against having the ballot measure.

2010 – Lowell, MA: Young people from the United Teen Equality Center in Lowell, MA advocated to lower the voting age to 17, and the city council supported the proposal. The proposal went to the state legislature, just like with Cambridge. It passed in the state Senate but not the House.

2013 – Takoma Park, MD: Maryland’s laws are unique, in that cities can lower the local voting age with just a city council vote – no ballot measure or state approval required. The city of Takoma Park lowered its voting age in 2013.


Current City Level Efforts:
San Francisco: The SFYC is leading a campaign to lower the voting age.

Washington, D.C.: There is a bill in the city council that would lower the voting age to 16.

Richmond, CA: The Richmond Youth Council is advocating for the city council to support the issue, but a bill has not been introduced.

Jersey City, NJ: Students are advocating for the city council to support the issue, but a bill has not been introduced.

Other cities are also exploring the issue, but have not yet introduced legislation.

State Level Efforts
State Representatives and State Senators in several states have introduced bills over the past 15 years that would lower the voting age for either all of the states’ elections or just school board elections in the state. None of these bills have passed, and very few made it out of committee. These bills include:

- 2003 – Texas
- 2004 – California
- 2004 - Iowa
- 2005 - Washington
- 2008 - Illinois
- 2008 - Michigan
- 2009 - Wisconsin
- 2011 - Washington
- 2014 - Missouri
- 2015 - Minnesota
- 2015 - New Mexico
- 2015 - Arizona
- 2015 - Hawaii

**Seventeen-Year-Old Primary Voting**
Twenty states allow 17-year-olds to vote in presidential primary elections if they will be 18 by the general election, although it varies by party. A smaller number of states allow 17-year-olds to vote in congressional primaries. For more information and to learn the laws in each state visit fairvote.org.

**Pre-Registration**
Some states allow 16- or 17-year-olds to pre-register to vote, so that when they turn 18 they are automatically registered. For more information and to learn the laws in each state visit fairvote.org.