

Talking Points on Lowering the Voting Age

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.
- 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 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- We're working to lower the voting age on the **local level** only, for the elections that are most directly relevant to young people's lives.

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).

Some of this document’s content is adapted from FairVote’s “Advice to Speakers: 16-year-old Voting.”

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
 - 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
 - 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
 - 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.