

# Talking Points on Lowering the Voting Age

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## Why should we lower the voting age to 16 for local elections?

### Main talking points:

#### **Lowering the voting age can create lifelong voters and lead to a long-term increase in voter turnout.**

- 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, young people can establish the habit of voting in a more stable environment, supported by family, peers, and teachers.
- In places that have lowered the voting age to 16 and tracked the data, 16- and 17-year-olds have consistently turned out at higher rates than 18-20 year olds (traditional first-time voters). (Data from Takoma Park, Austria, and some cities in Norway.)
- If someone votes in the first election they are eligible for, they are likely to become a habitual voter and keep voting in future elections. If someone does not vote in the first election they are eligible for, they are likely to become a habitual non-voter for the next several elections.
  - Data shows that voting in one election increases the probability of voting in the next election by up to 50 percent.

#### **Lowering the voting age would ensure that elected officials to listen to young people and address their concerns.**

- Voting is the most reliable way for ordinary citizens to influence the government.
- Elected officials pay most attention to those who vote.
- There is no better way to ensure that young people's voices are heard when it comes to local policymaking than giving them the right to vote.

### **Sixteen- and 17-year-olds deserve the right to vote on issues that affect them.**

- Local political decisions have great influence on the lives of 16- and 17-year-olds: public transportation, school funding, jobs, police policies, parks and recreation, and more.
- Sixteen- and 17-year-olds work and pay taxes on their income, can drive, and can in some cases be tried as adults in court.
- *Note: This point can be great for energizing people who are already supportive, and is sometimes less effective as persuading people who are opposed to the idea.*

### **Sixteen- and 17-year-olds are ready to vote.**

- Research shows that 16-year-olds have requisite civic knowledge and skills, and have the mental reasoning ability necessary to make informed choices.
  - Sixteen-year-olds' level of civic knowledge is equal to 21-year-olds.
  - Voting is a behavior that relies on a thought process that is sometimes called "cold cognition" – a slow, deliberate, thought-out decision-making process. This is the opposite of "hot cognition" – the high pressure, impulsive decision-making process. It is true that 16-year-olds are not as good as older adults at hot cognition, but they are just as good as older young adults at cold cognition.

### **Lowering the voting age can encourage better civics education.**

- Students learn best when class material is relevant to their lives, and there is no better way to make civics classes relevant than by inviting students into the voting booth.
- Letting 16- and 17-year-olds vote can push schools to focus more attention on effective 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.

### **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. Most major cities struggle to get even 20 percent turnout in their local elections, and many in the United States are questioning whether our democracy itself is at risk.
- It is clear that we need bold ideas to reinvigorate participation in democracy. This deserves to be one potential solution.

### **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 be 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).

## Where has this been done, and what are the effects?

### Three cities in Maryland

- Three cities in Maryland have lowered the voting age to 16 for their local elections. **Takoma Park** in 2013, **Hyattsville** in 2015, and **Greenbelt** in 2018. They are all suburbs of Washington, D.C. with populations between 18,000-25,000.
- In Takoma Park's 2013 elections, the first after the change, 44 percent of registered 16- and 17-year-olds voted, the highest rate among any age group.
  - In following elections in Takoma Park, 16- and 17-year-olds have continued to vote at higher rates than 18-29 year olds, and vote at about the average rate for all ages.
- In Takoma Park, city council and mayoral candidates have actively reached out to 16- and 17-year-olds in ways they did not in the past, including recruiting students to work on campaigns, holding events for young people, and placing campaign ads in the school newspaper.
- The lower voting age is now seen as totally normal in Takoma Park, with no negative effects.
- In Hyattsville, the change is more recent so there is less data, but the data we have shows that 16- and 17-year-olds who are registered to vote have turned out at a higher rate than other age groups.
  - It is also now seen as normal in Hyattsville.
- The Greenbelt City Council voted to make this change in January 2018.
  - A group of high school students advocated for more than two years.
  - In 2017, the city council placed a non-binding referendum question on the ballot to get residents' opinions. Youth leaders campaigned hard, leading to 53% of voters voting YES on the question.
    - This comes after more than 70% responded no to a question about lowering the voting age on a 2015 community questionnaire. This shows that with education, and hearing directly from young people, people tend to come around on this issue.

### International

- Many countries around the world have voting ages lower than 18, including Brazil, Ecuador, Argentina, Nicaragua, Austria, Scotland, and Germany (for some elections). Norway has experimented with a 16-year-old voting age in some local elections. See the Vote16USA white paper for a full list.
- In Austria, turnout for 16- and 17-year-olds has been higher than the previous average for first-time voters (ages 18-19).
- When Norway tried 16-year-old voting in local elections, 16- and 17-year-olds voted at higher rates than regular first-time voters.
- Scotland first lowered its voting age to 16 for the 2014 independence referendum, and then made it official for all of Scotland's elections.
  - In the referendum, 75% of 16- and 17-year-olds voted, compared to 54% of 18-24 year olds.

## Things to avoid:

### **DO NOT argue by analogy**

- If someone suggests that 16- and 17-year-olds do not have the mental capacity to vote, don't respond with, "Well, adults with declining capacities are still allowed to vote." This concedes that 16- and 17-year-olds may not be ready to vote, and distracts from the main points about the good that comes from giving voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds.
- It's best to respond directly, not with an analogy.

### **DO NOT use words like "kids" or "teenagers"**

- Avoid words that set up a distinction between youth and adults, like "youth," "adult," "teenagers," or "kids."
- Stick to the actual ages and talk directly about "16- and 17-year-olds," or "young people."

### **DO NOT compare 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.
- These comparisons can also be offensive to some people.