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Uplifting Youth Voices in Local Government

A Report by the Minnesota Youth Council's Policy Research Committee

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MINNESOTA YOUTH COUNCIL

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Contents

1 | Introduction 3

2 | Legislative Recommendation 4

3 | Status Quo of Youth Power 5

4 | Benefits of Allowing Youth to Vote 8

5 | Youth Have Adequate Political Knowledge to Vote 15

6 | Youth Possess Sufficient Cognitive Capacity to Vote 19

7 | Youth Have Enough Independence in their Lives to Vote 23

8 | Youth Have Enough Life Experience to Vote 26

9 | Youth Want to Vote 29

10 | Youth are not Politically Biased Toward Any Party 37

11 | The Logistics and Legality of Lowering the Voting Age 40

12 | Conclusion 44

13 | Authors and Acknowledgements 45

14 | Endnotes 46

Section 1: Introduction

As established by Minn. Stat. 124D.957, the Minnesota Youth Council Committee (MYC) is an official legislatively-mandated committee that provides advice and recommendations to the Minnesota State Legislature and the governor on issues affecting youth and serves as a liaison for youth around the state to the legislature and the governor.

The Minnesota Youth Council may select introduced bills in the House of Representatives and Senate for consideration for a public hearing before the committee; propose youth legislation; provide advisory opinions to the legislature on bills heard before the committee; and prepare a youth omnibus bill. The council is part of the Minnesota Alliance with Youth, a nonpartisan nonprofit group aiming to spur positive change for Minnesota's youth.

For the 2024-2026 term, the MYC's policy platform consists of several priorities that the council will spearhead advocacy on. One of these, and the subject of this report, is Uplifting Youth Voices in Local Government. To achieve this priority, the MYC recommends a proposal to allow youth to vote in school board elections in every school district in Minnesota. For the purposes of this report, youth is defined as 16- and 17-year-olds, and the two phrases will be used interchangeably.

The Minnesota Youth Council's Policy Research Committee was tasked with creating this report to organize research and support for this proposal. This report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the merits and benefits of allowing youth to vote and also address any questions and concerns that stakeholders may have about the proposal. Each section of this report covers a key merit of allowing youth to vote. It is based on rigorous published research, the authors' analysis, and the lived experiences of youth across the state. The MYC is committed to the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty in its advocacy; evidence is directly quoted from research studies and academic papers. Any paraphrases are brief and can be verified by accessing the hyperlinked source. Any edits for grammatical clarity are noted using brackets or ellipses, and all sources are hyperlinked directly in the report and listed in Section 14: Endnotes to allow for efficient verification of citations.

The MYC welcomes critiques, questions, and analysis of our work. If there are any questions, concerns, or inquiries about any of the content presented within this report, please contact the Minnesota Youth Council's Policy Research Committee at polresearch@mnyouth.net.

Section 2: Legislative Recommendation

The Minnesota Youth Council recommends that the Minnesota State Legislature pass an act to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot for Minnesota voters to change the State Constitution such that youth voting is possible in Minnesota. Such a constitutional amendment would either 1) Lower the voting age to 16 for school board elections or 2) Remove the legal prohibition on municipalities from lowering the voting age on their own if they so choose. In Minnesota uniquely, youth voting has signification legal nuances, which are elaborated upon on in Section 11, pages 40 and 41. The MYC's goal is for youth voting to start in 2026, upon ratification of the constitutional amendment.

This proposal originated as a result of discussions held during the July 2024 MYC conference, where council representatives identified and analyzed the problems facing youth today. One of the most pressing concerns was the lack of political power youth have, especially in school boards and local governments. The council is focused on giving youth the right to vote in school board elections because school boards are one of the most relevant and impactful decision-making bodies affecting the lives of youth, yet they have no power or ability whatsoever to hold school boards accountable or have a voice in shaping school board decisions.

Youth voting uniquely harnesses and accelerates the benefits of youth political engagement, hence the council's support for enfranchising youth with substantive and actual power as the main point of advocacy. Expanding the right to vote to youth is the best mechanism to achieve youth empowerment as there is an overwhelming body of research elucidating great benefits of youth voting with few drawbacks. The timing of 2026 is intentional to ensure that localities have the capacity to implement this proposal, and youth have the resources and education to make informed voting choices.

This proposal also occurs in the context of new updates to Minnesota Statutes 120B.021, which makes civics education a graduation requirement, leading future youth to be more informed voters. The council recognizes concerns that stakeholders may have about youth voting; hence, the following sections of this report aim to address such concerns. To offer a very brief preview of the contents herein, the academic literature finds that, in the context of voting, youth are just as politically informed and cognitively competent as adults, if not more. The MYC encourages all stakeholders to be open-minded in engaging with this proposal.

Section 3: Status Quo of Youth Power

Currently, youth lack political power, as they do not have the right to vote and are unable to support or oppose elected officials who make decisions that influence their lives. There is often a negative connotation associated with the word power, as it seems to imply that those who hold power will abuse it, oppress others, or become corrupt. However, power is, at its core, a neutral tool which can be a force for good or evil. This report defines power as the ability to make one's voices heard and effect change in one's community.

Throughout council discussions, MYC members expressed that despite youth efforts at empowerment, a lack of voting power remains the most significant structural barrier to youth empowerment in Minnesota. This issue is not the fault of adults, but rather the result of a lack of information, communication, and understanding about youth today. This report aims to offer clarity and convince stakeholders that youth deserve the right to vote as well.

Examining school boards specifically, youth lack the very basis of power afforded to a citizenry in a democracy as they cannot vote. School board members have fewer incentives to focus on youth issues compared to the demands of the adult voting population because youth cannot vote and thus cannot lend the most important form of support to elected officials: a vote. Certainly, there are numerous school board members who do engage and take youth concerns into consideration, and the council highly appreciates their commitment to youth. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee of that, and often, school boards are preoccupied with significant demands from their adult constituents who have competing and passionate visions for public education.

The lack of youth voting power is particularly egregious when considered in context. In an election in the United States, adults vote for elected officials who pass policies that affect their lives. From the presidency to the school board, the very basis of the United States' system of governance as a constitutional republic is founded upon the ideals that the citizenry is entitled to choose leaders who will address their concerns and represent their viewpoints and that elected officials are accountable to the people they make policy for.

As Thomas Jefferson famously wrote[1] in the Declaration of Independence, "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed …" However, there is one glaring case in which elected officials make all the decisions that govern a constituency's lives, yet that constituency has no power to give consent whatsoever in the selection of those same elected officials. This situation

occurs every single day in the over 13,000[2] school districts across the U.S., and in the 331[3] school districts across the state of Minnesota, where youth cannot impact one of the most influential institutions that shape their lives.

In light of this injustice, youth enfranchisement is supported from a human rights perspective. As Maslowsky et al. 2024[4] explain, "lowering the voting age aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12, which protects children's right to express their views in matters that affect them and provides that their views should be given weight according to their age and maturity." As Section 6 illustrates, youth are cognitively capable of voting, and youth deserve the opportunity to exercise their fundamental right to vote. The United States of America was founded on the great principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but these principles cannot be fully realized when youth are denied the power to champion the causes they care about and combat the crises facing their generation.

In addition to the theoretical basis regarding the lack of youth representation in school boards, this report also explores the practical considerations of this topic. While school boards must operate within the guidelines of federal and state law, they still have broad latitude to set district-specific policies that impact the day-to-day educational experiences of youth.

As a 2023 MPR News[5] report explains, school boards in Minnesota "can tailor policies to fit their district, including dress codes, curriculum or amendments to existing policy." There is currently a stark inequality in power between adults and youth regarding school board policies that affect adults very little yet they are able to dictate the conversation. It is difficult to ascertain why adults with no children in a school district are able to sway the outcome of a school board election or referendum, yet the students who attend the very same schools every single day have no say in who is elected to the school board, no say in the outcome of referendums that determine if they can purchase new textbooks and needed technology, and no say in the creation of school policies that intimately impact their lives. All adult citizens deserve a vote, and that right should be extended to youth as well.

There is also a more fundamental issue at play in that adult voters have likely not experienced K-12 education for a few decades, and their experiences and understanding of public education, while valuable, is not completely congruent with the actual lived realities that youth face every day. This is undoubtedly not the fault of adults, but it could lead to school board policies being inflexible and outdated. Youth are the ones that live with the consequences of school board policies every day, not adults. It is a matter of fairness and justice that youth deserve some say in the institutions that govern a significant portion of their lives.

Ultimately, the evolving educational landscape speaks to a need for increased youth representation and perspectives on school board policies to ensure that public education can adjust with the times and be effective in combating challenges and meeting the needs of youth. As the United States continues to grow more polarized, including youth who actually live with the impacts of school board policies in the electoral process may help ground the conversation in more realistic terms instead of allowing good-faith debate to devolve into acrimonious bickering. At a time when students face record levels of stress and mental-health needs[6], test scores continue to stagnate[7] after the COVID-19 pandemic, and school shootings[8] stalk our communities, school districts are struggling to adjust, in part because adults cannot fully understand the lived experiences and challenges that youth face on a daily basis.

What better way to address the problems facing our public schools than to hear from the very students impacted by said problems? Bringing youth voices and a fresh perspective would reinvigorate discussions and accelerate solution-finding on how to address the critical challenges facing the future of K-12 public education.

Section 4: Benefits of Allowing Youth to Vote

The success and benefits of youth voting have led many municipalities across the United States, as well as many countries worldwide to enfranchise youth. Maslowsky et al. 2024 explains, "Currently, seven municipalities in Maryland, one in Vermont, one in New Jersey, and two in California have laws permitting 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in school board and other local elections." In February 2024, the Newark City Council voted[9] unanimously to allow 16 and 17 year olds to vote in local school board races. After planning for implementation, youth in Newark will cast their first ballots in 2025. In Oakland and Berkeley California[10], youth voted for school board candidates in November 2024 for the first time. Further, as shown in Table 1 below, many countries also allow youth to vote not just in local elections, but for national ones as well.

Table 1: Countries with a voting age below 18

Table 1:
Countries with a voting age below 18 years in the entire country

Country	Minimum Voting Age (years)	Type of election
Argentina	16	All
Austria	16	All
Bosnia and Herzegovina	16[a]	All
Brazil	16	All
Cuba	16	All
East Timor	17	All
Ecuador	16	All
Estonia	16	Local
Greece	17	All
Indonesia	17[b]	All
Israel	17	Local
Malta	16	All
Nicaragua	16	All

a If employed and paying taxes.
b Anyone below the age of 17 years can vote if they are married.

Source: Eichhorn and Bergh 2021

Youth have demonstrated competence and ability to vote in these countries, serving as a strong signal that youth in Minnesota are ready and eager for the right to vote too. For all the potential criticisms and concerns that young voters have faced in their advocacy for fair political representation, relevant research (as described in this report) has indicated that almost none are substantiated by the facts. If youth voting was so

disastrous, there would be a massive backlash to the enfranchisement of young people, but almost nowhere have voting rights been rolled back or repealed. Instead, the repeated successes and significant benefits of youth voting have empowered many communities and countries around the world with a new engaged, passionate, informed, and responsible electorate that will lead these countries into the future.

The later sections of this report will most often discuss country-specific experiences with youth voting and center the issue in Minnesota-specific contexts, but before that, it is valuable to take a global view and understand the macro-level benefits of youth voting. There will be some overlap between Section 4 and later sections as the analysis is cross-applied to address critiques and reasons against youth voting, but it is helpful to articulate all the benefits of youth voting in a succinct manner first.

A comprehensive review of the literature regarding youth voting worldwide by Eichhorn and Bergh 2021[11] concludes with several key points on the benefits of youth voting. They find that youth voters have higher rates of turnout than first time adult voters, they are not politically biased toward any party or ideology, increase support for democracy and civics, and even cause an increase voter turnout amongst their adult family members.

First, Eichhorn and Bergh 2021 consider the impact of youth voting on voter turnout rates and state that multiple studies covering many countries across time periods (Bergh, 2013[12]; Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014[13]; Aichholzer and Kritzinger, 2020[14]; Hueber and Eichhorn 2019[15], Ødegård et al, 2019[16]) all find that "16- and 17-year-olds have higher rates of turnout as first time voters, when given the chance to vote, than 18- and 19-year-olds …"

By studying trends in voter turnout in countries that have had a voting age of 16 for some time, Eichhorn and Bergh 2021 report on the results from Franklin 2019[17] in Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, which state "there is a substantive positive effect on turnout in these countries in the long run." In fact, the positive effects of youth voting on turnout in adulthood lasts for 17 years (Franklin 2019, page 24). This is a long-term benefit that extends far beyond one or two election cycles. Minnesota boasts the highest[18] voter turnout of all 50 states, and the legislature can further solidify this admirable civic tradition by granting youth the right to vote.

Taking a step back to answer the hypothetical concerns about youth voting backfiring and lowering turnout, Eichhorn and Bergh 2021 emphasize that, "[there were] no negative consequences for turnout from lowering the voting age to 18 were found at these more current reductions to 16; rather there were statistically significant positive effects." Considering that youth are voting at ever higher rates than young adults in a diverse group of countries worldwide, it is not unreasonable to suggest that youth

deserve the right to vote in Minnesota too. To borrow a phrase[19] from the classic film *Field of Dreams*, if you let us, we will vote.

Second, Eichhorn and Bergh 2021 consider the impact of youth voting on the political outcome of elections. Citing Franklin 2019, they find that the evidence is "quite mixed" between and across countries. Specifics regarding political bias will be discussed in depth in Section 10.

Third, Eichhorn and Bergh 2021 consider the impact of youth voting on political attitudes and civic engagement beyond just voter turnout. In Latin America (Sanhueza Petrarca 2020[20]) and Austria (Aichholzer and Kritzinger 2020[21]), enfranchised youth have higher levels of trust and support for democracy compared to other voters. Nuanced differences can be observed here as well. Eichhorn and Bergh 2021 find that Scottish youth (who can vote at 16 for Scottish local and national elections) also had higher support for civic engagement compared to disenfranchised youth of the same age in the rest of the United Kingdom. Ultimately, Eichhorn and Bergh 2021 conclude there is a "genuine benefit of lowering the voting age to 16 …" in increasing youth political interest.

The council's proposal comes at a critical time when young people are disillusioned with democracy and the political system of the United States. The nonpartisan independent Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University found in a January 2023 survey[22] that "only a quarter of young people said they feel confident about democracy in the United States, compared to 31% who are not confident." However, there is still a reason for hope. Young people remain optimistic about the potential for change in a democracy, as "75% agree that voting is an important way to have a say in the future of the country." While the following survey is of young adult voters and not youth specifically, youth share many of the same concerns as young adults, so the results are still fairly translatable. In short, young people feel disappointed by democracy right now, but that can change if policymakers make a substantive effort to empower and include youth in the democratic process.

Fourth, Eichhorn and Bergh 2021 consider the impact of youth voting on voters 18 or older and the general politics system of a country. There has been opposition to lowering the voting age in many countries for many reasons, but understanding the positive externalities of youth voting may help convince the general public and adult voters to support such a policy. In localities where the voting age was lowered, public support rose after the policy was implemented, indicating that voters are not necessarily opposed to the policy itself, but may rather be fearful or hesitant about change. Considering potentially surveys indicating voter opposition to such an action, the MYC is working to proactively address these concerns with outreach efforts across the state.

But additionally, once youth voting begins and the benefits are realized, the empirical evidence indicates that voter support increases.

For example, in Scotland, Eichhorn and Bergh 2021 find that support for allowing votes at 16 eventually 'increased further to around 60%" and the Scottish Conservative Party (the center-right party in Scotland) also changed their position and voted to support lowering the voting age for all Scottish elections after seeing the public opinion shift in favor of the issue. There will be more extensive elaboration regarding the conservative case for youth voting in Section 10.

The broader American public is beginning to recognize the benefits of youth voting too. Hanmer and Novey 2022[23] find that after asking study respondents to consider that youth are politically competent enough to vote, "support for lowering the voting age jumped from about one-third to nearly half of respondents," indicating that voters are not necessarily opposed to youth voting, but rather lack sufficient information about the qualities of youth which mean they deserve the right to vote.

Beyond a shift in public support, there is also a benefit for the families of youth who vote as youth who are civically engaged can also inform their parents, peers, and friends about the importance of civic engagement and lead discussions about policy issues and political candidates. Civic education, which is required for Minnesota 11th and 12th graders under Statute 120B.021, complements youth-led civic engagement because youth are better informed about political systems and the value of civic engagement. If youth learn something impactful at school, they can share it with their friends, family, and peers, which in the case of voting promotes increased knowledge of civics and voter turnout.

In fact, a statistical analysis of municipal elections in Denmark comparing households where youth were eligible to vote versus those who were not eligible found that there was increased parental voter turnout because voting-eligible youth urged their parents to vote and discussed local issues more at home. Dahlgaard 2018[24] explains, "parents become 2.8 percentage points more likely to vote. In a context where the average turnout rate for parents is around 75%, this is a considerable effect." Thus, youth voting also has benefits for the broader community by boosting adult voter turnout, adding another reason to support this proposal.

Lastly, youth voting has positive external benefits for both youth and communities that extend beyond simply increased civic engagement, support for democracy, or higher voter turnout.

For youth themselves, using nationally representative data for adolescents and young adults, Ballard et al. 2018[25] states, "All forms of civic engagement are positively associated with subsequent income and education level. Volunteering and voting are favorably associated with subsequent mental health and health behaviors …" This unique result is due to youth feeling empowered and valued in the political space; a strong sense of self-esteem and value no doubt benefits mental health and wellbeing.

Student engagement is also associated with many benefits for academic achievement. A meta-analysis published in the National Institute of Health[26] in 2023 analyzing 93,188 participants and 148 effects across studies found that "student engagement had a positive impact on student learning communities, influencing student grades and course completion rates. The higher levels of student engagement resulted in lower absenteeism in the learning community." A 2019 report from Gallup[27] also finds that "student engagement and hope were significantly positively related to student academic achievement progress (growth) in math, reading, and all subjects combined, along with postsecondary readiness in math and writing." One of the most important goals of high school is to prepare students for a post-secondary experience, whether in the workplace, career and technical education, or a 2-year or 4-year college. Essentially, youth voting will catalyze increased youth engagement, leading to higher academic achievement for every student to succeed in core skills such as reading, writing, math, and science.

For communities, sustained youth civic engagement also produces a benefit. A 2022 report from the Brennan Center for Justice[28], finds that sustained civic engagement has benefits for both youth and their communities by leading advocacy efforts to expand rights to historically marginalized groups. The report states, "Civic engagement is an important part of our democratic society, and it is a meaningful part of young people's healthy development and transition into adulthood." Youth have participated in a broad array of efforts to give back to their communities. For example, as stated in Section 9, youth volunteer at higher rates than any other generation.

To conclude the benefits of youth voting in a Minnesota-specific context, it is evident that youth voting directly complements and supports the Minnesota Legislature's dedicated efforts to strengthen youth knowledge, awareness, and appreciation for the value of civic engagement. Specifically, youth voting improves the efficacy of Minnesota's new civic education requirements. This is true for several reasons.

First, as youth become more informed about government, voting, and the political process, they are better equipped with the skills and knowledge to vote. Second, youth have a greater reason and incentive to be engaged and attentive when learning civics because they can actually employ the skills and information learned in class at the

voting booth. Third, it is valuable to practice good habits of civic participation, making informed choices, and becoming an engaged citizen as early as possible.

In fact, the academic literature reveals that enfranchising youth in local elections is uniquely suited to complement civics education as young voters discuss, deliberate, and debate how they will vote on local issues that impact their lives the most. Hart and Youniss 2017[29] find that, "this change in voting age [to 16] will enliven civics education as young voters discuss how they will vote on local issues and promote the acquisition of the habit of voting." Similar to the logic for any good habit, building strong civic engagement and voting should start at 16 as this gives youth voters the experience necessary for voting in state and national elections once they turn 18. There is a negligible difference between 16- and 18-year-olds in every factor relevant to voting (See Section 6), so it is highly illogical that 18-year-olds can vote in all elections while 16-year-olds can vote in none.

The setting of school board elections, as nonpartisan local contests, offers a unique opportunity for youth to develop good civic engagement habits and skills. School board races are community-based and often center around specific local issues. These issues are also highly relevant to youth by virtue of them attending school and navigating the impacts of school board policies on a daily basis, so these elections give youth the chance to engage closely with the political process, learn about the candidates, and make an informed choice that aligns with their views without as much of the pressure, bitter partisanship, and avalanche of misinformation surrounding state and national politics. Once youth turn 18, they will be able to vote in all elections while fully exposed to this barrage of negativity and disinformation no matter what, so it is far more preferable to allow youth to gain experience earlier and attain skills to resist such harms.

Hart and Youniss 2017 further agree, writing that "because municipal governance is less ideologically-polarized than national politics, local communities are excellent contexts for developing civic knowledge and dispositions." Indeed, school board elections offer citizens an accessible way to engage with policymaking by limiting the influence of divisive debates on the national scale in favor of a localized, community-driven approach to solving the issues of a particular school district. Concluding this section of advocacy, a review of the academic literature surrounding youth voting from Hart and Youniss 2017 concludes that, "16- and 17-year-olds ought to be allowed to vote in local elections because they share all the relevant qualities for voting possessed by young adults." In short, Minnesota's new civics education standards are a valuable foundation to empower our youth to grow into the leaders of tomorrow; youth voting builds upon, strengthens, and solidifies this foundation.

As civics education for youth in Minnesota continues to expand and develop, evidence from surveys of the general public indicates that support for youth voting will increase once the public understands that youth are just as competent and eager to vote as adults.

Section 5: Youth Have Adequate Political Knowledge to Vote

Before addressing concerns about youth political knowledge, this report notes that there are different kinds of political knowledge. Adults have more of some forms of political knowledge based on their experience while young people have more of other forms of political knowledge than adults do. Women, African Americans, and other marginalized groups were once unfairly denied the right to vote because they were viewed as unqualified and unknowledgeable.

But the United States banned poll taxes and literacy tests, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 established voting protections to ensure that any adult US citizen can exercise their basic right to vote. All else being equal, why should these same protections and guarantees not extend to our nation's youth? Broadly speaking, there are no demands for adults to possess a certain level of information, political knowledge, or awareness to be able to vote. Both adults and youth alike are civically engaged and passionate about critical policy issues facing the U.S. today. Indeed, it is very encouraging that youth are indeed politically informed and passionate about issues that impact their lives.

As an overview regarding concerns about youth lacking information to engage with voting, there are two key ideas to understand on how enfranchising youth would inherently solve the concerns raised. First, once youth can vote, school board candidates will make a conscientious effort to reach out to youth in order to earn their votes. Candidates already appeal to adult voters in a wide variety of ways in any other electoral campaign. For example, strategies like door-knocking, flyers, campaign literature, and rallies will simply expand to engage and educate youth to give us a wide range of options and candidates to choose from. Youth will be treated the same as any adult voter. Second, this proposal calls for youth to begin voting in 2026, which gives over one and a half years for schools, nonprofits, as well as state and local governments to educate and inform youth about voting. Third, Minnesota's new required civics education standards will ensure that youth are informed about our systems of government, checks and balances, democracy, and other key values and information that contribute to our vibrant constitutional republic.

Beyond the overview, there are three main underlying facets that comprise the criterion of "adequate political knowledge." Specifically, the three facets are that: youth vote in a manner that accurately reflects their personal political beliefs, youth rely on rigorous and credible sources of information to influence their voting behavior, and youth possess adequate knowledge and mastery of general civics and the mechanics of

government. As the following section will demonstrate, youth meet or exceed each and every one of these three facets.

First, youth do vote in a manner that accurately reflects their personal political beliefs. In a democratic election, voters are empowered to choose candidates that reflect their personal beliefs, values, and priorities. It is valuable to understand where youth are able to vote for candidates that best represent them. The most rigorous evidence on this topic comes from Austria, where in 2007, the voting age was lowered to 16 for European Parliament elections (the European Parliament is roughly analogous to the United States Congress for this analysis, albeit with fewer powers). In a statistical analysis of youth voters' choices for the 2009 European Parliament election in Austria, Wagner et al. 2012[30] concludes that "[T]he quality of these [under 18] citizens' choices is similar to that of older voters, so they do cast votes in ways that enable their interests to be represented equally well." While Austria is a single country, Wagner et al. 2012 argues that it is possible to extrapolate broader conclusions from their analysis, as Austrian teenagers are not unique in the Western world.

Further, Lang 2023[31] conducted an analysis using voter surveys of youth for the 2021 German federal election. In this survey, 16- and 17-year-old participants indicated their voting choices. To assess whether youth accurately translated their own political views at the ballot box, the researchers stipulated that youth choices were normatively correct when they voted for the party that best reflected their preferences. In their study, Lang 2023 finds, "Results show that the voting decisions of 16 and 17-year-olds were as good as those by eligible voters. The study indicates that the exclusion of 16 and 17-year-olds Germans in democratic elections cannot be justified by their lack of decision-making ability."

The comparative between Germany and Minnesota is particularly valuable, as the two entities have extremely similar levels of development. Specifically, the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), a measure of a country's health, knowledge, and standard of living, scores Germany at 0.950 and Minnesota at 0.951. As one of the major components of HDI is quality and outcomes in education, it is reasonable to conclude that German and Minnesotan youth have similar levels of knowledge and ability to represent themselves politically. There is also a lack of evidence that youth are unable to accurately represent their political preferences via voting.

Second, the fact that youth rely on rigorous and credible sources of information to influence their voting behavior. While it is true that youth get a significant portion[32] of their news from social media, youth are able to resist the barrage of misinformation and disinformation prevalent on the internet. An analysis of fake news sharing during the 2016 election by Guess et al. 2019[33] finds that, "On average, users over 65 shared nearly

seven times as many articles from fake news domains as the youngest age group." While this study did not explicitly evaluate 16- and 17-year-olds, the media consumption habits of youth and young adult voters are similar enough to credibly draw a similar conclusion.

Additionally, increased exposure and experience with digital media may lead youth to be more adept than older adults in developing the skills needed to discern facts from fiction. Ultimately, misinformation and disinformation will always exist, and both youth and adults will unfortunately fall victim to fake news. However, it is far more preferable to take a constructive approach in adopting some of the numerous solutions that exist to combat these issues instead of using it as a cudgel to deny youth the right to vote. For example, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace[34], a nonpartisan think tank based in Washington, D.C., describes several actions that policymakers can take to effectively address online disinformation. Among its recommendations are supporting local journalism, media literacy education, and fact-checking information. Educators can also promote critical thinking in their classrooms by incorporating these skills into content and instruction.

Additionally, one of the solutions discussed in the Carnegie report - supporting local journalism - is already flourishing at numerous school newspapers across Minnesota. For example, the East Ridge High School Ridge Review newspaper created a compilation[35] of candidate platforms, forum discussions, and responses to specific interview questions about bond levies on the ballot for the 2021 District 833 School Board, the Edina Zephyrus school newspaper published a guide[36] for voting in the 2024 election, and the St Paul Academy Rubicon school newspaper analyzed[37] the vice presidential debate.

All of these efforts demonstrate that students are already engaged and motivated community journalists and leaders even without the right to vote. If allowed to vote, youth will be even more motivated to engage, organize, and inform their peers about the choices on their ballots and ensure that youth are informed about their voting choices. As this proposal focuses on school board elections specifically, school newspapers are poised to play a critical role in informing students in a nonpartisan manner about elections and politics, and supporting and expanding these programs and nurturing other school newspapers would invigorate access to information for youth, combat the rising tide of disinformation, and boost youth confidence when it comes time to vote.

Third, youth demonstrate capacity for mastery of general civics and the mechanics of government. In Minnesota, new civics education requirements per Statute 120B.024 mean that students will be required to take a course for credit in citizenship and government in 11th or 12th grade beginning with students entering 9th grade in 2024-25

school year. To meet the requirement, the 11th or 12th grade course must center and prioritize the citizenship and government standards and benchmarks. Civics education is critical[38] to ensure the United States is a healthy democracy and united constitutional republic. Hence, the MYC's proposal for youth voting is specifically designed to utilize the benefits that youth attain from civics education by starting youth voting in 2026. As 9th graders in the 2024-2025 year will be in 11th grade by 2026 and thus taking civics, they will be equipped with much more civics knowledge and skills to ensure voting is successful.

Section 6: Youth Possess Sufficient Cognitive Capacity to Vote

Concerns regarding youth cognitive capacity are the most important topic to address in any discussion about expanding youth voting rights; if youth do not have the cognitive maturity or critical thinking skills to engage in a logical way with politics, they should not be able to vote. On the other hand, if youth have the same or even superior cognitive and logically thinking skills compared to current adult voters, they deserve the right to vote.

Often, the most prominent argument against youth voting is that their cognitive capabilities have not fully developed. However, this overly simplistic view is inaccurate and overlooks the nuances and complexities of measuring cognitive development, especially in the context of voting. The reason why age is used as a determinant for voting qualification is based on the assumption that age is associated with the cognitive and reasoning capabilities needed to be a rational voter. Considering the capabilities needed to vote, Nelkin 2020[39] agrees in a review of relevant research that, "age is a defensible criterion for eligibility to vote, where age is itself a proxy for having a broad set of cognitive and motivational capacities," concluding that "the age of 16 is a good proxy for such capacities."

However, some argue that a lack of emotional, rather than cognitive, development, should be a reason to deny youth the right to vote. To answer such a critique, this report looks beyond broad generalizations about youth cognitive capabilities and find that neuroscience and psychology actually have a great deal of nuance that provides further justification for why youth are cognitively capable of voting as adults are.

Specifically, youth cognitive maturity is actually not a singular metric, but rather can be split into two parts: cognitive capacity and psychosocial maturity. As defined by Icenogle et al. 2019[40], "cognitive capacity … undergirds logical thinking, and psychosocial maturity … comprises individuals' ability to restrain themselves in the face of emotional, exciting, or risky stimuli." Essentially, cognitive capacity involves rational thinking and logic, while psychosocial maturity involves emotionally-charged and high-stress situations. These two dimensions of cognitive capacity are significantly different from one another, so it is important to distinguish between them and recognize under which dimension voting is applicable. Icenogle et al. 2019 supports this distinction, as they argue, "it is therefore reasonable to have different age boundaries for different legal purposes: 1 for matters in which cognitive capacity predominates, and a later 1 for matters in which psychosocial maturity plays a substantial role."

Voting is undoubtedly part of the cognitive capacity category of cognitive maturity, not psychosocial maturity because the mental and physical processes of voting require a high degree of logical thinking, planning, and rational reasoning far beyond the capabilities of an emotionally-charged impulsive choice. Maslowsky et al. 2024 state, "Voting is the antithesis of the impulsive behavior … voting involves multiple steps that require planning and commitment, including registering to vote, finding one's polling place, and determining when to cast a ballot."

Granted, politics does elicit strong emotions, but voters always have the ability to think before they vote, and they can take time to gather information and process a decision. Additionally, as mentioned in Section 4, Hart and Youniss 2017 explain that local elections are less polarized and partisan compared to national elections, offering the ideal forum for youth to engage in rational civic discussion, debate, and disagreement instead of vitriol, anger, and hate. Given the extensive time of political campaigns, voters have the time to weigh options and do necessary research whereas a stressful situation such as a party or timed exam would not allow for such deliberation.

The act of voting itself also required deliberate thinking and research, including on registering, finding your polling location, reserving a day on your calendar, clearing conflicts, waiting in a line, etc. None of these steps are indicative of a fast, furious, and impulsive choice. Oosterhoff et al. 2021[41] also provide additional social context, stating that "adolescents tend to make more impulsive decisions with peers, yet voting is a solitary act." The voting booth is private, unstimulating, and confidential, lending further credibility to the idea that voting involves rational thinking, not rash triggers.

Oftentimes, voting booths are located in community buildings, which few likely find excessively stimulating on a cold November Tuesday. Oosterhoff et al. 2021 summarize this contention by stating that, "The voting process is intentionally designed to provide citizens with the ability to make thoughtful, deliberate, and independent decisions and thus, represent a context where 16 and 17-year-olds can exercise their adult-like capacities."

Having established the necessity of separating consideration of youth cognitive versus psychosocial maturity and that voting is part cognitive capacity, the report now looks to the research on each part of maturity.

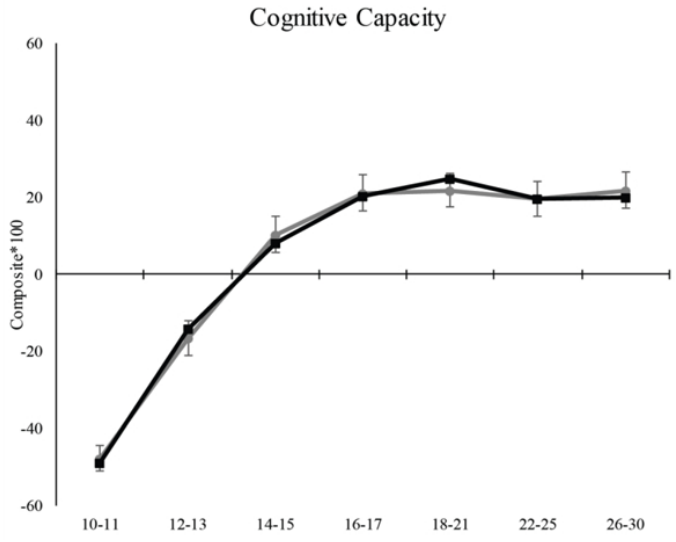
First, consider cognitive capacity. Icenogle et al. 2019 finds that "cognitive capacity reached adult levels around age 16 …" The existing academic literature overwhelmingly concludes that 16- and 17-year-olds possess the necessary cognitive capabilities to vote. Oosterhoff et al. 2021 report that "adolescents demonstrate adult-like levels of cognitive capacities including working memory, verbal fluency, planning, and logical reasoning by

age 16, and thus are capable of mature reasoning and decision-making." The repeat logically and processing skills that are needed to be an informed and reasonable voter are all present by age 16, so it is reasonable to argue that youth are cognitively capable of voting.

Specific developmental studies also support this argument. Note that 18-year-olds are allowed to vote in all elections, and in terms of cognitive capabilities, youth are essentially identical to 18-year-olds. A study of youth psychology by Hart and Atkins 2010[42] finds that, "by 16 years of age—but not before— American adolescents manifest levels of development in each quality of citizenship that are approximately the same as those apparent in young American adults who are allowed to vote …" Hart and Atkins 2010 further consider claims that youth lack the maturity to vote and conclude 'that empirical evidence and fairness suggest that 16- and 17-year-olds ought to be awarded the vote."

Research directly testing youth cognitive capabilities and reasoning skills also confirms this, as an empirical study of American youth by Oosterhoff et al. 2022[43] asking both youth and adults to explain why the voting age should be changed found that, "adolescents provided greater integrative and elaborative complexity in their reasoning to change the voting age than adults … Findings are consistent with past research indicating that adolescents possess the cognitive capacity and political knowledge to vote in U.S. elections." When youth have stronger logical reasoning skills than adults, that is even a greater reason to enfranchise them. For a visual representation of youth cognitive maturity, see Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Cognitive Capacity as Age Increases



Source: Icenogle et al. 2019

Now, this report considers psychosocial maturity. From the previous paragraphs, it has been established that psychosocial maturity is not applicable in the context of voting and thus should not be considered. Nonetheless, it is valuable to put these concerns of a lack of psychosocial maturity in societal context. For example, consider the act of driving a car. Driving is a much emotionally-charged[44] activity than voting, yet there are over 2.8 million[45] youth across the country with drivers licenses as of 2021. Young people are given the right to drive at 16 and demonstrate the capacity to do so in a sufficiently safe way, so they should also be given the right to vote.

In conclusion, youth have the cognitive capacity and capabilities to vote in both an absolute and relative context. Absolutely, youth cognitive capabilities are sufficient to make reasoned voting choices, as evidenced by psychosocial and developmental studies as well as the analysis in Section 5 that youth can accurately translate their political and policy preferences into choices at the ballot box. Relatively, youth possess the same levels of cognitive abilities as adult voters. Both facts support the argument that youth deserve the right to vote.

Section 7: Youth Have Enough Independence in their Lives to Vote

There is a concern that youth voters will not be independent in their voter behavior and may be unduly influenced by parents, teachers, friends, peers, social media, or other individuals or organizations. Fortunately, youth are not unduly influenced by their social environments. Before discussing the empirical evidence on this issue, it is helped to consider some theoretical aspects of it.

Note that the burden of this report is not to show the burden is not to show that parental influence is never an issue or does not exist (which is certainly untrue), but rather to show that youth can navigate parental pressure in an adequate manner when making voting decisions. Also, the burden is comparative: if parental influence for 16- and 17-year-olds in the sphere of voting in particular is not more compromising than parental or other influence is for voting adults, this is further reason to not use independence as a reason to restrict the voting age to 18. Additionally, from examining the academic literature surrounding this topic, evidence finding that parental influence on youth alters or compromises voting decisions is not well substantiated. In fact, parental or social influence can play a role in a decision, but one ultimately has free will in making a choice. After all, the United States is a democracy, and choices made on a ballot are private and personal.

It is also valuable to consider the historical context of voting in the United States and the fact that many of these same specious arguments regarding a lack of independence were once wielded to deny women the right to vote. As University of Kentucky law professor Joshua A. Douglas notes[46], "this was the same specious argument that many people used in opposing the Nineteenth Amendment's extension of the right to vote to women: that wives would simply follow their husbands at the voting booth … it is simply not true. Married women have never blindly adhered to how their husbands want them to vote."

In a school board elections context, consider the example of a schoolyard bully. Society, teachers, parents, and culture all say not to bully fellow students. However, one can also choose themselves to not bully for reasons independent than blindly following the instructions of authority figures. On the flip side, negative social influences undoubtedly exist as well, but one can certainty accept the poor advice to vape, for example, without losing the personal free will and opportunity in exercising independent judgment to say no. Nelkin 2020 implicates this analysis, arguing that "research purporting to show that children often adopt the political affiliation of their parents is not by itself sufficient to show lack of relevant opportunities to exercise autonomous agency." This is because

children may choose to adopt the political viewpoints held by parents or other authority figures for a variety of reasons, not just because they were forced or manipulated into doing so.

Moving on from the theoretical debate, this report examines the actual voting process and design to refute assertions of undue influence. By design, voting processes are designed to reduce the risk of outside influence on a voter's choices. Elections are fair and occur in secure locations with confidential ballots, and voter intimidation is prohibited. To date, there is no research making a normative conclusion that youth being influenced by outside factors is harmful or problematic. It is true that everyone is politically influenced by their environment and life experiences. However, that is a normal part of political socialization, and this situation is the same for adults. In society, individuals, both youth and old, are constantly presented with a variety of information and choices. It is up to each individual to make normative judgements on this informative and arrive at their own opinions. A diversity of thought is part of what makes the United States a beacon of democracy and free speech. As youth are just as cognitively capable of processing information and using logic in the context of politics, there are not harmful implications arising from natural human influences and social interactions.

As stated in Section 5, online disinformation persists, but youth are making significant strides to counter it, including by supporting school newspapers that educate youth in an independent, factual, and nonpartisan way. Indeed, youth are influenced by environment and social groups, but that is an indication of normal human social interactions rather than undue control or nefarious influence that is disproportionate to what adults experience on a daily basis as well. Everyone living and interacting in society is influenced to varying degrees by their environment, and youth are no different.

The empirical evidence also bears this out. By comparing Takoma Park, Maryland, where youth have been allowed to vote in local elections since 2013, and other cities in Maryland and Pennsylvania where youth are not allowed to vote, Hart et al. 2020[47] conducted an analysis to determine whether youth voters were disproportionately influenced by their social circles when voting compared to adult voters. Their study found, "little evidence was found to suggest that teenagers' partisan identifications are substantially more influenced by families, communities, and historical events than older adults."

There also remains a concern that youth could become unduly politically polarized and experience political conflicts with their peers after newfound political enfranchisement, but there are several flaws with this idea. First, adults are quite[48] politically polarized

and still able to vote, so that inherently does not constitute a unique nor legitimate reason to deny youth the vote. Second, it is valuable to youth to practice good habits of respectful disagreement and develop a nuanced understanding of policy issues. Such skills are more important than ever considering that youth will be full-fledged voter when they turn 18, and they will have no practice at resisting political polarization if they do not start at age 16. This is especially beneficial for school board elections since youth interact with district policies daily and have the most comprehensive understanding of their implications. Third, Hart et al. 2020 supports this analysis empirically and finds "no apparent ill-effects on young people or their communities and [youth voting] will increase the political representation of an age cohort that can vote responsibly." Overall, youth influence and are influenced by their social environments, but not to a disproportionate degree, and there are no harms or negative effects from this standard socialization.

Section 8: Youth Have Enough Life Experience to Vote

There is a concern that youth lack life experience by virtue of their young age relative to the current electorate. There is not sufficient scientific basis to quantify the implications or even dimensions of "life experience" as it is a vague term with many different meanings and interpretations. It is also important to note that many adults would not have relevant life experience in deciding the outcome of school board elections as they have not been in the K-12 public school system for many decades.

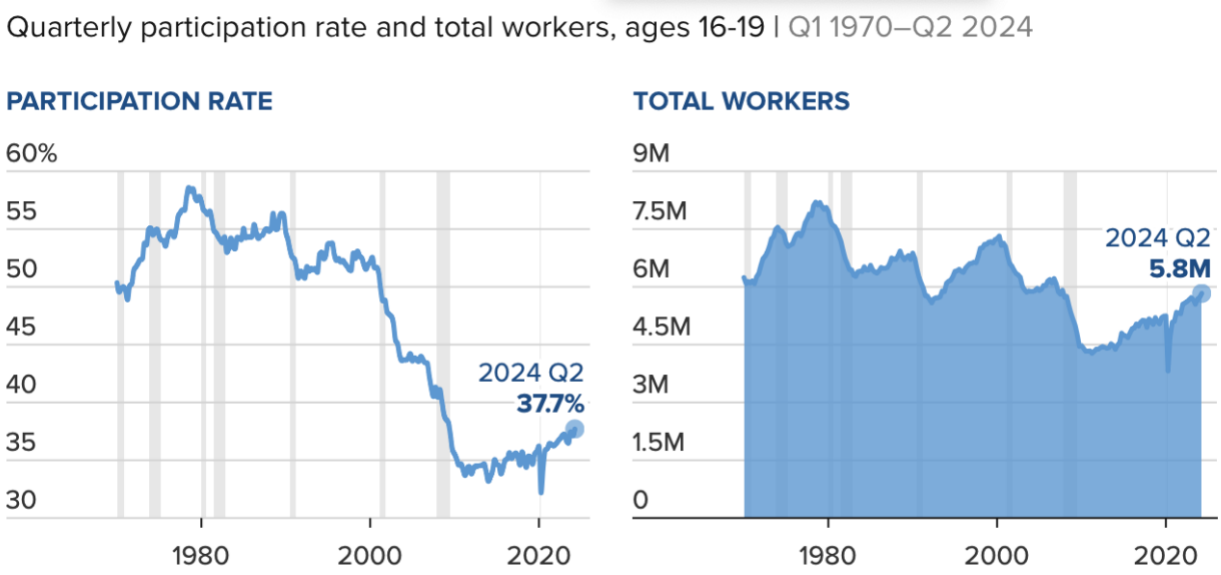
A senior citizen, while certainly a valued and respected community member, would not have as applicable of life experience in the context of 21st Century public education compared to a current high school student. It is critical to celebrate the variety of experiences of Minnesotans of all ages and backgrounds to ensure that school board policy reflects the rich diversity of their communities. Furthermore, here is actually no specific substantive or quantifiable life experience that is necessary to vote. Most adult voters in the United States have varying life experiences that contribute to the civic diversity of our country in many ways. A sugar beet farmer in Halstad and an architect in Minneapolis have very different life experiences, but both Minnesotans are valued citizens with important lived experiences that enrich our democracy.

Similarly, the hundreds of thousands of youths across Minnesota have diverse life experiences, but they all contribute in different ways to their communities. There is not a single set of lived experiences that entitles one to vote; all experiences are important. As Oosterhoff et al. 2021 points out, "Ultimately, the assumptions that accompany insufficient life experience arguments against changing the voting age are value-based and do not lend itself to empirical investigation." Life experience is not quantifiable or measurable, and thus, everyone will rely on their own biases and personal experience to determine whether youth life experiences qualify to award us the vote.

With this understanding, it is important to keep in mind that life experience is entirely subjective and not actually a legitimate empirical argument against youth voting. However, there are still a few areas of analysis to be made regardless of how youth lived experience do support youth enfranchisement, namely, tax-paying and employment status, as well as interactions with the K-12 education system. Principally, economic contributions to the government should never determine one's right to vote, as that would make voting pay-to-play and undermine the very promise of American democracy. The United States banned poll taxes for similar reasons, and there is no requirement (nor should there be) for adults to pay a certain amount in taxes to be able to vote. However, economic constrictions may be an important consideration from a

legislative perspective, so it is helpful to discuss it. First, on taxes. Youth do pay income taxes from their jobs, and sales tax from the goods and services they purchase. A significant portion of youth hold jobs, earn money, and pay taxes. Recent reports[49] in July of 2024 find that 5.7 million 16- to 19-year-olds participated in the labor market, a record high since 2007. In fact, this exact reason[50] is why Republican Representative Michael Burgess of Texas voted in favor of lowering the voting age to 16 in 2019. The MYC's proposal is much more modest, but the logic still stands. See Figure 2 below for an illustration of youth employment.

Figure 2: Labor force participation for young workers in the United States



Source: CNBC and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics via FRED

Second, on interactions with the K-12 education system. This area is where youth overwhelmingly have more life experience than adults. Today's youth live in uniquely challenging times, as record unrest rocks both their lives both domestically and internationally. For example, the current generation has had to experience education while going through the COVID-19 pandemic, and there remain pressing crises of climate change, countless tragic school shootings, debates over the impact of social media and technology, and an ever more competitive educational landscape, not to mention political instability in the United States and worldwide. All of these challenges are unprecedented, and youth today are growing up and maturing faster than previous generations to navigate this new world.

These lived experiences are just as valuable as experiences that adults possess. Both youth and adults suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic, and generations stood in

solidarity to support each other. Youth have proven their resilience to these countless challenges, and voting is the next step in their development as fully-fledged members of society.

Section 9: Youth Want to Vote

Minnesota boasts a proud tradition of leading the nation in voter turnout. Unfortunately, Wisconsin narrowly beat us in 2024, achieving voter turnout of 76.93% compared to Minnesota's 76.35%. By enfranchising youth, Minnesota can once again reclaim the mantle of civic leadership that we have held for so long.

Youth interest in voting can be measured in two ways: directly by analyzing youth voter turnout empirically, but also indirectly by analyzing youth civic engagement in non-voting contexts. Before looking into these two areas, note that potential criticisms of a lack of youth engagement in politics are self-defeating; without the right to vote, youth have comparatively fewer ways to be engaged in politics even if they are passionate about an issue and want to effect change. If adults could not vote, they might feel more apathetic or disinterested in a critical policy issue knowing that their perspective will ultimately not matter. But enfranchising the youth addresses this issue and leads to increased political awareness, knowledge, and engagement.

Leininger et al. 2024[51] conducted an experiment in Germany analyzing a group of 10,000 German youth and comparing those able to vote versus those who barely missed the age limit, but were the same in all other variables and did not differ in any way with respect to their "fundamental political dispositions" to ensure an accurate comparative result. As an initial setup of the experiment, Leininger et al. 2024 found "no difference in political interest or efficacy between adolescents and young adults", further supporting this report's analysis from Section 5 that youth have adequate political knowledge. However, the most promising result is that the researchers found simply being granted the right to vote increased the probably that youth would "gather information about the upcoming election as do older voters … [and that] eligible young people were more likely to discuss politics with family and friends, more likely to use a voting advice application, and consequently felt better informed than their ineligible peers." This makes sense, as giving youth the right to vote gives us an active reason to be engaged and interested in politics.

Youth, like any rational group, will invest time and energy into learning about voting and politics when their investment is matched with an equal return, namely, that their voices will finally matter at the ballot box. Youth will even talk to family members and motivate them to be engaged and informed voters as well, extending the benefits of increased political engagement to their families. Leininger et al. 2024 conclude by declaring that, "Overall, our evidence can be interpreted as supporting arguments for a lower voting age."

Now, this report examines youth voter turnout and civic engagement.

First, the report examines the empirical evidence surrounding youth voter turnout currently. In Austria, there were instances where youth turned out to vote at lower rates, but there were factors at play other than the fact that youth are uninterested or unmotivated about politics. As Markus et al. 2012 explain, "measures of political interest, knowledge and non-electoral participation indicate that young people under 18 are not particularly unable or unwilling to participate in political life." Further, the researchers analyze that "these factors do not help to explain their lower turnout rates, so we cannot say that young citizens fail to vote for reasons that are particularly troubling for democratic legitimacy."

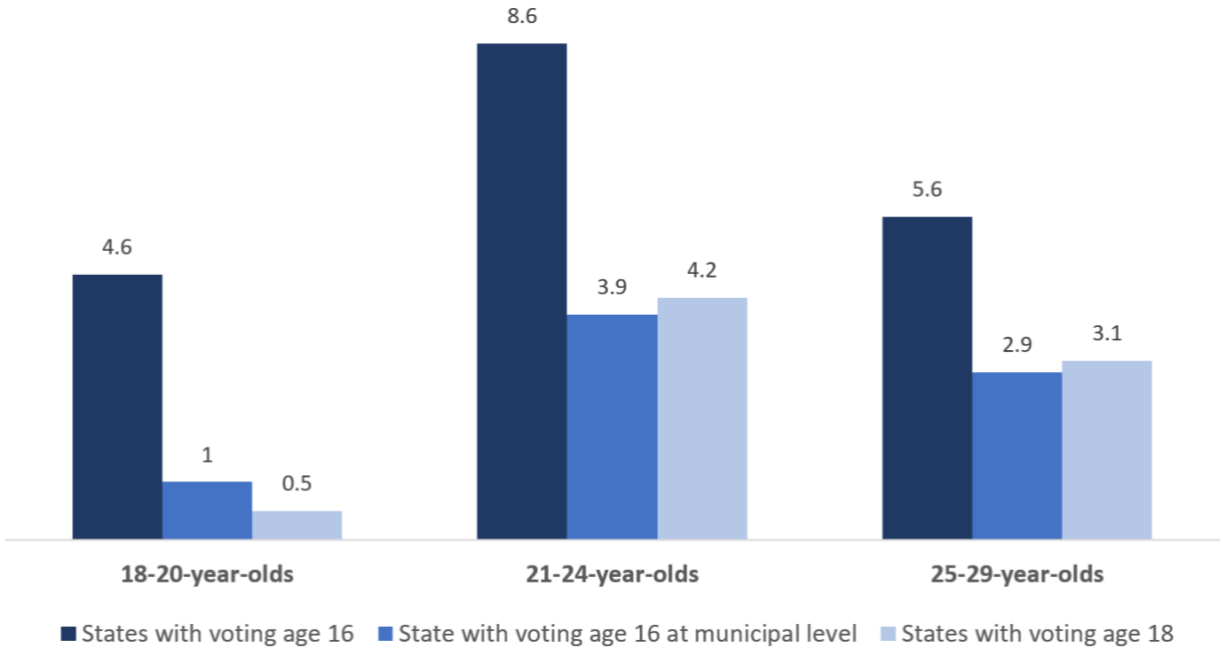
Voting earlier could address many of the barriers leading to lower turnout amongst American youth adults in the status quo. Lower turnout amongst American young adults is an issue, but there are a couple of reasons why this problem would not apply to youth. There likely are several reasons why young adults did not turn out at higher rates. For example, they may be in college and face barriers in transportation to access polling locations, they may face problems in registering to vote, or they may not have been contacted by political campaigns urging them to vote. The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement quantifies[52] this in December 2022, finding that "21% of youth who did not register to vote said that they didn't know how to register (9%), missed the registration deadline (8%), or had trouble with their voter registration application (4%)."

However, in other localities, the research is even more promising, finding that youth turnout at higher rates than adults, and that voting at age 16 leads to long-term habits of sustained voter turnout. For example, in Scotland, Eichhorn and Hübner 2021[53] finds the long term impact of youth enfranchisement in Scotland, starting from the 2014 independence referendum to leave the United Kingdom, is that these youth voters, even as they grow into adulthood, continue voting. Eichhorn and Hübner 2021 state, "In the 2021 … elections, people under 30 who had been able to vote from age 16 went to the ballots in greater numbers than those enfranchised from age 18 … Those who were able to vote as a 16- or 17-year-old were also more likely to continue voting into their 20s." Fortunately, the timing of which election youth gained the vote did not have an impact on the positive turnout benefits. Eichhorn and Hübner 2021 state that giving youth the vote "has had positive long-term consequences for turnout. The boost was unrelated to whether people cast their first vote as a 16- or 17-year-old in the independence referendum or in later elections."

In a later study the following year, this time on German youth voters, Eichhorn and Hübner 2022[54] compared voter turnout increases from the 2017 to 2021 federal election

in German states that allow youth to vote versus those that do not, and they found that "[voter] turnout increases were far more strongly pronounced in those states where the voting age was 16 for state elections." Additionally, similar to the Scotland result, higher voter turnout persisted among older age groups long after youth in these German states were able to vote. For example, voter turnout among 25–29-year-olds increased by 5.6% in states with youth voting compared to only 3% in states without. See Figure 3 for the full representation of the research findings.

Figure 3: Mean increase in voter turnout from 2017 to 2021 in German general elections by state voting age and age groups



Source: Eichhorn and Hübner 2022

From both Scotland and Germany, youth voting demonstrates long-term benefits by creating good habits for youth in voting from age 16, and these same voters are likely to keep voting even as they get older.

In the United States, given the widespread lack of youth voting, there is scant research to elucidate the long-term impacts of youth voting. However, there is research finding on adults finding that voting once leads to a higher likelihood for voting in the future. The reasoning and warrants for why that is the case extend to youth as well, meaning the research conclusions may be extended to would-be youth voters as well. A study[55] of 25,200 registered voters by Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green and Ron Shachar, political science professors at Yale University and Tel Aviv University, finds that after being

contacted by mail or in-person and voting in the 1998 elections, the voters were "significantly more likely to vote in local elections held in November of 1999" and isolating the effect of voting as a habit, they found that "voting in one election substantially increases the likelihood of voting in the future."

The logistical warranting for why this is the case is supported in another study, Cravens 2020 agrees that[56] "Voting in one election makes a person more likely to vote in future elections." Cravens 2020 further finds using United States and United Kingdom survey data that "turnout habit as a durable disposition to vote determined by an ability to automatically initiate voting and self-identify as a frequent voter." Once a voter has voted once, they are certainly registered in the electoral database (given that this is necessary to vote at all), and thus further voting is both easy and a practiced habit. As with all habits, one must start at some point, and 16 is a far better age than 18 to start practicing and building the habits of voting.

More than just good habits, there is also a unique warrant as to why starting to vote at age 16, not 18, uniquely leads to sustained later turnout later that other methods of voter engagement are less able to achieve. Serra 2024[57] of the London School of Economics finds that at age 16, "young people are more likely to still live with their parents and go to school, both of which are environments that can foster participation at the first elections because they provide guidance on the political system, local candidates, and voting process that someone who has never voted before is inevitably less familiar with. Those aged 18 to 23, on the other hand, have likely left their parental homes and possibly their hometowns too, and might therefore not be acquainted with local issues and candidates, or with voting registration systems and requirements." Certainly, anyone who has had to move, change addresses, start a new job, go to college, or experience a major shift in life can attest to these challenges. Now recall how much you thought about voting and public policy during that time. As this mini mental exercise demonstrates, voting at age 16 avoids many of the determinants that cause low voter turnout in youth adults 18 and older.

University of Kentucky professor Joshua A. Douglas agrees, arguing that "sixteen– and seventeen-year-olds are part of their communities, engaged in local debates, and immersed in civic education in high school. By contrast, eighteen-year-olds are graduating from high school, moving away from home, and entering the workforce or enrolling in college. The sheer fact of moving makes it more difficult to begin voting. These individuals must both register ahead of the election and often deal with absentee balloting hurdles. Thus, at an already tumultuous time in their lives, we also expect eighteen-year-olds to jump through various administrative hoops to participate in our democracy. Sixteen-year-olds do not face these same hurdles. Instead, they typically are living at home and are invested in their communities, and they are enrolled in high

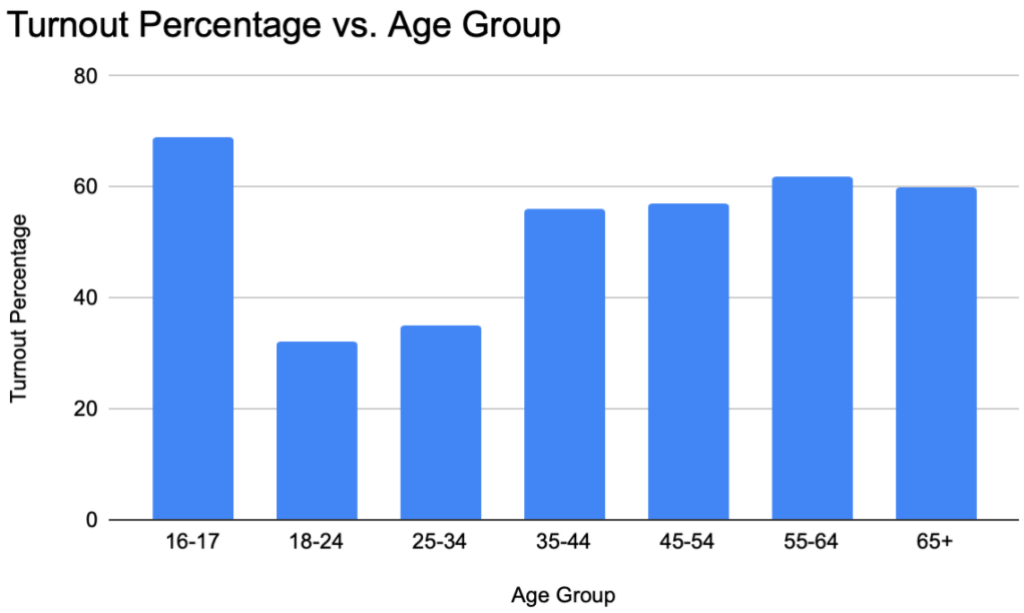
school, where improved civics education can teach them about the registration process and the intricacies of voting not to mention the candidates and issues."

The implication of this comparison between voting at age 16 versus 18 means that voting at age 16 would give youth more practice and experience to start casting votes when they benefit from community connections, support, and resources. As such, statistics regarding low voter turnout for 18-year-olds and other young adults should not be used as a reason to argue that youth are uninterested in voting; young adults lack the same community support and connections that youth have which are so critical to increasing voter turnout.

This will also help address concerns around low turnout for young adults. Basic logic bears out that society should promote the acquisition of good habits, such as teeth brushing or hand washing, from the earliest appropriate age. The same should apply for voting. Robust voter turnout is essential to a healthy and vibrant democracy, and allowing youth to vote builds these good habits early.

In the United States, so few municipalities have youth voting, so it is much more difficult to draw conclusions from the limited data available on youth voter turnout. However, Takoma Park in Maryland, one of the earliest adoptions of youth voting in municipal elections, can serve as a guide. Takoma Park has allowed youth to vote in city elections since 2013, and youth have turned out at the highest rate compared with all other age groups. Turnout is the best indicator of youth interest, and the available evidence demonstrates that youth are eager to vote if given the chance, and when they vote, they keep doing even after becoming adults. See Figure 4.

Figure 4: 2020 Turnout by Age Group in Takoma Park, MD



Source: Author's calculations from Table 3[58] in the City of Takoma Park Election Report

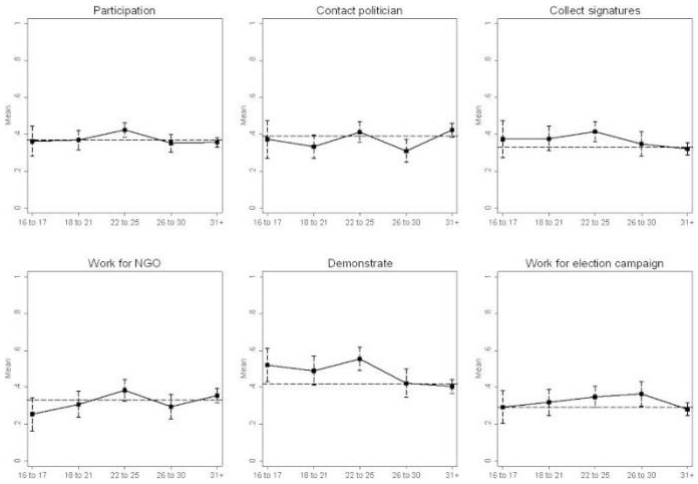
In a Minnesota-specific context, the rate of youth voter pre-registration can be used as a benchmark to assess whether youth are engaged and eager to vote. A news report[59] finds that since Minnesota's new Automatic Voter Registration system started operation in April of 2024, over 25,000 youth have pre-registered to vote. Even knowing they must wait 2 years until they can cast a ballot, youth are already highly motivated to pre-registered and will likely turnout at significant rates in future elections.

Additionally, the council's proposed date of 2026 as the first election in which youth will get to vote gives over one and a half years for us to register even more youth, who now have an active reason to be excited about voting since they will be able to do so without waiting until 18. Many nonprofits, the Secretary of State's office, and individuals and organizations can all take up this responsibility to include youth in the democratic process.

Further, examining the status of non-voting youth civic engagement can also provide insight into the level of youth civic engagement currently. Youth are already proving their dedication in giving back to their communities in a variety of ways, such as serving on advisory commissions, volunteering in nonprofits, and spearheading change with diverse forms of advocacy.

A 2022 report from the Brennan Center for Justice quantifies that roughly 50% of youth donate to charitable causes and 61% discuss political, social, or local issues with friends, family, and peers. Further, youth also give back to the community. A Census Bureau analysis[60] found that at 28%, youth volunteer at the highest rate of all age groups. These trends are mirrored in countries that have lowered the voting age as well. For example, in their study of Austrian young voters, Markus et al. 2012 compares Austrian voters under 18 and those above 18, and finds that "the youngest citizens' willingness to participate in non-electoral politics is relatively high and no different from the overall mean." See Figure 5 on the next page for a visual representation of this analysis.

Figure 5: Comparison of Age Groups and Their Participation in Non-Electoral Activities



Source: Markus et al. 2012

For a more personal example, one of the authors of this report, Daniel Song, served as a student commissioner on the City of Woodbury's Planning Commission for the 2024 term. In this role, he offered feedback and asked questions about commercial/industrial site plans, subdivisions, conditional use permits, planning, zoning and sign regulations, and other planning-related items. He has commented on a diverse array of topics impacting his community, ranging from major projects such as his high school's proposed expansion and a proposed Amazon warehouse facility to topics as small as chicken-rearing regulations.

Another author of this report, Elizabeth McCormick, also serves on a board in her city of Northfield. The MYC is very appreciative and grateful of the opportunity to make our voices heard and represent the views and concerns of youth in our local governments, but more needs to be done. The limitations youth on commissions face include that they ultimately do not have voting power, the commissions youth serve on are advisory and not binding, and a single young person cannot represent the voices of all youth.

This report highlights these examples of youth in local government because they illustrate how youth are civically engaged and interested in local issues, but the true and only way to effectively engage all youth is to give them the vote since everyone can then make their voices heard on the issues that impact their lives. Looking broadly at the country, a series of New York Times[61] interviews from youth across the country in March of 2024 found that youth are overwhelmingly in support of lowering the voting age. The council invites all stakeholders to learn about the stances of young people in advocating for their right to vote.

Section 10: Youth are Not Politically Biased Toward Any Party

First and foremost, youth voting is a nonpartisan issue. Second, youth voting has the potential to benefit both political parties in a bipartisan fashion.

Before addressing the partisan and ideological implications of youth voting, it is imperative to recognize that the right to vote is nonpartisan, and a voter's specific political affiliations should never constitute a reason against their right to vote. Voting is a basic human right, and to deny a qualified voter the right to vote only because one does not agree with their political stances goes against the very basis of democracy and fair representation. As President James Madison put it[62], "the right of suffrage is a fundamental Article in Republican Constitutions." Additionally, Wray-Lake and Oosterhoff 2022[63] argue that "arguments that state that enfranchising adolescents would shift the political majority in undesirable ways are … fundamentally anti-democratic in ignoring voting as a human liberty."

To conceptualize this idea, imagine Americans 25-29 years old were denied the right to vote because they support[64] the Democratic Party by 32 points, or if Americans 80 and above were denied the right to vote because they support the Republican Party by 19 points. Both of these scenarios are extremely undemocratic and unfair. The same logic applies to youth. Using concerns of youth being politically biased to deny them the right to vote would constitute an unfair double standard because all else being equal (this report has proved youth are just as qualified as adult voters in all relevant aspects; see previous sections), such a standard is not applied, nor should it be applied, to any other age group of Americans.

In short, this analysis supersedes any concerns regarding youth being political biased the political and ideological preferences of youth should not play a role whatsoever in deciding whether they deserve to vote.

However, in an effort to be comprehensive, it is important to still address these concerns.

Youth are open to persuasion by candidates that engage and champion their concerns. The nonpartisan Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University in 2022 finds[65] that "[Young people] are less likely to identify with one of the two major parties. They report high shares of people who do not identify with either political party. Nearly two in five youth (38%) said they identify as either Independents or "something else," compared to 35% of the 30-44 age group and 30% or

fewer of older voters." Youth are independent-minded and open to persuasion by both political parties, and instead of denying youth the right to vote, elected officials should appeal to young constituents.

In a school board context, this is especially important. Basic fairness dictates that school board members have a higher responsibility to meet the needs and aspirations of students in school rather than adult-run political interest groups. Democracy is only realized when elected officials must appeal to be responsible to voters; that's what makes our government more responsive to the needs of the people compared to authoritarian regimes like China and Russia. If policymakers are serious about upholding their commitment to democracy and fair representation, they should allow youth to vote. Allowing youth to vote will lead to long-term engagement in the democratic process and strengthen Minnesota's culture of healthy and strong political engagement amongst citizens of all ages.

In addition to the Scottish Conservative Party voting in favor of lowering the voting age to 16 as mentioned in Section 4, many other prominent conservative elected officials in the United Kingdom have declared[66] their support for enfranchising youth. Miles Briggs, a Conservative Party member of the Scottish Parliament, discusses his experiences with youth voting in Scottish elections and finds that youth were not indoctrinated by their elders, but instead "[made] up their own minds, contributing to the discussion both inside and outside of their schools, making decisions about what they wanted from their futures." Briggs goes further to say that "I have not met anyone who was out there campaigning, who was not impressed by their contribution, their intelligence and their diligence … This has not somehow detracted from Scotland's traditions – it has bolstered them. I believe this to be one of the most politically engaged generations we have seen: people who are also deeply affected by political decisions are actively contributing to our democratic process."

Further, young voters are persuadable by candidates of both parties and ideologies. In the 2020 election, young adults (18 to 29) supported[67] President Biden over President Trump 61% to 36%. One of the reasons was because the Biden campaign focused on outreach to young voters. As Tufts University reports, "Nearly half of young people (ages 18-29) said they were contacted by the Biden campaign or the Democratic Party, while 31% of youth were contacted by the Trump campaign or the Republican Party." In the 2024 election, support for President Trump among young voters increased[68] 10 percentage points from 36 to 46% in part because Trump also tailored his messaging toward young Americans, such as holding events[69] with prominent social media figures. The upshot of this shift in young people demonstrates that young adults and youth are not ideologically monolithic or blindly support one political party.

Returning to school board elections, elected officials and candidates of all political affiliations and platforms can win youth voters if they make a genuine effort to connect with young Americans and pledge to address their concerns. Combining this analysis with the understanding that youth voting leads to long-term higher voter turnout among youth, enfranchising the youth represents a major opportunity for Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and candidates of all ideologies to build a base of solid and sustained support from the generation will comprise a majority of the electorate in the near future.

Section 11: The Logistics and Legality of Lowering the Voting Age

Logistical and legal considers are the most significant barriers to achieving youth voting in Minnesota. However, before discussing these issues and potential ways to address them, it is critical to put these concerns into context. To be explicitly clear, this report has proven that youth voting itself, once realized, has no drawbacks but bountiful benefits, both for youth themselves and for their communities. Logistics and legality are in no way critiques or criticisms of the merits of youth voting inherently as a policy, but rather barriers to the successful implementation of such a policy. The MYC acknowledges the significant logistical and legal hurdles to achieving youth voting, and this report will be frank and forthright in discussing these issues, but in considering that youth voting as a policy delivers substantial benefits to many constituencies of all ages, the MYC urges legislators to work constructively to address logistical and legal concerns rather than using them as justification to deny youth the vote. As President John F. Kennedy rightly remarked,[70] "We … do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win …"

With that in mind. this section will discuss the logistical and legal considerations of youth voting.

On logistics, looking to historical precedent, the cities of Oakland and Berkeley have already implemented this proposal and provide a useful precedent regarding logistics. Additionally, Minnesota would have a year and half to arrange the logistics of youth voting, as the MYC proposes that youth voting should start in 2026. In that time frame, any and all concerns over logistics can be addressed in a measured and comprehensive manner. Numerous countries have also adopted youth voting at a national scale without any issues. See Table 1.

Oakland, California can provide a concrete example for the implementation of youth voting. As the Los Angeles Times explains[71], "sixteen- and 17- year-olds must register to vote and are sent a ballot with only the school board candidates in their district, preventing them from voting in other races." Absentee ballots are already commonly used in elections across Minnesota. There are rigorous procedures followed by the Minnesota Secretary of State's office that ensure every single absentee ballot is secure and legitimate.

These safeguards can be extended to absentee ballots for youth voters. Note that the council does not endorse or support any specific method to implement youth voting; these examples are offered merely as potential hypotheticals to demonstrate the viability of youth voting with respect to logistics.

Finally, it is important to note that youth in Minnesota can already[72] pre-register to vote, so youth voting is simply a matter of expanding pre-registration and then allowing these same pre-registered youth to actually vote in school board elections. Pre-registration can take place through the many organizations that youth are a part of, such as high schools, places of worship, libraries, nonprofit and community organizations like the League of Women Voters, and political parties can play a role as well. Strategies for engaging adult voters can simply be expanded to encompass youth.

As part of the research in writing this report, the authors has a conversation over Zoom with Minnesota Secretary of State Government Relations Director Nicole Freeman. Note that the Secretary of State's office does not hold an official position on the legislative recommendation of lowering the voting age; the MYC's conversations with Ms. Freeman and others are simply part of the information-gathering and research process. Ms. Freeman advised that there are several logistics concerns with respect to youth voting.

Some school board elections are held in odd years while some are held in even. There are also federal and statewide elections in even years. In this case, youth voting would need either a dedicated election or a split process to ensure youth voting in school board elections only. This may require a separate registration system as currently pre-registered youth have a pending, but not active status in the voting system since they cannot vote until they turn 18.

In many situations, school districts are split across election precincts, or there are multiple school districts in a single precinct, which complicates ballot distribution. Additionally, homeschooled youth, youth in online school, and youth attending a school that is not their assigned school based on residency, may present additional questions on whether to enfranchise them as well.

There is also a cost consideration as mail in ballots are run by counties, and there may be a separate ballot require at the voting booth as aligning ballots with multiple ballot styles could be complicated for the elections software to manage. Ms. Freeman advised that counties may have to double their ballot styles (one ballot for adults, one for youth with only school board candidates), which would double programming costs, burdening counties, especially in Greater Minnesota that work with a vendor to obtain ballots.

However, there are ways that the Minnesota Secretary of State and state government can prevent the burden of logistics from falling onto counties. New Jersey Bill S3240, which lowers the voting age to 16 for school board elections statewide, provides a template that can guide implementation in Minnesota. The council supports the Minnesota Legislature to undertake similar steps in their legislation creation. The New Jersey bill details a logistics plan on how this will be executed. The bill directs the New Jersey Secretary of State to:

(1) create a registration form and a process to register 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in school board elections, which conforms as nearly as possible to the equivalent form and process utilized for all other eligible voters;

(2) establish a method of verifying the identity of registered 16 and 17-year-old voters which conforms as nearly as possible to the methods utilized for all other eligible voters;

(3) provide for the design of paper ballots on which 16 and 17-year-olds may vote for school board members; and

(4) ensure the provisions of this act are implemented effectively and in a manner compatible with all other elections held in this State.

The New Jersey bill explicitly guarantees that "This bill does not require action on the part of any school board or municipality in order to implement its provisions."

This is very important, as youth voting would necessitate the creation of separate ballots for youth to vote, and potential new election security and administrative procedures. Similar to New Jersey, the Minnesota Secretary of State may be able to implement a similar set of actions to ensure the logistics of youth voting do not burden school districts, countries, or local municipalities by assisting with large costs of ballot design, voting machines, technology, ballot distribution to youth, registration, etc.

On legality, this is the most significant barrier to youth voting in Minnesota. Ms. Freeman of the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office informed the authors that one of the major legal barriers to lowering the voting age by an act passed by the legislature is that the Minnesota State Constitution explicitly and clearly requires voters be 18 and above. As such, the Secretary of State believes there would need to be a constitutional amendment passed by the Minnesota Legislature and approved by the voters of the state of Minnesota to change the state constitution to lower the voting age (or at the very least allow the legislature or local municipalities to lower the voting age on their own accord if they so choose).

Article VII, Section 1 of the Minnesota State Constitution states, "Every person 18 years of age or more who has been a citizen of the United States for three months and who has resided in the precinct for 30 days next preceding an election shall be entitled to vote in that precinct … The following persons shall not be entitled or permitted to vote at any election in this state: A person not meeting the above requirements …"

As 16- and 17-year-olds are not 18 years of age yet, they are explicitly prohibited from voting in Minnesota in all circumstances, in both state and local elections. As such, this also precludes cities, municipalities, and school districts from lowering the voting age to 16 on their own, as many municipalities in other states have done. For example, California, Maryland, and New Jersey do not have such restrictions, empowering cities and school districts to enfranchise youth. Unfortunately, such avenues are not possible in Minnesota.

In 2017, University of Kentucky Joshua A. Douglas published an analysis[73] of each state's constitution and the legality of lowering the voting age. Douglas agrees with the Secretary of State's interpretation, writing that "Although Minnesota's constitution initially phrases the right to vote as a grant, it subsequently states that if a person does not meet the "above requirements," that person "shall not be entitled or permitted to vote at any election in this state."

This means that the only way for youth to vote in Minnesota is through a constitutional amendment changing the Minnesota State Constitution to remove the explicit prohibition of persons not meeting the age requirements from being able to vote.

A document from the Minnesota House of Representatives explains[74] that the constitutional amendment process first requires the legislative to approve an act to change the constitution by a majority vote of both bodies (House and Senate) of the legislature. The constitutional amendment must then be presented to the voters at a general election. Amendments are ratified if approved by a majority of voters voting at the election, not just a majority voting on the amendment. The first step, as the MYC has previously recommended, is for the legislature to approve a constitutional amendment and put it on the ballot for voters' consideration.

Section 12: Conclusion

This report has presented a comprehensive case for lowering the voting age to 16 for school board elections in Minnesota. This report highlighted the urgent need to address the lack of youth representation in decisions that directly impact our lives and presented both a theoretical and an empirical case for why the voting age should be lowered to 16. The report underscores the idea that arguments against youth voting often stem from unfounded biases rather than factual evidence. Using a wealth of empirical evidence and logical reasoning, this report addressed common misconceptions and refute common critiques about youth voting. The research clearly finds that, by age 16, youth possess the adequate political knowledge, necessary cognitive capacity, sufficient social independence, rich life experiences, political interest and motivation, and political independence to vote. Dozens of countries around the world and many municipalities in the United States have already enfranchised youth to great success.

Beyond debunking misconceptions, this report emphasized the numerous benefits of empowering youth to vote. Enfranchising youth strengthens democracy and civic engagement by fostering a more inclusive and representative system. Early participation in the electoral process cultivates long-term voting habits, addressing concerns about low turnout among young adults and ensuring a vibrant and engaged electorate for the future. Additionally, youth voting has positive ripple effects, encouraging civic dialogue and higher voter turnout within families and broader communities, and promoting informed decision-making on matters of local importance. The evidence paints a compelling picture of a stronger and more engaged Minnesota empowered by the voices of its youth.

Building upon the evidence presented, the MYC urges the Minnesota State Legislature to pass legislation enfranchising 16 and 17-year-olds with the power to vote in school board elections starting in 2026. Minnesota is proudly the Star of the North. The North Star of policymakers in championing the concerns of our state should be to listen to the very youth whose futures are at stake. By passing this policy, Minnesota can continue its legacy of strong civic engagement, ensuring a more inclusive and representative democracy that empowers all its citizens, young and old, to shape a brighter future.

There are over 150,000[75] youth in Minnesota. That's 150,000 reasons to lower the voting age.

Section 13: Authors and Acknowledgements

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Lastly, this report owes its inspiration, motivation, and success to all the youth in Minnesota. To all the youth who dream: never forget that our voices matter.

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