

Top Ten Reasons to Lower the Voting Age

National Youth Rights Association
<http://www.youthrights.org>

"no right is more precious in a free country than that of having a choice in the election of those who make the laws under which...we must live. Other rights, even the most basic, are illusory if the right to vote is undermined."

Youth suffer under a double standard of adult responsibilities but not rights

In 1971 the United States ratified the 26th Amendment to the Constitution granting the right to vote to 18-20-year-olds. The 26th Amendment was the fastest to be ratified in U.S. history. At the height of the Vietnam War most Americans realized the sick double standard inherent in sending 18-year-old soldiers to fight and die for their country when they weren't allowed to vote. Double standards didn't go away in 1971. Right now youth are subject to adult penalties for crimes despite lacking the right to vote.

Frank Zimring found that "Between 1992 and 1995, forty American states relaxed the requirements for transferring an accused under the maximum age of jurisdiction into criminal court," (Zimring p.108) and "In Colorado, for example, defendants under the maximum age for juvenile court jurisdiction may nonetheless be charged by direct filing in criminal court if they are over 14 years of age and are charged with one of a legislative list of violent crimes." (Zimring 119)

What kind of twisted message do we send when we tell youth they are judged mature, responsible adults when they commit murder, but silly, brainless kids when they want to vote? This is a double standard, no different than during the Vietnam War. War isn't a dead issue now either, leaders who youth can't vote for today may send them to war tomorrow. Currently, several hundred Americans have died in Iraq having never been allowed to vote. Lowering the voting age is the just, fair way to set things straight.

Youth pay taxes, live under our laws, they should have the vote

Just like all other Americans, young Americans pay taxes. In fact, they pay a lot of taxes. Teens pay an estimated \$9.7 Billion dollars in sales taxes alone. Not to mention many millions of taxes on income, according to the IRS, "You may be a teen, you may not even have a permanent job, but you have to pay taxes on the money you earn." Youth pay billions in taxes to state, local, and federal governments yet they have absolutely no say over how much is taken. This is what the American Revolution was fought over; this is taxation without representation.

In addition to being affected by taxes, young people are affected by every other law that Americans live under. As fellow citizens in this society, every action or inaction taken by lawmakers affects youth directly, yet they have no say in the matter. In her 1991 testimony before a Minnesota House subcommittee, 14-year-old Rebecca Tilsen had this to say:

"If 16-year-olds are old enough to drink the water polluted by the industries that you regulate, if 16-year-olds are old enough to breathe the air ruined by garbage burners that government built, if 16-year-olds are old enough to walk on the streets made unsafe by terrible drugs and crime policies, if 16-year-olds are old enough to live in poverty in the richest country in the world, if 16-year-olds are old enough to get sick in a country with the worst public health-care programs in the world, and if 16-year-olds are old enough to attend school districts that you underfund, then 16-year-olds are old enough to play a part in making them better."

The just power of government comes from the consent of the governed, as it stands now youth are governed (overly so, some may say) but do not consent. This is un-American. Like all tax-paying, law-abiding Americans, youth must be given the right to vote.

Politicians will represent their interests if youth can vote

Politicians represent various constituencies; currently young people are no one's constituency. Why should politicians care about the needs and wishes of youth when they have no ability to vote for or against them? Lowering the voting age will give politicians a real reason to respect the desires of young people.

Youth feel alienated from politics and politicians, lowering the voting age will include them in the process. The words spoken before the Senate Judiciary Committee supporting lowering the voting age in 1971 are as true then as they are now, "The anachronistic voting-age limitation tends to alienate them from systematic political processes and to drive them to into a search for an alternative, sometimes violent, means to express their frustrations over the gap between the nation's deals and actions. Lowering the voting age will provide them with a direct, constructive and democratic channel for making their views felt and for giving them a responsible stake in the future of the nation." (Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Report on Lowering the Voting Age to 18, S. Rep. No 26, 92nd Congress, 1st Session 5 (1971).)

Youth have a unique perspective, they'll never have those experiences again

A common argument against lowering the voting age is that it isn't a burden to wait a few years. Denying youth the right to vote isn't the same as denying women or racial minorities, according to opponents, since in a few years young people will grow up and be able to vote. Why go through the trouble to lower the age to 16 when after two years they'll be able to vote anyways? Were it that simple, then perhaps, but it isn't.

Would it be acceptable to limit the right to vote to those with a certain income, reasoning that it is a flexible standard, those with less income must only work harder or wait till they too make enough to vote? No it wouldn't. Voters vote based on their individual circumstances, when those

circumstances change often so do their voting habits. The concerns of a 14 year old are different than that of a 24 year old, just as the concerns of a poor man differ from that of a rich man. The beliefs and priorities of 16 year olds as a class are unique to them; we cannot expect former 16 year olds to have as accurate a perspective as those who are currently that age. If we care at all about the needs and desires of youth, they must be allowed to vote for themselves.

16 is a better age to introduce voting than 18; 16 year olds are stationary

Currently the right to vote is granted at perhaps the worst possible moment in one's life. At 18 many youth leave the home and community they have lived for most their life, either to go away to college or to move away from home in search of work. At the moment they are supposed to vote they either have a new community that they are unfamiliar with or they must attempt to vote absentee back home, a process that turns off many new voters.

Lowering the voting age to 16 will give the vote to people who have roots in a community, have an appreciation for local issues, and will be more concerned about voting than those just two years older. Youth have comfortable surroundings, school, parents, and stable friends, they feel connected to their community; all factors that will increase their desire and need to vote. Lower the voting age, and youth will vote.

Lowering the Voting Age will increase voter turnout

For several reasons lowering the voting age will increase voter turnout. It is common knowledge that the earlier in life a habit is formed the more likely that habit or interest will continue throughout life. If attempts are made to prevent young people from picking up bad habits, why are no attempts made to get youth started with good habits, like voting? If citizens begin voting earlier, and get into the habit of doing so earlier, they are more likely to stick with it through life.

Not only will turnout increase for the remainder of young voter's lives, the turnout of their parents will increase as well: "A 1996 survey by Bruce Merrill, an Arizona State University journalism professor, found a strong increase in turnout. Merrill compared turnout of registered voters in five cities with Kids Voting with turnout in five cities without the program. Merrill found that between five and ten percent of respondents reported Kids Voting was a factor in their decision to vote. This indicated that 600,000 adults nationwide were encouraged to vote by the program."

Kids Voting is a program in which children participate in a mock vote and accompany their parents to the polls on Election Day. Reports show that even this modest gesture to including youth increased the interest in voting of their whole family. Parents were more likely to discuss politics with their kids and thus an estimated 600,000 adult voters were more likely to vote because of it. Lowering the voting age will strengthen this democracy for all of us.

If we let stupid adults vote, why not let smart youth vote?

The argument that youth "should not vote because they lack the ability to make informed and intelligent decisions is valid only if that standard is applied to all citizens." (Farson, Birthrights, 182-183) But yet this standard is not applied to all citizens, only young people. "We do not deprive a senile person of this right, nor do we deprive any of the millions of alcoholics, neurotics, psychotics and assorted fanatics who live outside hospitals of it. We seldom ever prevent those who are hospitalized for mental illness from voting." (Farson, Birthrights, 177-178)

Even beyond senile, neurotic, and psychotic adults, regular adults often do not meet the unrealistic standard opponents to youth voting propose. Turn on the Tonight Show one night and see the collection of adult buffoons who can't tell Jay Leno who the vice-president is, or who have forgotten how many states are in this country. Yet these adults are happily given the right to vote. The fact is, intelligence or maturity is not the

basis upon which the right to vote is granted, if that were the case all voters would need to pass a test before voting. Though "...under voting rights jurisprudence, literacy tests are highly suspect (and indeed are banned under federal law), and lack of education or information about election issues is not a basis for withholding the franchise." (Davis, Scott, et al p. 126) Youth shouldn't be held to a stricter standard than adults; lower the voting age.

Youth will vote well

It is silly to fear that huge masses of youth will rush to the voting booth and unwittingly vote for Mickey Mouse and Britney Spears. By and large, those individuals with no interest in politics and no knowledge on the subject will stay home from the polls and not vote. This mechanism works for adult voters as well. Youth will behave no differently.

Besides foolishly throwing a vote away, some worry about youth voting for dangerous radicals. These fears are unfounded as well, "We should remember, too, that many people today vote at first, and often for many years after, exactly as their parents voted. We are all deeply influenced, in politics as everything else, by the words and example of people we love and trust." John Holt p. 169 One's political leanings are influenced by their community and their family, and it is likely young voters will vote in much the same way as their parents, not because they are coerced to do so, but because of shared values.

With the voting age at 16 there is the opportunity for new voters have a greater opportunity to be educated voters as most are in high school. When the voting age is lowered schools will most likely schedule a civics class to coincide with 16 that will introduce the issues and prepare new voters. It stands to reason that these young voters will be better prepared to vote than their elders.

There are no wrong votes

Noting that youth will most likely vote well we must wonder, is it at all possible for a

voter to vote wrong? Did voters choose poorly when they elected Clinton in 1992? Republicans would say so. Did voters choose poorly when they elected Bush in 2000? Democrats would say so. If youth were able to vote for either of them, or against them would they be voting wrong? I don't think so. All voters have their own reasons for voting, we may disagree with their reasons, but we must respect their right to make a decision. As we must do with youth.

Lowering the voting age will provide an intrinsic benefit to the lives of youth

Granting youth the right to vote will have a direct effect on their character, intelligence and sense of responsibility. Is it any wonder why many youth feel apathetic towards politics? After 18 years of their life being told their opinion doesn't matter, they are just foolish children who should be seen and not heard, is anyone surprised that many people over 18 feel turned off by politics and don't vote? We can see this contrast between volunteering and politics. Teenagers have amazingly high levels of volunteering and community service, however many feel turned off by politics. Even small gestures like mock voting has a large effect on teen's interest in politics, of students participating in Kids Voting USA, "More than 71% of students reported frequently or occasionally questioning parents about elections at home. These same students also viewed voting with great importance. About 94% felt it was very important or somewhat important to vote." Including youth in a real, substantive way in politics will lead to even more interest as they take their public-spirited nature into the political realm.

Many opponents to lowering the voting age assume apathetic youth today will be no different when given the right to vote, this is wrong. Responsibility comes with rights, not the other way around. "It is not a pre-condition of self-government that those that govern be wise, educated, mature, responsible and so on, but instead these are the results which self-government is designed to produce." (Stroll) Educator and

youth rights theorist, John Holt points out that if youth "think their choices and decisions make a difference to them, in their own lives, they will have every reason to try to choose and decide more wisely. But if what they think makes no difference, why bother to think?" (Holt, 156) He stresses this point again, "It is not just power, but impotence, that corrupts people. It gives them the mind and soul of slaves. It makes them indifferent, lazy, cynical, irresponsible, and, above all, stupid." (Holt, 156)

Lowering the voting age may not be the magic bullet to improve the lives of youth, but by giving them a real stake in their futures and their present lives it will push them to become involved, active citizens of this great nation. The National Youth Rights Association strongly urges lawmakers and individuals in this country to seriously consider lowering the voting age.

Wesberry v. Saunders, 376 U.S. 1, 17 (1964).

Stroll, Avrum, "Censorship, Models and Self-Government," *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall 1967) The Hague, Netherlands: Nijhoff Pub., p.81

Zimring, Frank. *American Youth Violence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998

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"Tax Interactive."
<http://www.irs.gov/individuals/page/0,,id%3D15579,00.html>. Visited 22 February 2003

According to <http://thestic.com/STrates.stm> the average sales tax in the country is 5.62%, According to a study by Interep (<http://www.interep.com/pr/PRTeen02.pdf>) teens spent \$172 Billion in 2001.

"Proposal to Lower the Voting Age."
<http://www.youthrights.org/voteproposal.html>. Visited 22 February 2003

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