

Why the Voting Age Should be Lowered to 16

Youth NEED the Right to Vote

- 80% of 16 and 17 year-olds work at some point before graduation.¹ 61% of teenagers work *during* the school year.²
- Youth pay taxes but have no say about how much or how that tax money is spent.
- Youth will be deeply affected by decisions about social security, but cannot vote to insure that the money they contribute today will be there for them when they retire.
- Youth have strongly held views about the environment, but have no voice in determining the leaders who must protect it.
- Youth are most directly impacted by education policy. As students, they have the best perspective to determine what reforms are needed but have no input in deciding what changes are made.

Youth Have the Maturity Needed to Vote

- Youth become physically mature at an earlier age. For example, the average age of puberty has declined from 16 ½ in the mid 1800's, to 15 in 1900 to about 12 today.³



- Today's youth are smarter than their parents' generation. Studies conducted by Professor James Flynn have shown that IQ scores grew by 17 points during the period 1947 through 2001, with the increase accelerating to 0.36 points per year in the 1990's.⁴ In other words, a child scoring in the top 25% in an IQ test today, would score in the top 3% of an IQ test in 1932.⁵ Experts have suggested an explanation to

this trend: the explosion of new media, television and particularly the internet, which challenge youth's cognitive senses and problem solving abilities.

- Youth are treated like adults in many respects. 16 year-olds are allowed to drive

¹ Studies: Light 1995; Steinberg and Cauffman 1995; The Evansville Courier, August 10, 2003, p. B3.

² Ovetta Sampson "Paying a Price/ Teens at Work Juggle Assets and Liabilities," Houston Chronicle, January 11, 2001,

³ "Today's Puberty is Too Fast for Society," James P. Pinkerton, Newsday, April 2, 1998, A57.

⁴ "Dome Improvement," Steven Johnson, Wire Magazine, May 13, 2005.

⁵ "I.Q. Scores Are Up, and Psychologists Wonder Why," Trish Hall, New York Times, February 24, 1998.

in 48 states.⁶ Youth 16 (or even younger) are tried as adults for serious crimes in many states. As a result, the number of juveniles in adult prisons grew by 47% during a mere five year period (1990-1995).⁷ If youth can be punished like adults, they should also be given the rights of adults.

Youth Have the Political Knowledge to Vote Intelligently

- Youth are enrolled in school, taking history, government, law and/or economics.
- When students are taught a full course curriculum, they come to know MORE about politics and government than adults.

Example: Students who took the comprehensive We the People (“WTP”) constitutional law program scored BETTER than adults 18-80 in knowledge of government and politics. See Table below.

Question	WTP Students Answering Correctly	Adults (18-80) Answering Correctly
Could name the vice-president	96%	74%
Understood the meaning of “Judicial Review”	96%	66%
Knew Two-Thirds Veto Override Requirement	87%	34%
Knew which political party controlled the House of Representatives	68%	68%
Could explain political party ideology	87%	57%

High school students are more than qualified enough to vote: the federal Voting Rights Acts of 1965 (42 U.S.C. § 1971(c)) states that:

any person who has not been adjudged an incompetent and who has completed the sixth grade in a public school in, or a private school accredited by, any State or territory, the District of Columbia, or the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico where instruction

⁶ “State by State Driving Rules for Teenagers,”

⁷ Deanie C. Allen, “Trying Children as Adults,” Jones Law Review, 2002.

is carried on predominantly in the English language, possesses sufficient literacy, comprehension, and intelligence to vote in any election.

Thus, if a 6th grade education is adequate for voting purposes, certainly the 10th grade education most 16 year-olds possess would be more than adequate.

Unknowledgeable Adults Are Not Kept from Voting

- Even ignoring the issue of youth knowledge of politics, adults who are ignorant about political issues are not kept from voting. For example, polls have shown that about 70% of adults can't name their *own* state's senators.⁸ Another poll found that three-quarters of Americans could not name their House member.⁹ A third showed almost two-thirds of adults could not name *any* United States Supreme Court justices.¹⁰ Adults are even more confused on the issues themselves. In the Washington Post poll, adults mistakenly thought foreign aid made up 26% of the budget (it made up only 2%).¹¹ If adults lack even **basic** knowledge of who represents them and how the government works, how can youth be classified as not knowledgeable enough to vote?

Youth Voting Will Increase Adult Turnout

- Studies taken on the Kids Voting program¹² have shown that the mock election program has increased parental turnout. A 1996 survey found that 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.¹³ Another study found that this increase in voting resulted from dinner-time conversations between parents and children over political issues learned from Kids Voting, and this impact was strongest among the group *least* likely to vote, parents from lower socio-

⁸ "What to do, what to do?," Ralph Reiland, Pittsburgh Live Column, October 24, 2004, at http://pittsburghlive.com/x/tribune-review/opinion/columnists/reiland/s_264990.html

⁹ Richard Morin, "Who's in Control? Many Don't Know or Care; Knowledge Gap Affects Attitudes and Participation, The Washington Post, January 29, 1996, A1.

¹⁰ "Nearly two-thirds of Americans can't name any U.S. Supreme Court Justices, says FindLaw survey," PR Newswire, Europe, June 20, 2003; Survey by Findlaw, Press Release, June 20, 2003, at <http://company.findlaw.com/pr/2003/062003.scotus.html>

¹¹ Richard Morin, "Who's in Control? Many Don't Know or Care; Knowledge Gap Affects Attitudes and Participation, The Washington Post, January 29, 1996, A1.

¹² Kids Voting is a program operating in 29 states and the District of Columbia, which combines a civics curriculum with an opportunity for students to cast mock election votes at the polling place.

¹³ John Stuart Hall, "Elections and Civic Education, the Case of Kids Voting USA", National Civic Review, Spring 1998, 79.

economic backgrounds.¹⁴ Thus, a lower voting age will increase turnout among those least likely to vote by encouraging parents and children to discuss political issues that might otherwise have gone ignored.

Youth Want the Right to Vote and Will Turnout

- 73% of 12-17 year olds in a Washington Post survey were very interested or fairly interested in politics. 95% of these young people viewed voting in a presidential election as very important or fairly important.¹⁵
- Teens support a lower voting age: 73% of 12-17 year-olds in a 1991 Minneapolis mock election supported a voting age of 16.¹⁶
- In a national poll conducted by Do Something, a majority of young people favored lowering the voting age below 18.¹⁷
- Teens will turnout and vote:
 - **Germany**- Several states lowered the voting age to 16 for local elections, with higher turnout for voters under 18 than for 18-24 year-olds.
 - City of Hanover (1996) 16-17 year-olds (56.5% turnout), 18-24 year-olds (49.1% turnout).¹⁸
 - City of Braunschweig (1996), 16-17 year-olds (50.4% turnout), 18-24 year-olds (44.5% turnout).¹⁹
 - State of Saxony-Anhalt (1999) (all major cities), 16-17 year-olds (33% turnout), 18-21 year-olds (32% turnout), 21-25 year-olds (24% turnout).²⁰
 - **Austria**- Several Austrian provinces also lowered their voting age to 16. 16-17 year-olds have turned out well. For example, in the City of Graz, January 2003- 16-17 year-olds turned out at a higher rate (58%) than the total voter turnout (57%).²¹
 - **USA**- For the most part, turnout among American youth must be examined by comparing mock election turnout number with adult turnout.

¹⁴ Johnson, Thomas J. Editor. *Engaging the Public: How Government and the Media can Reinvigorate American Democracy*. Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. (Lanham, Maryland, 1980), 160.

¹⁵ Sharon Warden, "Teen Views on America and Politics", *Washington Post*, October 30, 1992, E1.

¹⁶ Education Week on the Web, November 27, 1991, Web Site. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/vol-11/13boxh11> (No longer available on the internet).

¹⁷ "Lowering the Voting Age: Online Polling Results from U.S. Youth". Do Something, Inc. May 8, 2006.

¹⁸ "Teens Show Voting Desire in Germany". *Phoenix Gazette*. September 19, 1996.

¹⁹ United Kingdom's Electoral Commission Summary, April 2004, at 16.

²⁰ *Ibid* at 17.

²¹ "Local Governments in Austria, the Politico-Administrative System and New Developments since the 1990's," *Diputacio Barcelona xarxa de municipis*, at 52.

- Minneapolis School Board Election (1991)- 12-17 year olds (40% turnout), Adults (5.6% turnout);²²



- Washington D.C. (1994) (Kids Voting Mock Election)- students (50%+), Adults (40%);²³
- Baltimore, 2003- an actual election where some 16 and 17 year-olds were able to vote in the mayoral primary because they would be 18 by the time of the general election (more than one year later). Turnout: 35% of registered 16 and 17 year-olds turned out versus 36% of the general population.²⁴

A Voting Age Under 18 is Constitutional

The 26th Amendment to the United States Constitution states that:

The right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of age.

There is agreement among distinguished constitutional law professors such as Vikram Amar (University of California-Hastings)²⁵ and Katherine Hunt Federle (Ohio State University)²⁶ that the 26th Amendment only prohibits a jurisdiction from setting a voting age above 18, it does not prohibit a voting age under 18.

²² Education Week on the Web, November 27, 1991, Web Site. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/vol-11/13boxh11> (No longer available on web).

²³ Richard C. Tenwolde, "Teaching Ballot Box Practices", Washington Post, November 17, 1994, J1.

²⁴ Berkeley, California Youth voting Bill," Kriss Worthington and Darryl Moore, considered May 24, 2005 at <http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/citycouncil/2005citycouncil/packet/052405/2005-05-24%20Item%2025.pdf>

²⁵ "Senator Seeks Lower Voting Age," Kate Folmar and Julie Patel, San Jose Mercury News, March 9, 2004.

²⁶ "Why Can't Older Kids Vote?" Katherine Hunt Federle, E-Book on Election Law, at http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/electionlaw/ebook/part1/eligibility_rules05.html

NYRA needs your help!

Lowering the voting age is an idea whose time has come. The National Youth Rights Association is organizing a nation-wide network of local chapters to work on lowering the voting age to 16 for state and local elections. Be a part of this movement by starting a local NYRA chapter at your school or in your community.

For more resources on lowering the voting age, check here:
<http://www.youthrights.org/votingage.php>

Start a chapter here:
<http://www.youthrights.org/chapters.php>

Or just get in touch with us for more information!

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