**National Youth Rights Association**

**Top 10 Reasons to Lower the Voting Age**

Lowering the voting age is a new concept for many people, but there are many good reasons that show doing so is a sound and ethical choice.

**1. Young people have adult responsibilities, but are denied the same rights.** People under 18 are contributing and active members of society. Millions of us are employed and volunteer in our communities. Many people under 18 also have “adult” responsibilities – such as being the primary caregiver for an ailing family member, running a business, and making substantial financial contributions to our households.

We are also capable of incredible intelligence and accomplishment. People under age 18 have the ability to [win a Nobel Prize,](http://nypost.com/2014/12/10/malala-yousafzai-is-youngest-person-to-win-nobel-peace-prize/) [reach the summit of Mount Everest,](http://www.historyandheadlines.com/10-major-accomplishments-young-people/) [conduct cancer research,](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/jack-andraka-the-teen-prodigy-of-pancreatic-cancer-135925809/?all) become [published authors,](https://teenscanwritetoo.wordpress.com/2012/10/06/teen-author-bookshelf-list-of-published-teen-authors/) [teach a graduate-level course](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/04/teen-physicist_n_1402887.html) in nuclear physics, [run their own schools,](http://www.sudval.com/05_onepersononevote.html#01) [work for NASA,](http://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/2-degrees-flies-planes-author-works-at-nasa-his-age-17/ar-BBmHYb4?li=AAa0dzB&ocid=mailsignout) and [risk their lives](http://theweek.com/articles/468498/9-heroic-teens-incredible-acts-bravery-updated) to save others. If young people are capable of such a variety of amazing feats, certainly we have the capacity to vote for the candidate that best represents our interests.

**2. Young people are expected to follow the law, but have no say in making it.** People under 18 are expected to follow adult laws and experience adult consequences if we don’t do so. In every state, it is possible for a case to be [transferred out of juvenile court into adult criminal court](http://www.ncsl.org/research/civil-and-criminal-justice/juvenile-age-of-jurisdiction-and-transfer-to-adult-court-laws.aspx), and in certain states all crimes committed by 16- and 17-year-olds are automatically transferred. Approximately 250,000 people under age 18 are tried, sentenced, or [incarcerated as adults](http://www.campaignforyouthjustice.org/documents/KeyYouthCrimeFacts.pdf) every year across the United States. This means that not only does our society expect young people to know “right from wrong” and the consequences for breaking certain laws, but our society also expects that we are able to navigate the adult legal system and are mature enough to be placed in adult prisons. It is hypocritical to tell us that we are mature, responsible adults when they commit a crime, but ignorant and naive when we want to vote.

We are also expected to follow the law regarding taxes. In 2011, people under 18 paid over [$730 million in income tax](http://taxfoundation.org/sites/taxfoundation.org/files/docs/PuttingAFace2013.pdf) alone and had no representation on how that money was spent. This “taxation without representation” should be no more tolerable to modern Americans as it was during the American Revolution.

**3. Young people are already participating in politics.** Despite attempts to exclude us from the political process, we are still making our voices heard. Young people have started ultimately successful campaigns for [mayor](http://mentalfloss.com/article/12438/7-teenagers-who-were-elected-mayor) and [state](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2014/05/14/this-west-virginia-17-year-old-just-beat-an-incumbent-state-delegate/) [legislature](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/bold-teen-runs-for-office/) before they were even old enough to vote.

People under 18 have also participated in politics by forming [Political Action Committees,](https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2010/04/young-adults-teens-forming-politica/) [managing campaigns,](http://www.blackpoolgazette.co.uk/news/local/teen-masterminds-political-campaign-1-7116090) advocating for our rights in front of legislative bodies, and becoming grassroots activists. And even though we are not allowed to vote, young people are able to contribute just as much money to a political campaign as adults are. In fact, the [U.S. Supreme Court ruled that banning people under 18 from this part of the political process](http://www.fec.gov/law/litigation_CCA_M.shtml) actually violates our First Amendment rights.

Whether it is forming political groups at school, organizing protests, or using social media to express our opinion, young people find a way to become involved in politics. And if we want to be involved in the political process this badly, how can politicians deny us the right any longer?

**4. Young people make good voters.** When the voting age has been lowered to 16, young people have shown our interest in voting. In 2013, when Takoma Park, Maryland, lowered its voting age to 16, registered voters under 18 had a [turnout rate four times higher than voters over 18.](http://www.promoteourvote.com/blog/16-and-17-year-olds-vote-for-first-time-in-takoma-park) And again in Hyattsville, Maryland (the second place in the U.S. to lower the voting age to 16), registered 16- and 17-year-old voters had a[higher turnout out rate than older voters.](http://www.votewarner.com/faqs) Seventeen-year-olds also had a [higher turnout rate than people aged 20-50](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-05-07/news/chi-17-year-olds-voted-at-higher-rate-than-parents-in-primary-election-20140507_1_women-voters-turnout-langdon-neal) in the Chicago Primary in 2014.

Similar trends have occurred outside the United States. Voters aged 16 to 17 had a higher turnout rate than older voters under age 30 in [Norway’s 2011 elections,](http://www.abo.fi/fakultet/media/33801/degard_bergh_saglie_abo2015.pdf) voters under 35 in [Scotland’s 2014 referendum election,](http://blog.whatscotlandthinks.org/2014/12/many-16-17-year-olds-voted/) and voters aged 18-20 in [Austria’s elections](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2013.872652) in 2011 and 2014.

Although it can be difficult to determine what constitutes a “good vote” (see below), a group of researchers tried to determine the quality of votes cast by people under 18 by comparing how well their votes aligned with their stated values. Voters aged 16-17 were found to have made [choices that were “more congruent with party positions”](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0261379412000212) leaving the researchers to conclude that “lowering the voting age does not appear to have a negative impact on input legitimacy and the quality of democratic decisions.”

**5. Lowering the voting age will help increase voter turnout.** Voting is a habitual act – people who vote in one election are more likely to vote in the next.  Lowering the voting age will [establish new voters](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-austria-lower-voting-age-1.4100793)when people are less likely to be moving as a result of attending college or leaving their families. People under 18 tend to have stronger roots in their community, often having lived in the same area for many years and established connections to their school, family and friends, and other community groups. This gives us an awareness and appreciation of local issues. As we are less likely to live away from home, we don’t have to deal with unclear residency laws or absentee ballots that can discourage college students or other new voters. Because of the habitual nature of voting, encouraging new voters at a younger age will increase voter turnout as the population gets older. Young people who vote also influence the voter turnout of their parents. In a study of the Kids Voting program (where people under 18 were allowed to cast votes in a mock election), [parents who had children participating in the program were more likely to vote in the actual election](http://youthrights.org/issues/voting-age/proposal-to-lower-the-voting-age/).

**6. Lowering the voting age will improve the lives of youth.** Young people have a right to be heard and to have our interests taken seriously. However, by disenfranchising young people society tells us that we do not have anything of value to add to the political conversations in our society. It also gives politicians permission to ignore our interests as people under 18 have no way to hold their representatives accountable.

This is especially concerning since there are certain issues, such as environmental degradation, public education policy, long-term government debt, corporal punishment laws, and [poverty](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/by-the-numbers-childhood-poverty-in-the-u-s/) that impact young people more than anyone else. Younger people may also be better in tune with modern issues around internet privacy and social media use. But since young people are underrepresented in politics, the issues affecting us are underrepresented as well. Lowering the voting age will also help to increase the civic engagement of young people. 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 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.” (1971 U.S. Code Cong. Admin. News at pp. 365-367)

**7. Knowledge and experience are not criteria for voting eligibility.** Even though young people can be as politically informed as older people, there is no requirement that either group have any political knowledge at all. In fact, whenever tests have been used to register voters, it has always been about preventing certain groups of people from having political power rather than making sure the electorate is as informed as possible. Because of their discriminatory nature, knowledge or literacy tests are not used anywhere in the United States.

In spite of this, Congress has tried to determine the amount of knowledge a potential voter might need and even then concluded in the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that [a sixth-grade education provided “sufficient literacy, comprehension, and intelligence to vote in any election](http://library.clerk.house.gov/reference-files/PPL_VotingRightsAct_1965.pdf).” Later on, when renewing the Act in 1975, the Senate Judiciary Committee pushed this idea further by stating, “It is difficult to see why citizens who cannot read or write should be prevented from participating in decisions that directly affect their environment.” (S. Rep. No. 94-295, 1975: 24)

If you are diagnosed with a developmental delay or experience a brain injury, you do not automatically lose your right to vote and in fact, many states have passed laws that expressly ensure that [you retain the right to vote unless it has been removed in a court of law](http://www.bazelon.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=7Cp83GrRVY0%3D&tabid=315).

**8. There are no wrong votes.** In a democracy, we don’t deny people the vote because we think they might vote badly. It can be easy to feel baffled by the way other people vote, even if we know them very well. Many people believe that there are voters who are completely ignorant of the issues, woefully misguided about the economy, who get their political ideas from biased media, vote for candidates based on their personality, and are completely naive about the world. And yet, disenfranchising people simply because we disagree with them is not considered a serious position, unless that group happens to be disenfranchised already.

No advocate for lowering the voting age believes that young people will always vote intelligently, especially since not everyone can agree on what that means. But the same can be said for adults. Why are young people held up to a higher standard than everyone else?

**9. Arguments against lowering the voting age can be used to disenfranchise adults, too.** In a democracy, universal suffrage is the right of all citizens and the ability to vote should not be taken away lightly or arbitrarily. If a group is to be disenfranchised, the burden of proof must lie with those who want to remove voting rights, rather than requiring the oppressed group to prove why they deserve the right.

Throughout history, arguments against increasing the franchise have always been dubious and they still are – no matter the group. If you think young people are too naive or uneducated to vote, then ask yourself how would you feel about receiving a test before you could vote. No matter the test, many adults would fail. There are also adults that lack maturity or can be easily manipulated. The argument that certain groups of people lack the knowledge or maturity to vote has been used [against increasing voting rights to people who don’t own land, servants, and women](http://scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2505&context=facpubs) throughout history.

**10. Legislation to lower the voting age has more support than you think.** When the United States decided to end age discrimination in voting for everyone 18 and over in all elections, it adopted the 26th Constitutional Amendment. The Amendment’s overwhelming and bipartisan support allowed it to make history as the quickest Constitutional Amendment ever to be ratified.

Today, lowering the voting age continues to have wide support. Nearly half of US states have seen legislative attempts to lower the voting age in the last two decades, including four towns in Maryland that have successfully lowered their voting age to 16. Internationally, more than 25 countries have a voting age lower than 18 and many more are looking at following their lead.