



WHY 16- AND 17-YEAR-OLDS SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO VOTE IN LOCAL ELECTIONS AND BEYOND



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INTRODUCTION

In New Jersey and across America, there are fierce efforts underway to prohibit students from studying or even talking about issues of race, racism and systemic inequality, including the legacy of slavery in America.¹

Following the passage of one such bill in Florida, for instance, schools are removing foundational texts from curriculum, ending courses that teach these subjects and forbidding diversity, equity and inclusion trainings.²

If ever we needed an influx of voters to lift their voices at the ballot box to respond to these attacks on truth, history and democracy, it is now.

The challenge, however, is that voter turnout in non-federal elections is exceedingly low.

Annual school board elections in 2023, for example, saw about 3-7% voter turnout in participating municipalities.³ In Newark – New Jersey's largest city – turnout was a dismal 3%.⁴ Annual non-partisan municipal elections had 4-44% voter turnout,⁵ and the primary elections had about 4-15% voter turnout.⁶

To start raising these chronically low participation rates requires deep community organizing, some of which is already occurring, to register eligible voters and encourage them to vote.

However, there is more we can do.

“I believe, if given the opportunity, my peers would love to vote in school board and local elections. I’ve seen multiple instances where out of touch school boards have enacted policies that directly harm the education of students, resulting in backlash. Many students are really passionate about their own education and the quality of the town that they live in.”

YENJAY HU
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

“Our school board and local elections are the elections that will most likely impact us the most. Adults don’t go to school in our towns, so they don’t have to deal with the repercussions of having someone elected who isn’t fit for the job.”

OLIVE STERRY
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT



It is time to bring new, younger voters into the democratic fold, particularly in elections that directly impact them.

This policy brief will outline why New Jersey should lower the voting age to 16 in local elections.

This can in time lead to a broader democracy expansion by lowering the vote age for state elections, as well.

We have an inspiring opportunity before us - to make our democracy more representative for the next generation.

Let's embrace it.

“[B]eing able to vote in local elections would allow me and other young people to have greater autonomy over our education.”

**ALEXIS CHEN
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT**

THE OPPORTUNITY TO LOWER THE VOTING AGE TO 16

“The [s]tudents in the Vietnam era protested to lower the voting age to 18 because 18-year-olds were being sent off to die without a voice. Well now, 16- and 17-year-olds are being killed and attacked literally and figuratively without a seat at the table. They are pawns on the political table, without a means to protect themselves.”

SAM ALTMAN
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

“Since votes are private, most people wouldn’t vote like their parents unless they actually believed that it was the best option.”

ANONYMOUS
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

Despite their age, research shows that not only are 16- and 17-year-olds “neurologically and socially mature enough to vote responsibly,”⁷ they are equally informed about and engaged in political issues as their older counterparts.⁸ As they enter their formative years, it is imperative that they are empowered to use that knowledge at the polls and make voting a habit.

In light of this research, it is evident that the 18-year-old age requirement is merely an artificial barrier.⁹ Following are reasons why 16- and 17-year-olds should be allowed to vote in local elections and beyond.

First, lowering the voting age to 16 does not conflict with the New Jersey Constitution.

The New Jersey Constitution¹⁰ grants an affirmative right to vote to those 18 and older – but does not prohibit voting for those who are younger. The age mentioned in the Constitution should be read as a floor rather than a ceiling.¹¹ Accordingly, New Jersey should lower the voting age for state elections through state legislation.

However, municipalities do not need to wait for the state to act. Municipalities in New Jersey can pass local laws right now regarding voting rights and elections.¹² Though the state’s election law statutes enumerate the limited circumstances under which certain persons who otherwise meet the requirements are prohibited from voting, they do not bar anyone from voting because they are under 18.¹³

Furthermore, neither the New Jersey Constitution nor election law statutes state that the New Jersey State Legislature gets to determine the age for local races, which means that local governments can make this decision on their own.¹⁴

Second, by expanding access to the ballot to 16- and 17-year-olds in New Jersey, who are much more diverse now than even just ten years ago,¹⁵ a municipality could create a longer trend of higher turnout in local elections and be one step closer to building a robust, equitable and representative democracy.



When 16- and 17-year-olds were allowed to vote for the first time in Takoma Park, Maryland in local elections, their turnout was significantly higher than the general population.¹⁶ It is estimated that 17% of eligible voters under 18 turned out to vote their first election, more than double the rate of 8.5% for those 18 and older.¹⁷ When you take registration rolls into account, the turnout is even more staggering. The turnout rate for registered city residents under 18 was close to 42%, four times the rate for those 18 and older.¹⁸

Third, the minimum voting age of 18 is an artificial limitation that was set after a long national fight wherein young people argued that if they were old enough to be sent to fight wars, they were old enough to vote.¹⁹ This advocacy culminated in the passage of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment.²⁰

The legal definition linking adulthood to the age of 18 should not be a deterrent for expanding our democracy.²¹ The legal age of consent in many states,²² including New Jersey, is 16,²³ and the compulsory school attendance age ends at 16.²⁴ Most states in our country have set the driving age at 16.²⁵ Sixteen-year-olds can make financial contributions to a political campaign, volunteer in campaigns and serve as poll workers.²⁶

Since 2017, residents 14 and older in Freehold Borough, New Jersey have been allowed to vote in the participatory budgeting process to decide how officials spend up to \$200,000 on projects that benefit the entire community.²⁷ Other Garden State cities have adopted a similar participatory budgeting process in recent years, including Neptune City²⁸ and Asbury Park.²⁹

Many people under 18 also have “adult” responsibilities – such as being the primary caregiver for an ailing family member, running a business or making substantial financial contributions to their households.³⁰

Young people are affected by the same policies as adults but have no say in deciding their representatives. This is especially true for local elections such as school board elections.

School boards set policies and establish budgets for the entire school district. This includes input in teacher contracts, quality of school buildings and selecting what textbooks and programs students use.

A growing number of young people are engaging in social activism – protesting about climate change, women’s and LGBTQ rights, immigration, gun control and Black Lives Matter.³¹ However, despite exercising their First Amendment rights, they lack real power in the systems that affect them.

Everyone, including 16-year-olds, deserves the right to vote on issues that directly impact them.



“I wish I could’ve participated in one of my local Board of Ed elections in 2020. There were many candidates running with opinions that I didn’t agree with. [T]hey believed that schools should’ve been maskless and fully in person when health officials argued against it.”

ANONYMOUS
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

“If kids are old enough to be forced to give birth, they should have the right to vote for or against the policies affecting them.”

LELAH TEKHNA
COLLEGE STUDENT

“We should lower the voting age because 16- and 17-year-olds are old enough to work and be taxed, but currently have no say in laws [or] policies that affect them.”

ANONYMOUS
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

OTHER COUNTRIES AND SOME U.S. CITIES THAT ALLOW 16- AND 17-YEAR-OLDS TO VOTE

New Jersey's cities would not be the first to lower the voting age.³² Several cities in the United States have acknowledged the need for young voters and have already lowered the voting age for their local or school board elections.³³

U.S. STATES / MUNICIPALITIES WITH VOTING AGE UNDER 18			
17-Year-Olds Vote In Primaries	16-Year-Olds Vote In All Local Elections	16-Year-Olds Vote In Local Elections Only	16-Year-Olds Vote In School Board Elections Only
Connecticut Delaware District of Columbia Illinois Indiana Iowa Kentucky Maine Maryland Mississippi Nebraska New Mexico North Carolina Ohio South Carolina Utah Vermont Virginia West Virginia	Maryland · Greenbelt · Hyattsville · Riverdale Park · Takoma Park	Vermont · Brattleboro	California · Berkeley · Oakland

Recently, U.S. House Representative Grace Meng of New York reintroduced a bill to lower the voting age to 16 for all elections – federal, state and local.³⁴

Additionally, numerous other countries around the world allow those under 18 to vote in certain elections.³⁵

VOTING AGE ELIGIBILITY AROUND THE WORLD				
Sixteen (16)				
No Restriction	If Employed	If Married	Local Elections Only	Other Specific Restriction
Argentina Austria Brazil Cuba Ecuador Nicaragua	Bosnia and Herzegovina Croatia Serbia Slovenia	Dominican Republic Hungary Indonesia Philippines	Estonia Malta United Kingdom <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Guernsey · Isle of Man · Jersey 	Belgium – European elections only Germany – in some local and state elections only United Kingdom <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Scotland - non-federal elections only Switzerland – state of Glarus for regional elections only
Seventeen (17)				
No Restriction	If Employed	If Married	Local Elections Only	Other Specific Restriction
Greece North Korea Norway Timor-Leste			Israel	

CONCLUSION

“[I] know what’s going on in the school district and I know what needs to be fixed, so being able to elect people who would actually help the schools would benefit me.”

OLIVE STERRY
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

“There is no reason to think that a 16-year-old can’t make an informed decision, especially when many adults vote for candidates based on little to no research. When laws are going to be [a]ffecting you directly, you should have a say in who represents you.”

ANONYMOUS
COLLEGE STUDENT

Our democracy, and our educational system, are currently under attack. With our states and cities serving as laboratories for democracy, allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local and eventually state elections will address both these issues directly.

Lowering the voting age will increase voter turnout among those most affected by what is taught and learned in our schools. This should be paired with introducing civics to 16- and 17-year-olds, which will likely lead to more discussions between parents and children about politics and local issues, resulting in an increase in voter turnout for all.³⁶

New Jersey’s Constitution allows municipalities the authority to lower the voting age. It’s time to let young people vote.³⁷ We need their voices now more than ever.



Photo: Vote16NJ

ENDNOTES

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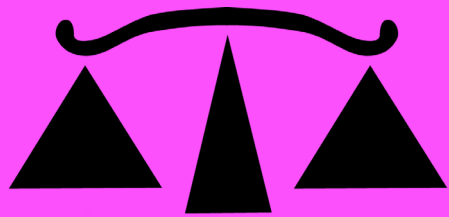
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- ¹¹ See generally *Gangemi v. Berry*, 25 N.J. 1 (1957); *Allison v. Blake*, 57 N.J.L. 6 (Sup. Ct. 1894).
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- ¹⁴ See NJ CONST. art. II, § 1.3; N.J.S.A. 19:4-1; N.J.S.A. 40:42-4; N.J.S.A. 40:69A-30.
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