PART I.

Building the Movement:
Organizing for Change

Table of Contents

Lowering the voting age is about more than passing a law – it's about building youth power. Real change starts with organizing, and that is where the movement to lower the voting age starts, too.

This section will walk you through how to launch a grassroots campaign rooted in youth leadership, coalition building and community engagement.

STEP 1 – Build Your Team and Secure Key Support

Forming a Core Organizing Team

Nobody can change the world or their community alone – you will need a team to get the job done! To anchor your campaign, bring together a team of passionate young people and adult allies committed to youth justice and democracy.

A strong core team can:
- Create a campaign plan, with goals and timelines
- Divide roles and responsibilities
- Build trust and support in the community
- Keep the energy going through challenges or setbacks

Potential roles for your organizing team include:
- Convener or team leader
- Advocacy coordinator
- Outreach and mobilization coordinator
- Communications coordinator
- Events coordinator
- Voter registration and GOTV coordinator

As you build your team, think broadly about whom to involve. Key stakeholders might include:
- Local elected officials (especially your mayor and city council members)
- School district leadership

- Student clubs
- Youth-serving organizations
- Parent-teacher associations
- Local voting rights or civil rights organizations (like Vote16NJ and the NAACP NJ State Conference Youth and College)
- Community activists and other trusted voices

Remember: Be intentional about making space for young people to lead. This campaign should be powered by the youngest people – 16 and 17-year-olds – who will benefit most from it.

Creating a Campaign Plan

Every successful campaign needs a strong plan to guide the work and keep your team on track. Your campaign plan doesn't have to be complicated, but it does have to be clear, realistic and rooted in your community's local context.

While your campaign plan is a roadmap, remember to build in flexibility. Campaigns often face unexpected challenges or opportunities – a vote might get delayed, a new supporter might step up or a public crisis could shift the landscape.

Your campaign plan should include at least the following elements:

Goals

Start your campaign plan by identifying the issue you are focused on and setting clear goals. In this case, that goal is to lower the voting age to 16 for local elections in your municipality. A clear, shared goal keeps your team aligned and focused.

Guiding Questions:
- What changes do you want to see and why?
- Do you want to see a new ordinance, ballot initiative or resolution?
- Will the ordinance allow 16-year-olds to vote in school board elections, municipal elections – or both?
- What does success look like in the next six to 12 months?

Impacted Communities

The Vote16 movement is about expanding democracy and centering the voices of young people – especially in decisions that affect their education and future. To build a campaign that's powerful, authentic and rooted in justice, start by identifying the communities directly impacted by the issue.

Think about who is excluded from the democratic process by the current voting age, and how their lives are shaped by policies they have no say in. These are the people your campaign should be built with, not just for.

Go beyond just identifying impacted young people; build meaningful relationships with them. Make space to deeply listen to their stories, experiences and visions for change. Create opportunities for ongoing dialogue and feedback so your campaign stays accountable to the people most impacted.

You'll come back to these communities throughout every phase of your campaign: when honing your goals, recruiting leaders, choosing tactics, monitoring the campaign's impact and celebrating victory. They shouldn't just be participants or token spokespeople – they should be co-creators and your strongest partners in the work.

Guiding Questions:
- Who is most affected by the current voting age?
- Who is most impacted by school board or municipal government decisions?
- What are their ages and what schools do they attend?
- How does being excluded from voting harm them or shape their day-to-day lives?
- What would it mean for them to be able to vote at 16? What would the benefits be?
- Who would be involved in implementing a Vote16 law or supporting young voters?
- How can you create a feedback loop with these community members?
- What platforms can you use to help them share their stories and shape the campaign?

Targets

Identify both your primary and secondary targets for your advocacy. This will shape your strategies and tactics.

Primary targets are decision-makers. This includes city council members, the mayor and school board members. Secondary targets are those who may be able to influence your primary targets. This might include influential community leaders, organizations or voters who can sway decision-makers.

Guiding Questions:
- Who can introduce or vote on a Vote16 ordinance?
- How do they get the role – are they elected or appointed?
- Who are their constituents and allies?
- What are their interests? What issues do they care about?

Allies and Opponents

Identify allies who share your values or might benefit from your goal – like organizations for young people, educators, community leaders and civil rights organizations. Invite them into your coalition and create real opportunities to collaborate. Strong campaigns are built on strong relationships.

Also consider your opponents – those who may stand against lowering the voting age because of misinformation, political motivations or doubts about young people's readiness to participate. Understand their arguments so you can respond clearly and powerfully.

Some people or organizations may not be allies or opponents yet. With the right outreach and message, you may be able to bring them in.

Guiding Questions:
- Who are one to three groups or individuals who could support your campaign?
- What strengths or resources do they bring?
- Who might try to oppose the campaign and why?
- Who is undecided and how can you reach them?

Tactics

Once you've set goals, it's time to decide how you'll get there. Tactics are specific actions you'll take to carry out that strategy.

No campaign can use every tactic at the same time. Choose a mix of tactics that will be most impactful in your community, align with your team's strengths and capacity and demonstrate youth leadership.

You may need to escalate your tactics over time if you're not seeing results. For example, at some point you may need to shift from building awareness to applying direct pressure.

Every tactic should serve a purpose: either building relationships, growing your base, shifting narratives or influencing decision-makers.

Common tactics include:
- *Community Outreach and Education*: Tabling, flyering and door knocking
- *Relational Organizing*: One-on-one conversations with your network and peer-to-peer outreach
- *Media and Digital*: Social media campaigns and press outreach
- *Lobbying*: Meeting with elected officials, giving public testimony and delivering letters demanding action

Guiding Questions:

- What's your strategy to win?
- How will you raise awareness, build support and move decision-makers?
- How will you adapt or escalate your tactics if needed?

Resources

All campaigns need resources – but that doesn't only mean money. Think about the skills, tools, spaces and relationships you already have access to, and where you'll need to find support.

People are often your most valuable resource. Friends, teachers, mentors and community leaders can offer skills, time and connections. Don't overlook things like access to meeting spaces, art supplies or club social media accounts. These can all be powerful resources.

Guiding Questions:

- What spaces can you use for meetings or events? (school, library, community centers, local businesses)
- What materials or technology do you have access to? (computers, printers, microphones, tablets, Canva)
- What skills does your team bring? (public speaking, graphic design, video editing, event planning)
- Who do you know who could support you? (teachers, local organizations, family, mentors)
- What training or tools do you need to build your campaign?

Timeline

A timeline can help your team work toward long-term goals while hitting important short-term goals. Create a simple calendar that tracks key dates, campaign milestones, deadlines and action steps.

Keep your plan realistic and leave room for flexibility. A good timeline builds in time for outreach, education, team-building and rest.

Key dates can include:

- City council or school board meetings
- Election Day or voter registration deadlines
- Back-to-school nights and school events
- National civic holidays (National Voter Registration Day, National Voter Education Week, Constitution Day, High School Voter Registration Week)
- Team meetings
- Planned campaign tactics and actions

Guiding Questions:
- When will you take action and carry out your planned tactics?
- Are there key events coming up in your school or city that you can plan around?
- What deadlines do you need to meet?
- Are there any civic engagement holidays that can create opportunities for your campaign?

Metrics for Success and Evaluation

Establishing clear campaign benchmarks can help your team evaluate whether your strategy is effective.

Knowing that you're making progress helps your team celebrate wins and stay motivated! Even if your Vote16 ordinance takes time to pass, smaller wins along the way are still powerful.

If you aren't making progress towards reaching your goals, it may be time to reconsider the campaign targets or tactics you're using. Build in regular reflection points to assess how things are going and adapt your plan as needed.

Benchmarks can include:
- Securing a meeting with a city council member
- Collecting 1,000 petition signatures from residents
- Recruiting a base of 50 youth leaders and volunteers
- Passing a Vote16 ordinance

Guiding Questions:
- How will you measure progress?
- What benchmarks can you set that are both significant and realistic?
- What does winning look like, including short-term and long-term wins – for your campaign and the impacted community?

Key Documents:
- Campaign Plan Template

Finding a Champion in Office

To lower the voting age in your town, a member of the city council will have to sponsor and introduce an ordinance. But to have a successful movement, you want more than just an ordinance sponsor – you want a champion.

Having an elected official who is in your corner and ready to do everything possible to get a Vote16 local ordinance over the finish line can make a huge difference.

While the city council may take the lead, don't overlook the role a mayor can play. If you live in a town that has a mayor and who is supportive of lowering the voting age, they can be a vocal advocate, rally public support or even push the municipal council to act.

Look for someone who:
- Believes in the voice of young people and empowerment
- Has a track record of standing with young people and marginalized communities
- Has been outspoken in support of voting rights and democracy
- Holds a leadership position on the city council

To recruit your champion:
- Request a meeting so that you can share your vision
- Come prepared with testimonies from young people, data and examples from other cities
- Outline the actions and activities you want them to take (e.g., introduce an ordinance, ask their colleagues for support, speak at a press conference, etc.)

You can find more on this in **Part 2: Passing and Implementing a Vote16 Ordinance in Your Town**, under **Step 3: Drafting and Passing the Ordinance.**

Get Schools Involved

The vast majority of 16- and 17-year-olds spend most of their day at school. Your campaign will be stronger if you get high school groups and officials involved and form strong partnerships with them.

Connect with:
- Social studies and civics teachers
- Student government advisors
- Student clubs and afterschool programs
- School board members
- Administrators who care about civics learning

Ways to collaborate:
- Look for opportunities to present in classes
- Host voter education pop-ups during school events, like assemblies and fairs
- Partner with teachers to include Vote16 in lessons and student programming

The sooner you can form partnerships with your school, the better! You can even begin having these conversations before you've found a local champion.

Bringing the movement to the classroom: Vote16 organizers visited Great Oaks Legacy Charter High School in Newark to connect with students, share voter information and help them register to vote.
Photo Credit: Great Oaks Legacy Charter High School

STEP 2 - Spread the Word and Mobilize Support

Host Community Events

Once you have your core team assembled and you've co-created a campaign plan, it's time to find supporters and grow your movement. Community events – from rallies to teach-ins to candidate forums – can help build momentum and visibility for your campaign.

Potential events include:
- A town hall for young people with elected officials
- A back-to-school voter block party
- A candidate forum focused on youth issues
- A screening and discussion of a civic-themed documentary
- Art-based events like poster-making or zine workshops

Young people from Newark at the Vote16 Town Hall learn about their newly won right to vote in school board elections, ask questions directly to election and school officials, and register to vote on the spot.

Use Outreach and Social Media

Community Outreach

While hosting community events is an essential part of community organizing, you'll be most successful at increasing awareness if you use multiple methods to connect with the community.

For example, you can also do in-person community outreach by:
- Attending meetings and events hosted by community organizations and sharing information about Vote16 with other attendees
- Tabling at fairs and festivals to share Vote16 resources and recruit supporters
- Putting up flyers and posters on community bulletin boards or areas with high foot traffic

See more on this under **Step 4 – Implementing the Ordinance,** a subsection of **Part 2 – Passing and Implementing a Vote16 Ordinance in Your Town.**

Social Media

To effectively reach young voters, you have to meet them where they are – and that means online. Digital outreach is one of the most effective ways to mobilize young people who spend a significant portion of their time on social media, messaging apps and digital platforms.

But not all online engagement is created equal. Authenticity, creativity and peer-to-peer connection are key. Make sure young people take the lead in creating social media posts and videos. Social media should feel personal and peer-led, not corporate or scripted.

You can make your Vote16 campaign visible through:
- Instagram takeovers
- TikTok challenges
- Group chats
- Hashtags that are catchy and consistent
- Graphics that are bright, succinct and easy to share across platforms

Train Student Leaders

Leadership development is essential to the success and sustainability of any social movement. Don't just ask young people to show up – invest in helping them lead!

Train young leaders in skills like:
- *Facilitation and meeting planning*: Teach young people how to plan and run meetings and calls, set agendas and keep peers engaged.

- *Relational organizing and canvassing*: Equip young people with tools to have one-on-one conversations that move others to act. Practice real scripts and role plays.
- *Public speaking and public testimony before elected bodies:* Practice writing and delivering short, compelling speeches. Use real council or school board meetings as mock scenarios.
- *Message strategy and storytelling*: Guide young people in crafting personal narratives that connect with different audiences, from peers to policymakers.

Make your trainings interactive and fun! Include icebreakers, games, breakout sessions and reflection. Always affirm young people's lived experiences and the strengths they bring and build on their existing skills as leaders.

Leveling up our leadership! Organized by the Gem Project, this youth-led training brought together over 65 young leaders to build their skills in organizing and advocacy – then take action. After the training, participants conducted peer-to-peer outreach to over 100 additional young people, encouraging them to register to vote and get involved.
Photo Credits: Photography by Fresco

Engage the Media

Engaging with the press and media organizations can help broaden awareness, shape public perception and elevate the voices of young people.

A strong media strategy should include:
- *Relationship-building*: Reach out to local reporters, bloggers, local influencers and community newsletters. Share your story and invite them to events.

- *Student-led content*: Encourage young people to write op-eds or letters to the editor, especially around key milestones like ordinance votes or the first Vote16 election.
- *Media moments*: Plan media-worthy moments like rallies, press conferences or art installations that visually show the power of young people.
- *Message discipline*: Train young spokespeople to stay on message, answer questions confidently and redirect tough questions toward core values and solutions.
- *Storytelling*: For maximum impact, use messaging that features relatable and personal stories.

Tip: Create a media toolkit with talking points, sample press releases and quotes from young leaders that can be shared widely. You can even add graphics for social media.

Key Documents:
- [Talking Points](#)
- [Social Media and Event Toolkit](#)

You can use this section to get started at your own pace, and if you have questions or want support along the way, you can always reach out to the **Institute's Vote16 Team** at **justice@njisj.org**.

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