

PART II.

Passing and Implementing a
Vote16 Ordinance in Your Town



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Now that the organizing groundwork is in motion, it's time to turn that momentum into a local ordinance. This section outlines how to pass a Vote16 ordinance and make sure it is implemented effectively, so that 16- and 17-year-olds can fully participate in your municipality's local elections and decision-making.

STEP 3 – Drafting and Passing the Ordinance

Every ordinance effort starts in the same place: knowing what current law allows us to do. And when it comes to moving a Vote16 ordinance forward, one question always comes up first:

Is lowering the voting age legal in New Jersey?

Yes. New Jersey law allows municipalities to take local action to expand voting rights in non-partisan municipal and school board elections, *unless* specifically prohibited by state statute. Current law does not bar this. In 2024, Newark passed a Vote16 ordinance after extensive legal review, and other municipalities are following in its footsteps.

While the New Jersey Constitution⁴ guarantees the right to vote beginning at age 18, it does not prohibit local governments from allowing younger residents to vote in local elections. It sets the floor – not the ceiling. The state constitution outlines only who *must* be allowed to vote, while other state law defines who is excluded from the right to vote – for example, people who are currently incarcerated or whom a court has found mentally incapable of understanding the act of voting. That distinction leaves space for local governments to pass their own local voting laws – so long as those ordinances do not violate the state constitution and state laws – especially in municipalities with broad powers under home rule frameworks.⁵

The next key question is: *given that it's legal, how does my municipality's government structure shape the process for passing a Vote16 ordinance?*

Key Document:

- [Legal Overview: Authority and Process](#)

⁴ N.J. CONST. art. 2, § 1.

⁵ N.J.S.A. 40:48-2.

Understanding Your Municipality's Legal Landscape

Each municipality in New Jersey has its own structure, and that structure determines who introduces ordinances, who votes on them and what the path to passage looks like. Every municipality falls into one of five types – borough, township, city, town or village – and operates under one of 12 forms of government, including traditional forms like Commission and Council-Manager and several options under the *Faulkner Act*, such as Mayor-Council and Manager-Council. Each form of government defines who holds legislative authority in that municipality, how laws are introduced there and what the path to passing a law looks like.

For example, Newark is a city that operates under the *Faulkner Act*, using what is called a Mayor-Council form of government. This means the mayor and city council are elected separately, and each has distinct powers. The mayor oversees city departments and day-to-day operations, while the city council is responsible for passing local laws. Ordinances can be introduced by either the mayor or a councilmember, although it is more common for councilmembers to introduce them.

In Newark, the Vote16 ordinance to lower the voting age to 16 for school board elections was introduced by a city councilmember and then voted on and passed by the full Newark City Council. You can learn more at the [New Jersey League of Municipalities](#) about the different types of municipalities in New Jersey.

Once you've identified your municipality type, you'll want to answer a few key questions before reaching out to local leadership:

- Who has legislative authority in your municipality – councilmembers, commissioners or another body?
- When are your non-partisan municipal elections held – May or November (general election)?
- If you're targeting school board elections, are they held in April or November?

In New Jersey, if your municipality holds school board elections in April, the school district covers the full cost of the election. These costs are categorized as "special" and don't count against standard budget limits. When elections are moved to November, on the other hand, the county runs and funds them and is later reimbursed by the state. In this case, school districts may still be on the hook for added expenses through a formal agreement. The financial responsibilities for local elections are set by law – this wouldn't change under the Vote16 initiative, but local leaders may not be aware of them, so it's important they understand the cost implications before moving forward.

Beyond election timing and costs, the legal pathway your municipality can use to lower the voting age is also important. Some municipalities may choose to pass an ordinance, while others may explore a charter amendment to make the policy more permanent. Either way, successful efforts have paired strong organizing with clear legal strategy and early coordination with municipal attorneys.

Finally, things can get even more complicated when a school board is part of a [regional district](#). These school boards cover multiple municipalities and assign board members based on population, which can affect how receptive they are to the Vote16 idea. While school boards can't pass ordinances themselves, they can voice support publicly or recommend that municipal councils take action. In regional districts, it's best for each municipality to pass its own ordinance to make sure all students residing in the school district are treated equitably.

While New Jersey's system is complex, it is possible to work within it simply by being prepared. When in doubt, speak with your municipal clerk or connect with organizations that support voting rights for young people, like the Institute, to map out your next steps.

Building Legislative Support

Once you understand the legal landscape in your municipality, you can finally begin your advocacy. The first step is to do outreach to identify a champion on the municipal council – ideally, this is someone who believes young people should have a say in democracy and is willing to introduce the ordinance (see **Step 1: Build Your Team and Secure Key Support in Part I: Building the Movement: Organizing for Change**). If your mayor is also supportive of the initiative, even better. A committed council sponsor can make all the difference in building momentum and guiding the Vote16 ordinance through the process.

Once you've found your council champion, it's time to build broader support by:

- Scheduling one-on-one meetings with other decision-makers, particularly other councilmembers and even the mayor, to explain the campaign and answer questions
- Bringing strong materials to those meetings, including a sample ordinance, the Institute's *Legal Overview* and a one-pager with quotes and stories from students about why the right to vote matters to them and how voting would impact their lives
- Encouraging students, teachers and community members to attend council or board meetings, especially those meetings that allow public comment or voting on the ordinance

Most municipal councils require a simple majority – meaning more than half of the members must vote yes during their formal voting process – for an ordinance to pass. This is why building relationships and securing enough votes early on is key. Even skeptical officials can change their minds when they see well-prepared young people showing up and speaking out!

Key Documents:

- [Legal Overview: Authority and Process](#)
- [Talking Points](#)
- [Email Templates for Outreach](#)
- [Outreach Scripts and Peer Engagement Guide](#)
- [One-on-One Meetings Prep and Guide](#)
- [Council Presentation Template](#)

You'll find these resources and more in **Part IV: Your Vote16 Toolkit**. Use what's most helpful and make it your own!

Responding to Common Concerns

As you build support, you'll likely hear questions like:

- "Is this legal?"
- "Are 16- and 17-year-olds really ready to vote?"
- "Won't this make elections more complicated?"

These concerns often come up at council meetings, one-on-one conversations with officials and during public comment. Be ready with clear, confident answers and whenever possible, let students take the lead. Their voices are often the most compelling.

Here are examples of how to respond:

- Yes, it's legal. Newark passed a Vote16 ordinance in 2024 following legal review by their municipal attorneys, the New Jersey Attorney General's Office and the Governor's counsel. Under New Jersey state law, municipalities have *home rule* authority and broad discretion to legislate their own nonpartisan elections. This includes the ability to expand the local electorate, such as allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote, so long as the local law doesn't conflict with state statutes or the state constitution – which this does not. The New Jersey Constitution provides an affirmative right to those 18 years older to vote, but it does *not prohibit* those younger from voting in local and state elections.
- Young people are ready. From organizing around education and climate change to speaking out on racial justice issues, students already show up for important issues in their communities. Lowering the voting age gives them the power to turn that civic engagement into real influence. At 16, many young people are already working, paying taxes, driving and taking on adult responsibilities without having a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Some are caretakers in their own families and even financially contribute to the household. If they contribute to the system the way adults do, they should have a voice in shaping it.
- Election offices can handle this. Municipal and school board elections often happen off-cycle, making them easier to manage. Once a Vote16 ordinance passes, the New Jersey Division of Elections begins updating the voter registration and ballot systems as part of their regular duties to facilitate elections statewide. With advance planning, clear procedures and good communication, implementation of this policy is straightforward.

Key Documents:

- [Talking Points](#)
- [Flyers and Fact Sheets](#)
- [Op-Ed and Letter Templates](#)

If you need help creating talking points, preparing for a meeting or coordinating with the Division of Elections, reach out to the **Institute's Vote16 Team** at justice@njsj.org. We're here to support you.

Drafting the Ordinance

Once you have a council legislative sponsor and initial support, it's time to put your proposal into writing. A clear, well-crafted ordinance sets the foundation for everything that follows.

Start with the templates below, which reflect best practices and legal guidance from other successful local efforts.

Your ordinance draft should clearly state that 16- and 17-year-olds are eligible to vote in local or school board elections and reference relevant New Jersey legal authority.

Please also remember to check in early with your municipal clerk to confirm formatting requirements, legal review steps and how to officially introduce the ordinance. A supportive council sponsor should submit the draft for review before it's placed on the agenda. The cleaner and more complete your draft, the smoother the process will be.

Key Documents:

- [Sample Municipal Ordinance Template](#)
- [Sample School Board Ordinance Template](#)
- [Sample Joint Ordinance Template](#)

The Path to Passage

In most municipalities, passing a Vote16 ordinance will follow a clear, step-by-step process:

- *Introduction* – A supportive councilmember introduces the ordinance to the governing body.
- *Public Hearing(s)* – Community members, especially students, show up and speak out in support of the ordinance.
- *Final Vote* – The council votes on the ordinance, usually at a later meeting.

Some municipalities may require two hearings, public notice or legal review before a vote. The process may vary, but the strategy stays the same. You keep students at the center, build momentum at every stage and turn out your base.

Key Documents:

- [Municipality's Council Meeting Guide](#)
- [Campaign Milestone and Stakeholder Tracker](#)

If you need help figuring out your municipality's process, please connect with your municipal clerk, or reach out to the **Institute's Vote16 Team** at justice@njisj.org.

STEP 4 – Implementing the Ordinance

Passing the ordinance is just the beginning. Turning expanded voting rights into reality requires early coordination with officials at every level, including municipal, county and state.

That starts with making sure everyone knows the ordinance passed. The municipal clerk should promptly send written notice to the County Clerk, County Board of Elections and New Jersey’s Division of Elections, including the effective date and any relevant election deadlines.

From there, successful implementation depends on clear communication and thoughtful planning in four key areas: working with election officials, registration and ballot design, outreach and education, and overall timeline coordination.

Work with Election Officials

Begin by setting up a joint conversation between the municipality, county and state. Each of these partners plays a unique and essential role in putting Vote16 into practice:

- The Secretary of State’s Office (Division of Elections) must update the Statewide Voter Registration System (SVRS) so that newly eligible voters can register and are flagged as eligible for local races only. They will only be able to vote in the specific local election authorized by the ordinance that was passed.
- County election officials are responsible for implementing those changes on the ground – processing registrations, designing ballots, training poll workers and counting votes.
- Municipality or school board clerks often help manage local outreach and the logistics around voter communication.

These steps are interconnected. While municipalities may lead on outreach or passing the ordinance, only the state’s Division of Elections can make the technical updates that allow registration for those under 18. Municipalities and counties cannot act alone – state action is the necessary first step. Until the SVRS is updated to reflect the new voter eligibility, registration forms from 16- and 17-year-olds cannot be processed, even if submitted.

Key Documents:

- [Implementation Checklist and Follow-Up Guide](#)
- [Election Official Contact Guide](#)

Registration and Ballot Planning

Once the system is updated, local planning can begin. In many spring school board elections, there is usually only one race on the ballot, so ballots for 16- and 17-year-olds will be the same as those for older voters. However, in November general elections, when multiple races appear, separate ballots will be needed so that under-18 voters only receive the races they are eligible to vote in. While the voter roll itself does not change, the ballot must clearly reflect those eligibility limits in an accessible way.

This might sound complicated, but with early coordination, it's entirely manageable.

Newark has already registered more than 2,000 eligible students, demonstrating that once the system is in place, young people are eager to participate. After the state updates its systems, the registration and voting process will look the same for 16- and 17-year-olds as it does for older voters. The only difference is that their ballots will include only the races they're eligible to vote in.

Key Documents:

- [Youth Registration and Turnout Tracker](#)
- [Implementation Checklist and Follow-Up Guide](#)

Outreach and Education

Equally important, even the best systems won't matter without strong public awareness. Sixteen and 17-year-olds need to know that they are eligible to vote and that a school board election is upcoming.

In Newark, although everything ran smoothly, organizers on the ground had only two months between the state system update and the voter registration deadline to finalize key voter information. That short window was not enough time to fully educate and engage new voters. The good news for future municipalities is that the voter eligibility framework is now in place, making it possible to begin outreach and education much earlier.

That early voter outreach will be critical. A successful rollout of this new ordinance depends on clear, proactive voter education among 16- and 17-year-olds, which might include:

- In-class presentations about registration and voting
- Know-your-rights cards or simple FAQ sheets
- Student-led outreach efforts in schools and neighborhoods

Newark students showed just how powerful that kind of young voter outreach can be. They organized rallies, forums and even Election Day interviews, demonstrating that the process of expanding the vote isn't just creating legal change, it's a real opportunity to deepen civic engagement.

Substantive Voter Education

Outreach efforts should go beyond simply notifying young people of their right to vote. They should also include messaging about why voting matters, when the election is and how to participate – whether by mail or in person.

Just as importantly, students need to understand whom and what they're voting for. That means explaining what school boards actually do, such as how they shape curriculum, set district policies, hire superintendents, approve budgets and address issues like school safety and facilities. In some towns, young voters may also be eligible to vote in municipal elections for mayor or city council, which carry power over city services, policing, parks, youth programming and more.

Equipping new voters with that context helps make voting feel meaningful and relevant. It also strengthens civic knowledge and fosters a deeper connection to local government. Flyers like the one created in Newark (see **Flyers and Fact Sheets** for reference), which clearly explains the impact of school board decisions and lists key dates and voting options, can be a helpful model moving forward.

Key Documents:

- [Flyers and Fact Sheets](#)
- [Social Media and Event Toolkit](#)
- [Talking Points](#)
- [Student Voices One-Pager](#)
- [Op-Ed and Letter Templates](#)
- [Outreach Scripts and Peer Engagement Guide](#)

Timeline and Coordination

Finally, remember to give yourself enough time throughout the entire process. Coordination with state and county officials typically begins after the Vote16 ordinance is passed, so it's important to plan ahead and work backwards from your target election date. Most municipalities should aim to pass the ordinance at least six months before the next local election.

This timeline allows for:

- Transmitting the ordinance to the appropriate state and county offices
- Updating the voter registration system
- Launching outreach and education campaigns
- Training poll workers and preparing ballots
- Conducting Get Out the Vote efforts and voter registration drives

To keep things on track, municipalities should appoint a clear point of contact, ideally a staff member in the mayor's office or clerk's office who can manage communication and ensure no steps are missed.

Key Documents:

- [Implementation Checklist and Follow-Up Guide](#)
- [Media and Outreach Tracker](#)
- [Campaign Milestone and Stakeholder Tracker](#)

If you need help along the way, reach out to the **Institute's Vote16 Team** at justice@njsj.org. We can assist with drafting letters, coordinating with the state and mapping out your implementation timeline.



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