

Lowering the Voting Age

Engaging Wisconsin students in deliberation of current controversial issues
A project of the UW-Madison School of Education

Deliberation Question: Should we allow 17-year-olds to vote in state and federal elections?

History and Background

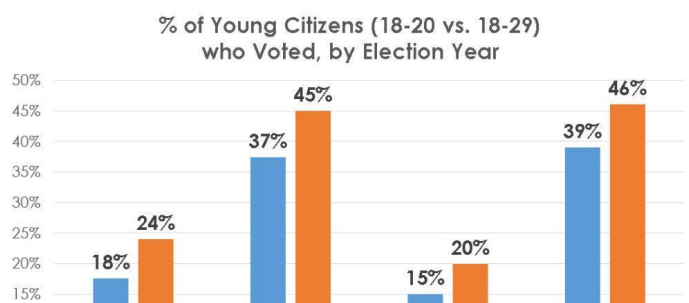
In the wake of the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida, student survivors have become politically engaged. This has prompted calls to lower the current legal voting age of 18. Several states have tried to lower the voting age in recent years. For example, in April 2018, a Washington, D.C. Council member created a proposal to allow 16-year-olds to vote in federal and state elections. In California in 2017, there was a similar proposal to lower the voting age to 17 through a state constitutional amendment, but it was defeated. And in 2013, the city of Takoma Park, Maryland became the first place in the United States to give 16-year-olds the vote in local elections and referendums. The nearby community of Hyattsville, Maryland, followed in 2015. Twenty-one states, including Illinois, now have voting laws allowing 17-year-olds to vote in primary elections if they will be 18 by the general election.

It may come as a surprise that states or local governments could change the voting age. The 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution required that states allow anyone 21 or older to vote. In addition, the 17th Amendment states that a person who is allowed to vote in state elections can also vote in federal elections. States can lower the voting age for state and federal elections, and local governments can only lower the voting age for local elections.

However, the military draft during the Vietnam War tested the previous voting age of 21. Many people believed that if 18-year-olds were being drafted into the war, they should also be able to vote. In testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments in 1970, Senator Ted Kennedy said, “A society that imposes the extraordinary burden of war and death on its youth should also grant the benefit of full citizenship and representation, especially in sensitive and basic areas like the right to vote.” Thirty percent of the troops in Vietnam were under 21. Almost half of the U.S. soldiers who died in action were not old enough to vote.

In response, the Voting Rights Act of 1970 lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 in all state and federal elections. However, the Supreme Court found in the case of *Oregon v. Mitchell* (1970) that this Act violated the reserved powers of the states to establish their own voting age regulations. The Court ruling meant that a constitutional amendment was needed to lower the voting age. Congress acted quickly, and in 1971 the 26th Amendment gave 18-year-olds the right to vote in all state and federal elections.

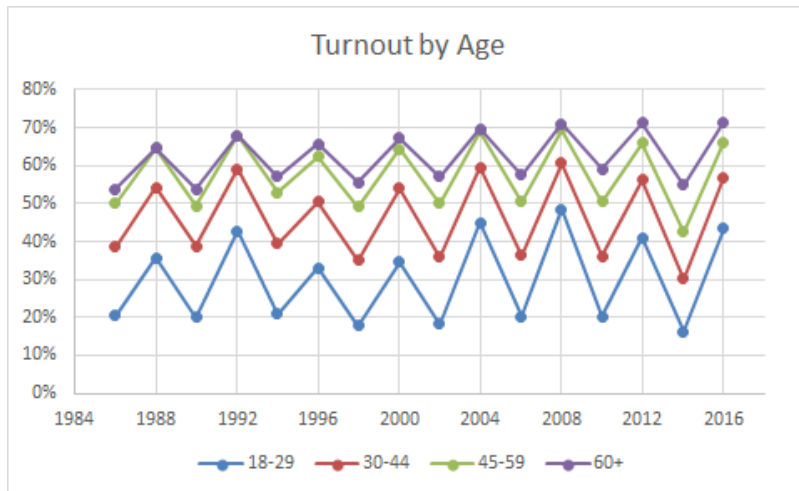
Unfortunately, young voters are the least likely demographic to show up at the polls. During the 1972 presidential election, a majority of 18-21 year-olds who were eligible to vote turned out. Since 1972,



however, voter turnout among this age group has declined and now fluctuates between about 15% and 40%. (Figures 1 and 2.)

Why don't young people vote? Some believe that youth choose other types of civic and political engagement. Many young people volunteer in their communities, which may help them feel a deeper sense of "making a difference." Others engage in activism, either in person or through social media, which may be a more appealing or convenient way of participating. Low voter turnout has become a difficult cycle to break. Because young people don't vote at high rates, campaigns and candidates don't often target young voters for outreach. Because young people don't vote much, campaigns and candidates don't create platforms for issues important to youth.

Figure . Youth voters by election year.



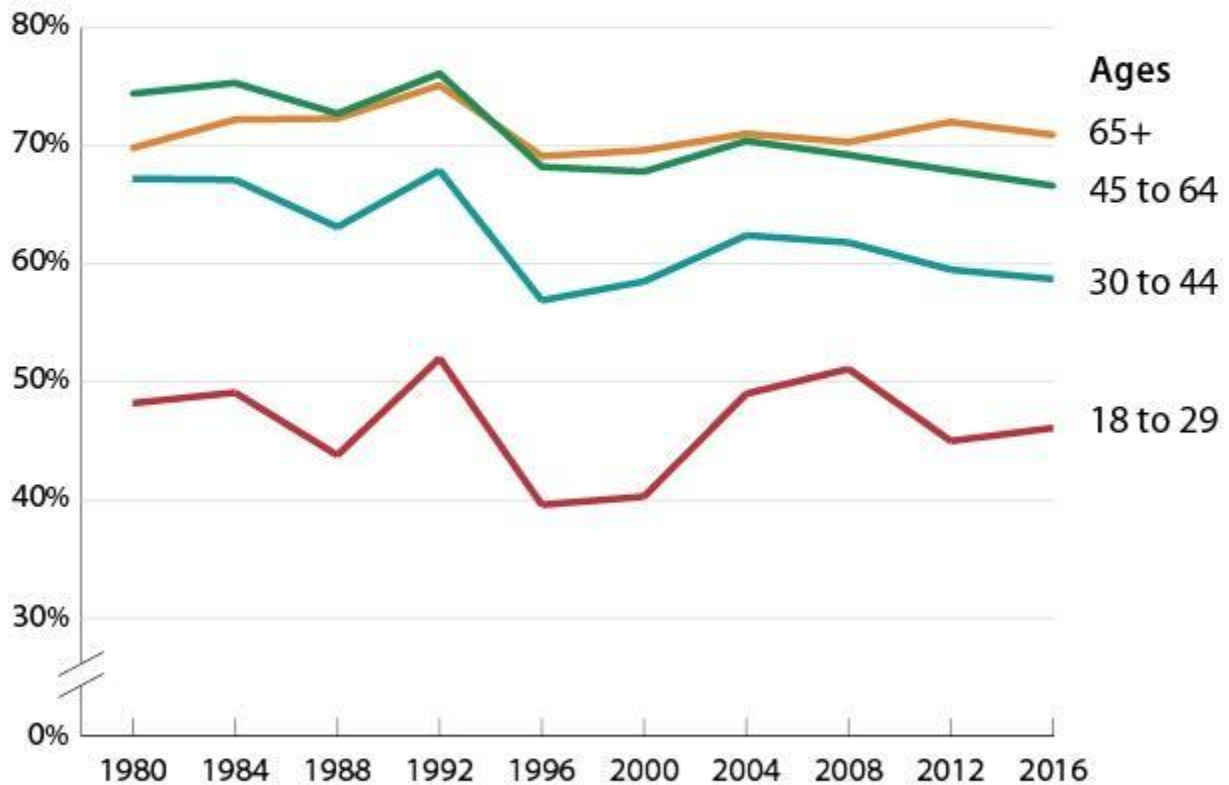
Another issue is that young people in the 18-24 demographic often experience big changes during that time in their lives, including moving. Some young people graduate from high school, move away from home for college or a job, and then may finish college and move again. Because voter registration rules and voting procedures are different in each state, young people must figure out how and where to vote many times before they have started a habit of voting. Even if they just move within the same town they still have to register in a new location.

Furthermore, some states require an ID to vote, while some don't. This often leads to confusion, and prevents people from voting. A 2016 study by the Pew Research Center found that many Americans who are registered voters do not know what the voter ID laws are in their state. Some believe that they need an ID when they do not (37%), or are unaware that an ID is required in their state (22%). Moving across state lines is likely to increase confusion. In fact, over half of all young people believe that they need an ID to vote when they do not. This confusion could discourage eligible citizens from voting if they falsely believe that they need an ID that they don't have, or it could prevent them from voting when they arrive at the polls unprepared.

More Millennials Vote

Only Age Group to See Voter Turnout Increase Since 2012

Voting Rates by Age



United States[™]
Census
Bureau

U.S. Department of Commerce
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
[census.gov](https://www.census.gov)

Source: Current Population Survey,
1980-2016 Voting and Registration Supplements
<https://www.census.gov/topics/public-sector/voting.html>

Figure 3. Increase in youth voting since 2012.

Arguments for allowing 17 year olds to vote

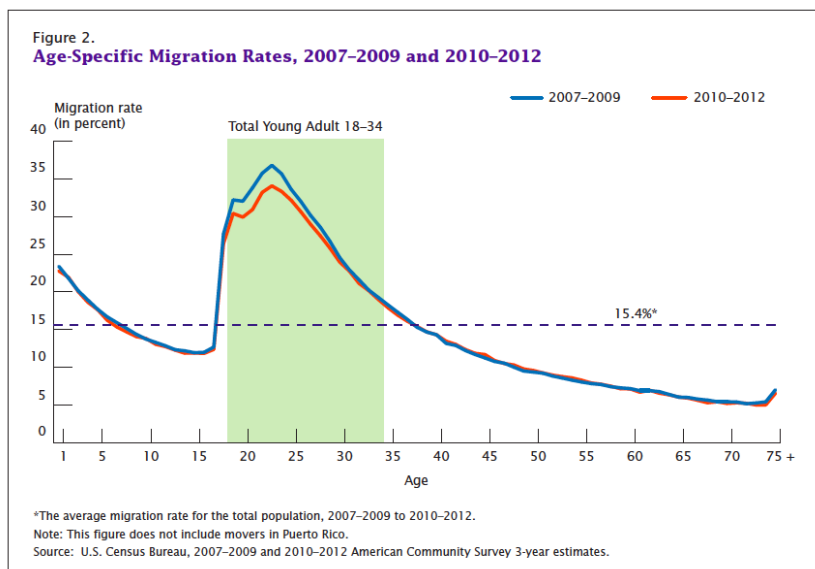
The stereotype of high school students is that they are impulsive and self-centered, and therefore should not be able to vote on important issues. However, studies show that young people are actually intellectually developed enough to make informed decisions. Voting is essential for democracy.

Joshua A. Douglas, a law professor at the University of Kentucky, is a strong advocate for lowering the voting age. He cites psychological studies about “hot cognition” and “cold cognition.” Hot cognition is about emotional decision-making. It includes impulse control, peer pressure, and risk. Cold cognition, on the other hand, is about thinking rationally to make a clear decision. This is developed by age 16 or earlier. This research about hot and cold cognition shows that even if young people don’t always demonstrate social and emotional maturity, they are just as ready to make the kinds of reasonable decisions necessary for voting as people just a year or two older.

These studies show that young people are intellectually ready to participate in political decisions. Allowing people to begin voting at age 17 would increase the political participation necessary for a healthy democracy. Education would play an important role in this participation. Schools could integrate elections and voting into their curriculum when it is directly relevant to the students’ experiences. This presents an opportunity to provide timely and accurate information, enhance the authenticity of civics education, and support our democracy by preparing young people for the serious responsibilities associated with citizenship. Over half of young voters in states with no ID requirements wrongly believe that they need an ID vote. Schools could be an important source of information for voters when they first become eligible. When the city of Tacoma Park, Maryland lowered the voting age to 16 for municipal

elections, young people immediately responded. Twice as many 16 to 17-year-olds voted than their slightly older 18 to 21-year-old peers.

Voting at a young age forms a lifelong habit of voting. Many studies have shown that early voting behavior predicts how often people will vote in the future. Young people’s voter participation is low—partly because it takes time to develop this habit.



Furthermore, evidence also suggests that people are less likely to vote after they move. When voters relocate and need to re-register in a different place, their voting rates drop. According to U.S. Census data, 18 to 24-year-olds move at more than double the rate of the general population (Figure 4). These frequent moves throughout young adulthood decrease voter turnout and make it less likely that young people will develop the habit of voting. Allowing 17-year-olds to vote when they have the support of their communities would encourage their voting habits, increase young voter turnout, and enhance the strength of our democracy.

John Della Volpe, the Director of Polling at the Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, believes that we may be witnessing a change in attitudes about voting. Polling in 2017 found a 15% increase in the number of young people who believe that voting matters, partly due to the 2016 presidential election and outrage over school shootings. If more young people believe that voting makes a difference, more young people will vote. If young people are ready and willing to engage in the political process through voting, we should let them.

Some people think that the real reason for not allowing younger people to vote is a political strategy; younger voters cast their ballots more often for liberal candidates. For this reason, conservatives are opposed to lowering the voting age. This is consistent with other efforts on the part of Republicans to make voting more difficult. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, between 2010 and 2014, at least 22 states passed laws that made it harder or less convenient for eligible voters to vote, including voter ID requirements, limits on early voting, eliminating same-day registration, and shorter voting hours. These efforts to limit voter participation call into question the motivation for opposition to a lower voting age. Arguments about maturity may be a cover for political strategy.

Young people are citizens too, and are subject to the same laws and regulations as older voters. Increasingly, they have awoken to the reality that they are directly impacted by policies related to gun ownership, health care, and other important issues. Seventeen-year-olds should have an equal voice in choosing the leaders who makes these laws and whose decisions will shape their future opportunities. Currently, the government does not fully represent the people who are governed, violating a basic tenet of democracy. We should do everything we can to increase representation, promote voter turnout among young people, and remove barriers to participating in this critical part of our democratic process. Lowering the voting age to 17 would support these goals.

NO

Arguments AGAINST allowing 17 year olds to vote

When the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 in 1971, there was a strong feeling across the country that if young Americans were going to fight and die for our country they should be extended one of the most important the privileges of citizenship, voting in open democratic elections. But that was almost fifty years ago. There is no draft and no parallel reason to extend the vote to younger citizens today. Those who would like to allow 16 or 17-year-olds to vote are simply making a strategic calculation meant to increase the number of liberal voters. This position is irresponsible because it would allow young people without political knowledge or life experience to make decisions that impact the rest of society.

Seventeen-year-olds are not legal adults in most respects. They often still live at home and are considered dependents of their parents. They are subject to different legal penalties, privacy standards, and in many states still have restrictions on their driver's licenses. Once people turn 18, we allow them to marry, join the military, and require them to serve on juries. These institutionalized ways of treating children under the age of 18 reflect common social beliefs about their maturity and independence. In an official analysis of the 2017 California proposal to lower the voting age to 17, Nichole Becker notes that "with a few limited exceptions... California confers the legal rights and responsibilities attendant with adulthood on those individuals who are 18 years of age or older. The committee should consider whether it is appropriate to confer one specific legal right—the right to vote—on certain individuals who have not yet reached the age of majority." Ultimately, California lawmakers rejected this proposal to extend voting rights to youth before they reach legal adulthood.

Giving young people the right to vote doesn't fit with other cultural and legal frameworks for how we allow them to participate in society. Voter turnout is shockingly low in the 18-21 demographic, falling as low as 15% in major federal elections. This could mean that young people are not interested in voting. Even voters in their mid-to-late twenties vote at lower rates than older adults. Why should we extend the right to vote to 17-year-olds when 18-, 19-, and 20-year-olds don't take this responsibility seriously?

Some people even arguing that we should raise the voting age again. They cite examples where 18- to 21-year-olds make risky decisions, display social and emotional fragility, and lack the ability to civilly engage with ideas they disagree with. In an opinion piece for *USA Today*, Glenn Harlan Reynolds, a law professor at the University of Tennessee, argues that young people do not often show that they have the intellectual capacity for critical thinking. He says that young people are "not capable of weighing opposing ideas, or of changing their minds when they are confronted with evidence that suggests that they are wrong." There is a large amount of research in psychology and neuroscience that supports the

position that adolescent brains are different from adults. For example, adolescents are prone to more risky, impulsive behavior and giving in to peer pressure. Independent thinking is important for a healthy democracy. We don't want voters who simply follow the advice and influence of their peers.

Allowing students to vote at age 17 would probably mean that public school teachers would be involved in educating students about elections and voting. Students at this age are easily influenced by peer pressure, and political pressure from their teachers or other authority figures is also a significant concern. It is possible that teachers would be in a position to encourage their students to vote a certain way in elections. Opening the door to this kind of influence would be ethically problematic and puts both teachers and students in an awkward position.

There are many other ways that young people can become politically engaged before they can vote. During a committee hearing to consider the proposal to lower the voting age to 17 in California, Rep. Matthew Harper pointed out that young people can volunteer for political campaigns, work on ballot initiatives, and write letters or opinion pieces about their positions. Voting is not the only form of political engagement available.

High school students who are still legal dependents of their parents have not had practical experiences making consequential real world decisions, and they should not have the authority to vote on issues that will impact others. In the online publication *The Federalist*, journalist Robert Tracinski says this lack of life experience is one of the major factors that should prevent lowering the voting age. In fact, he advocates for raising the voting age instead. Referring to employment, marriage, and home ownership, he writes, "all of these milestones and life experiences materially change one's attitudes toward taxes, regulation, education, law enforcement, morality, and personal responsibility in a way that hasn't happened yet for 16-year-old kids who often enough don't yet take responsibility for cleaning their own rooms."

For decades we have given most legal rights of adults to 18-year-olds. We hold them accountable to the standards of adults, including criminal charges. It would not make sense to give the all-important right to vote to 17-year-olds when they still can't get married, work full-time, or even use a tanning booth without permission from a parent. The transition to adulthood comes with a lot of rights and responsibilities, including voting. We should keep it that way.