

Extending Voting Rights to 16- and 17-Year-Old Citizens

2014 POLICY GUIDE



State and Local Policy

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Voter turnout is too low. Enabling cities to extend local election voting rights to 16-year-olds boosts turnout.

The Problem: Voter turnout among eligible voters under 30 is far lower than any other age group. Turnout rates for these young citizens can be particularly low in local elections, being often only a fraction of that of older voters. One reason is that our voting age means an American's first chance to vote often is when they are nearly 20 and have left their familiar community.

The Solution: Laws allowing localities to extend voting rights to citizens at age 16 are a means to increase civic engagement and voter turnout by giving communities a chance to introduce young people to voting when still living at home.

The 26th amendment was the fastest-adopted amendment in history, lowering the voting age to 18. States and some cities can go further to establish a lower voting age. At least 20 states already allow 17-year-olds to vote in primaries or caucuses, and more cities are debating a lower voting age of 16 or 17.

Having a chance to participate in elections before leaving home creates opportunities for schools, communities and families to embrace young people's "first vote" opportunity.

Citizens who are 16 and 17 are often already old enough to register to vote and enlist in the military service. They typically have studied American democracy and political processes in high school. Research from nations and cities with age 16 voting shows that young voters exercise their voting rights as responsibly as older voters.

Furthermore, younger voters are far more likely to vote than those who cannot vote until they are 18 or older. Indeed, "first vote" turnout declines steadily with age until voters are 21. Those who cast their vote when first given the opportunity are also more likely to keep voting over time.

Success Story: Takoma Park (MD) has extended voting rights to its 16- and 17-year-old residents. In November 2013 and a 2014 special election, more 16- and 17-year olds voted than all 18-30-year-olds combined. In 2013, teen turnout was much higher than turnout of all older voters.

Key Facts

Voting at 17 is permitted in primaries in more than 20 states. Voting at 16 is permitted for national elections and/or some local elections in Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, United Kingdom (Scotland) & USA.

Voter Turnout Fact

Young people participate at lower rates than older Americans in all elections. In 2010, turnout among eligible voters under 25 was one-third of the turnout rate of eligible voters over 64. This turnout disparity is even higher for local elections that already tend to have extremely low turnout.

Fiscal Impact

Little to none, especially when the new voting age corresponds to the age at which voter pre-registration is permitted. (Voter pre-registration also has little to no fiscal impact.)

Related Reforms

- Voter Preregistration
- Automatic Registration
- Civic Education

Part Two Resources

- Model Statutory Language
- FAQ