



# VOTING AGE STUDY

**LWV** LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®  
OF MAINE

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# **I. INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE, ORIGIN, AND GOALS OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this Study, an effort of the Voting Age Study Committee of the League of Women Voters of Maine (LWVME), is to guide the creation of a policy position on whether the minimum age for voting in municipal and state elections should remain at 18 or be lowered to 16.

This policy position, ultimately written by the Board, will reflect a League consensus arrived at through the collated and analyzed views of at-large members and local unit study groups participating in local consensus meetings. The policy position will guide future League advocacy on any proposed changes to Maine's age requirements for voters.

The need for the study was recognized in 2021 when two bills (LD 706 & LD 1051) to lower the voting age to 16 were proposed to the state Legislature but did not pass (details in Section III. C) LWVME had no established position on this issue, so LWVME was unable to advocate either for or against the bills. Given that the proposed bills concerned voting rights – a primary focus of LWVME – our Advocacy Program Coordinator, Will Hayward, and our Counsel and Policy Advisor, John Brautigam, offered testimony on behalf of the League (Maine Legislature, 3/19/21a and 4/12/21a). They highlighted the League's historical role in advocating for the expansion of voting rights and mentioned some of the arguments used in the past to deny voting rights to women and to 18- to 20-year-olds, as illustrated in the extract on the following page.

## Voting Age Study | Lowering the Voting Age to 16

The League of Women Voters was born near the end of the multigenerational struggle for the expansion of voting rights to women. One hundred years later, it is almost incomprehensible that full participation in our democracy was denied to women for so long. Opponents to suffrage argued on completely unscientific grounds that women were intellectually inferior to men. Fifty years ago, opposition to lowering the national voting age to 18 was based on unproven claims that 18-year-olds were too irresponsible and politically immature to be allowed to vote. (Maine Legislature, 3/19/21a).

These bills and their failure to pass sparked a youth-led campaign and conversations across the state. L WVME became increasingly aware of the emerging movement, not just in the US but worldwide, to extend the vote to 16-year-olds. With several cities across the United States lowering their voting age to 16 – Mt Rainier MD, Berkeley CA, and Takoma Park, MD, to name a few – this movement is likely to continue in the coming years, and L WVME wants to be able to take a stand on the issue when it comes up again in Maine. Consequently, the L WVME Board proposed a study on lowering the voting age in Maine for statewide elections as well as allowing municipalities to lower the voting age for municipal elections. The proposal was accepted by membership at the 2021 State Convention, and a study committee was formed in March of 2022.

The study committee began with a review of L WVUS position statements and those of other state Leagues in search of a position that could be adopted in Maine using the League concurrence process instead of conducting a full consensus study. The committee determined that there was no existing League study or position on the topic of voting at 16 that L WVME could adopt. Consequently, the L WVME Board and study committee members decided to conduct a full consensus study.

## II. STUDY METHODS

This study on lowering the voting age to 16 aims to provide LWVME a document summarizing the information available on the topic in an unbiased and comprehensive manner. The study committee, formed in March 2022, brought together four volunteers and one staff member. Over time, other volunteers and staff joined the effort with a total of 13 individuals contributing overall.

### **Study Committee Members and Support Team**

LWVME staff support/study manager: Allyson Gardner

Volunteer researchers: Ritchie Dow, Lillias Martin, Emilia Toth, Dylan Wagner, Barbara Wirth

Editing and publishing assistance: Valerie Kelly, Jen Lancaster

On-call volunteer support: Wendlee Heath O'Brien, Jennifer Wheeler, Tamra Benson, Jocelyn Ruffner, Cole Cochrane

Once the decision to conduct a full consensus study was made, the study committee conducted a preliminary literature review and held team discussions that resulted in the identification of the following set of questions to be addressed in depth during the study:

- What is the history of this issue in the US?
- What is the experience in other democracies where the voting age was lowered?
- What do we know about the young voter?
- What are the central arguments and research around this issue of voting at 16?
- What are the potential impacts of reducing the voting age?
- What is known about the Impact of civic education on the younger voter?
- What would the path to implementation look like if voting at 16 were approved?

After the preliminary literature review, the team continued to identify additional documents, which were found through references cited in documents already reviewed and a thorough internet search. Documents included books, peer-reviewed articles, data-informed research findings, and scholarly articles. These documents are all listed in the bibliography of this report with hyperlinks for accessing the documents.

Though multiple opinion pieces were found, the study committee took steps to avoid using materials that were not supported by evidence-based research or expert opinion. The team focused on finding materials lending support to both sides of the Vote16 debate. This proved to be a challenge as most of the evidenced-based research was completed by organizations or individuals who previously, or, as a result of their research, stated support for voting at 16. Surprised by this result the study team reviewed the websites of several prominent research organizations<sup>1</sup> that tend to support more restrictive voting rights to see if they had done research on the topic or taken a position on voting at 16. The search failed to turn up any research or position statements on the topic.

The study committee also reached out to interview individuals and representatives of organizations in the US engaged in work to lower the voting age to 16 or in opposition to the change. Only individuals supporting the movement responded to our requests for interviews. Appendix A contains a list of people and organizations contacted and discussion notes from conversations with those who agreed to interviews.

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<sup>1</sup> Among the websites reviewed were Heritage Foundation, American Legislative Exchange Council, American Enterprise Institute, Rand Corporation, and Carnegie Endowment.

Another research challenge came with the ages represented in much of the existing research on voting behavior of “youth” or “young voters.” Though research on the 16- and 17-year-old voter does exist, particularly outside the US, the majority of research found in the US, examines the ages 18 years and older, defining the young voter as 18- to 24- or 18- to 29-years-old. The intent of this report was to highlight material specific to the 16- and 17-year-old. Given the limited information on 16- and 17-year-olds, the study team included results for other age groups, specifying the ages covered in different studies and commenting on the potential relevance of the results to the 16- and 17-year-old voter whenever appropriate.

As a result of the extensive literature review and interviews, the committee became aware of the positive correlation between civic education and enfranchising high school aged voters. Consequently, the study report contains information on civic education in the US and elsewhere (Section VIII) to provide further context about the relationship between civic education and youth voting.

This comprehensive document on what is currently known about lowering the voting age to 16 is intended to serve as background material for LWVME local unit consensus meetings on the subject. The study committee used the research results to develop a Consensus Question Guide to stimulate member discussions on the topic. The Guide includes some background material from the full report, but the study team believes that familiarity with the contents of this report will enhance the quality of the discussions about the consensus questions. As local Leagues work through the Guide and come to a consensus, they will be providing information that will be used by the study committee and the State Board to develop a position statement on whether the LWVME should support, oppose, or remain neutral on future legislation proposed to lower the voting age to 16.



# **III. US HISTORY OF LOWERING THE VOTING AGE AND THE VOTE<sub>16</sub> CAMPAIGN**

## **[A.] Milestones in US decisions about the minimum voting age**

National milestones in determining who gets to vote in the US start with the US Constitution and continue to the 1990s, covering issues of age, gender, race, and disability (see sidebar on next page for highlights). The following discussion focuses on changes related to age.

When Maine was granted statehood in 1820, it followed suit with every other state at the time by setting its minimum voting age to 21. The age of 21 seems to be a relic from English common law which determined the age of majority (adulthood) to be 21 (James, 1960).

Efforts to lower the voting age began in 1942 when the draft age was lowered to 18 after multiple Selective Service law revisions. Legislators argued that if men could be drafted to war at 18, then they should be able to vote at 18 as well. The phrase “old enough to fight, old enough to vote” became popular around this time. No national law was passed to this end until 1971 (Claire, 2020).

As the United States reached the height of the Vietnam war, committing more money and more troops, that old slogan again became a rallying cry. With youth suffrage gaining support across the political spectrum – 66% of Americans agreed that persons 18-, 19-, and 20-years-old should

be permitted to vote – the 26th Amendment was passed in 1971 (Lyons, 2004). It was the fastest ratification of an amendment in United States history, taking only 4 months, due to the upcoming 1972 election (Claire, 2020).

With a sudden rise in new constituents, politicians were forced to listen to this new demographic's demands. For example, Nixon made an appeal to young voters in the late 1960's and early 1970's by pledging to end the draft and enacting environmental regulations (Claire, 2020).

Today, youth activists are again calling for a lower voting age, with the target being 16 years old (Generation Citizen, 2020).

## Milestones in the Expansion of the US Voting Franchise<sup>2</sup>

**1788-1789:** When George Washington is sworn in as the first U.S. president, only white men who own land or a business can vote. (New Jersey is an exception. That state lets single wealthy women and land-owning African American men vote until 1807.)

**1870:** The 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gives all men the right to vote, regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” But Southern states soon create restrictions that prevent Black men from voting in most areas for almost 100 more years.

**1920:** The 19th Amendment grants suffrage to women, after almost a century of struggle to achieve it.

**1924:** The Indian Citizenship Act declares all Native Americans to be U.S. citizens, which in turn gives them full voting rights. But some states still block Native Americans from voting for decades to come.

**1965:** President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act, which bans discriminatory practices that some states had used to keep Black people and other groups from voting. For example, in many Southern states, Black Americans had been required to pass literacy tests before they could vote.

**1971:** Thousands of young Americans are dying in the Vietnam War, and many Americans argue that if 18-year olds are old enough to serve in the military, then they are old enough to vote. Their efforts culminate with the ratification of the 26th Amendment in 1971, which lowers the voting age from 21 to 18.

**1975:** The Voting Rights Act is expanded to help U.S. citizens who don't speak English. Cities with large populations of non-English speakers are required to provide ballots and voting instructions in other languages.

**1990:** The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that people with disabilities have “a full and equal” opportunity to vote.” States must make all aspects of the voting process—from registration to polling places—accessible to people with disabilities.

Source: Starecheski & Anastasia (2020).

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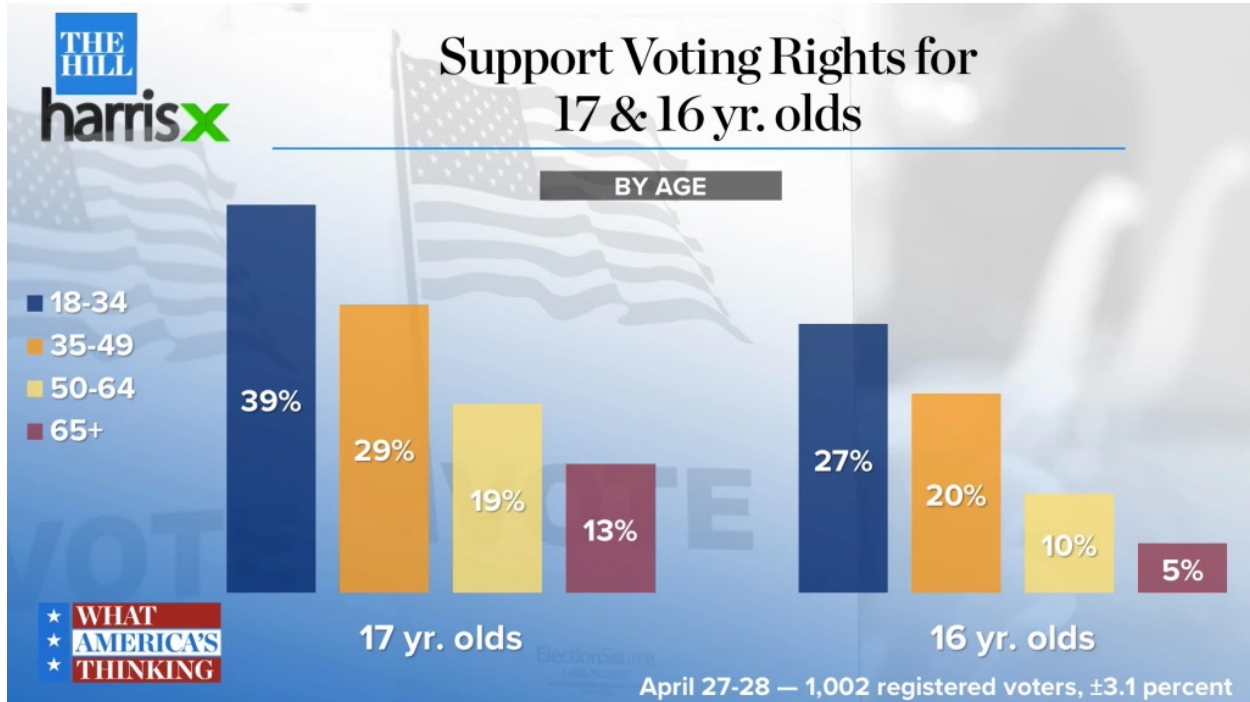
<sup>2</sup> While this timeline gives a decent overview of the history of voting rights, it does not acknowledge the disparities in enforcement or the exclusions that recent racial groups faced.

## **B.** Vote16 Campaigns in US

Across the nation young people, organizations, towns, and cities have been organizing to lower the voting age for every type of election. This movement has increased and seen success in the past several years at a municipal level (Douglas, 2020) (See table below). The first of these campaigns began in 2013 in Takoma Park, MD (Generation Citizen, 2020). The foundation behind this work is to empower young people with the ability to choose their school board members and local (town/city) elected officials. Proponents of these efforts believe that these efforts are building stronger connections between young people and their communities.

Lowering the voting age to 16 has also been proposed at the federal level. The most recent of these efforts began in January of 2023 when Representative Grace Meng submitted legislation (H.J. Res. 16) that seeks to expand voting rights in the 26th amendment of the US Constitution to include 16- and 17-year-olds (Meng, 2023). This is the second time this amendment has been brought before Congress.

US polls examining how much support exists for this change are limited in number but show the majority do not support lowering the voting age. A 2019 Hill-HarrisX poll, for example, surveyed a statistically representative sample of 1,002 registered voters (Wang, 2019). Findings showed 84% of Americans did not support the right for 16-year-olds to vote and 75% opposed the right for 17-year-olds to vote. The poll showed large variations in support across age groups (see graph) as well as political parties, with 78% of Democrats opposing the change and 89% of Republicans.

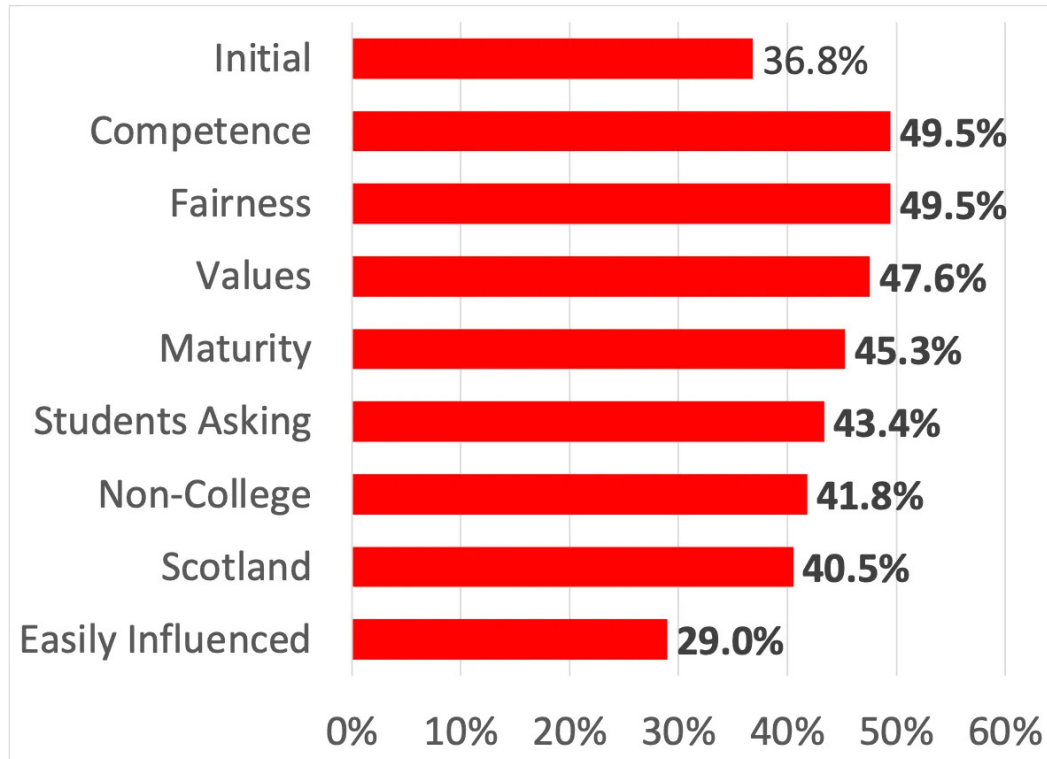


Source: Wang (2019).

Support for 16- 17-year-old voting specifically in local elections appears to be higher than support for lowering the age at the state and federal level. A University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) poll of 538 16- and 17-year-olds and older adults found the strongest support was for voting in school board elections with less support as elections expanded to state and federal contests (Wray-Lake et al., 2020). Similar results were found in a more recent 2022 survey of 2,000 responses from a sample broadly representing the American population. Findings were clustered with approximately 30% of voters in favor of lowering the age overall; more support was shown for local (36%) and state (34%) elections than national elections (32%) (Hanmer & Novey, 2002).

Several studies have experimented with asking the question about expanding the vote to 16-year-olds while also with offering some context on the young voter. As illustrated in the graph below, when provided with the addition of context (e.g., examples of youth competence, the role of fairness, and evidence from Scotland), respondents to the question tended to be more supportive of the lower voting age.

### **Additional Context Impacts Initial Support for Lowering the Voting Age**



Source: Hanmer & Novey, 2002.

In 2015, in order to provide national support for the campaigns to lower the voting age happening across the nation, Generation Citizen – a civic education nonprofit organization – founded Vote16 USA. Vote16 USA has provided support, structure, and resources for youth-led campaigns across the country. During the past year, our study committee has worked to gain an understanding of these Vote16 campaigns by conducting interviews with young people, researchers, and elected officials in the following four cities and with representatives of Vote16 USA and their research network (see Appendix A for details).

- Takoma Park, MD
- Culver City, CA
- San Francisco, CA
- Brattleboro, VT
- Vote16 USA
- Vote16 Research Network

Vote 16 has been more likely to succeed at the local level in states that already have home rule laws. In some states, known as home rule states, the state's constitution grants municipalities and/or counties the ability to pass laws to govern themselves as they see fit (so long as they obey

the state and federal laws and constitutions). In other states, only limited authority has been granted to local governments by the passage of statutes in the state legislature. In these states, a city or county must obtain permission from the state legislature if it wishes to pass a law or ordinance which is not specifically permitted under existing state legislation. In states without home rule or with limited home rule, lowering the voting age to 16 has not passed.

The following tables, based on information in Generation Citizen (2020), offer a summary of activity to date in promoting Vote16 across the US.

### Cities and Towns That Have Lowered Their Voting Age

YEAR	CITY	STATUS
2013	Takoma Park, MD	Passed
2015	Hyattsville, MD	Passed
2016	Berkeley, CA	Passed for school board elections but not yet implemented
2017	Greenbelt, MD	Passed
2018	Riverdale Park, MD	Passed
2019	Oakland, CA	Passed for school board elections but not yet implemented
2021	Mount Rainier, MD	Passed

### Current Campaigns For Lowering the Voting Age at the Municipal Level

START YEAR	LOCALITY	OBSERVATIONS
2014	Brattleboro, VT	Passed locally in 2020; governor vetoed the change to the city's charter
2015	Washington, D.C.	
2018	Somerville, MA	Passed locally; began lobbying the state to allow home rule (for cities to be able to change the age for municipal elections)
2018	Concord, MA	Passed locally; began lobbying the state to allow home rule (for cities to be able to change the age for municipal elections)
2018	Northampton, MA	Began lobbying the state to allow cities to be able to change the age for municipal elections
2016	San Francisco, CA	In 2020, this city-wide measure gained 49.2% votes in favor, just shy of passing
2018	Culver City, CA	In 2022, a city-wide measure failed to pass by fewer than 700 votes
2018	Boulder, CO	In 2018, the city council was in support but has not moved to vote on policy change.



**Bills Introduced Unsuccessfully at the State Level** *(most recent attempts)*

YEAR	STATE	YEAR	STATE
2003	Texas	2018	Nebraska
2004	Iowa	2018	North Dakota
2008	Illinois	2019	Hawaii
2009	Wisconsin	2019	Kentucky
2011	Washington	2019	New York
2014	Missouri	2019	Connecticut
2015	Minnesota	2019	Virginia
2015	New Mexico	2019	California
2015	Arizona	2020	Massachusetts
2015	Washington D.C.	2020	Vermont
2018	Michigan	2021	Maine

As an introduction to the discussions of the pros and cons of lowering the voting age that will follow, we offer as ‘food for thought’ four statements made by elected officials when discussing Vote16 proposals in their jurisdictions – two in support and two in opposition.



**In support:**

“

Our young people are at the forefront of some of the most existential crises facing our communities and our society at large. I believe that those who will inherit the nation we design here in Congress, by virtue of our policies and authority, should have a say in who represents them.”

– **Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA)**

U.S. House of Representatives  
(Generation Citizen, 2020, p. 14)

“

Those who pay taxes should have a voice in our democracy. As a teen, I worked and paid taxes [...] I support policies that encourage work and this could be part of the conversation.”

– **Rep. Michael Burgess (R-TX)**

U.S. House of Representatives  
(Generation Citizen, 2020, p. 14).



### **In opposition:**

“

While I applaud 16- and 17-year-old Vermonters who take an interest in the issues affecting their communities, their state and their country, I do not support lowering the voting age in Brattleboro. First, given how inconsistent Vermont law already is on the age of adulthood, this proposal will only worsen the problem. ... Second, if the Legislature is interested in expanding voting access to school-aged children, they should debate this policy change on a statewide basis. I do not support creating a patchwork of core election laws and policies that are different from town to town.

– **Governor Phil B. Scott (R-VT)**

(Scott, 2022).

“

I voted no because I do agree that at this time, we should grow our children into adulthood and responsibilities, and afford them this right. But also at the same time, as a Native American woman, as an auntie, as a sister, I think we should protect our children and let them be afforded and honor that process to go through their coming of age.

– **D. Wonda Johnson (D-Rehoboth)**

New Mexico State Representative  
(Fisher, 2023, citing Johnson)

## **C.** Maine's Experience to Date with voting at 16

In 2021, during the 130th state legislative session, Maine saw the proposal of two bills to lower the voting age: LD 706 and LD 1051. The first proposed to lower the voting age to 16 in the Maine State Constitution, thus extending suffrage to all 16- and 17-year-olds for future state and municipal elections. The second proposed to lower the voting age to 16 for municipal elections as a way to increase youth civic education.

LD 706, which proposed “an amendment to the Constitution of Maine to lower the voting age to 16 years of age,” was received by the Clerk of the House on March 2, 2021. This bill was proposed by Representative O’Neil. The bill summary is as follows:

This constitutional resolution proposes to reduce the voting age qualification by 2 years, from 18 years of age or older to 16 years of age or older, subject to approval at referendum.  
(Maine Legislature, 3/19/21b)

It was then referred to the Committee on Veteran and Legal Affairs. A public hearing was held on March 19, 2021. A review of testimony presented at the LD 706 hearing indicates that 31 individuals spoke in opposition to the bill, arguing that 16-year-olds were immature, impulsive, and irrational and could not be relied on to make sound political decisions. On the support side, there were 23 individuals presenting examples of young people being actively engaged in civic activities concerning climate change and gun violence but not being able to vote for policies they supported (Maine Legislature 3/19/21b).

Work sessions began on April 16, 2021. A fiscal note of \$172,000 was also attached to LD 706 from the Secretary of State’s budget to accommodate the printing of a second ballot that would pertain only to state elections and referendums (Maine Legislature 4/2/21) thus making a separate ballot for 16- and 17-year-olds that excluded any federal elections.

Following the work sessions, the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee voted on May 27, 2021, resulting in a divided report, 8 to 5: Majority ONTP (Ought Not to Pass)/Minority OTP-AM (Ought to pass as amended). The amendments made the bill more specific by identifying specific lines/

words to delete and to add, but they did not change the general intent of the bill.

A floor vote for LD 706 never occurred; both chambers elected to accept the “ought not to pass” report from the committee. The bill was marked as dead in the legislative files on June 3, 2021.

The second bill, LD 1051 was proposed by Representative Morales and was referred to the State and Local Government Committee on March 11, 2021.

LD 1051 received a public hearing on April 12, 2023. Of the 45 individuals offering testimony, 4 were in support, 2 were neither for nor against, and 39 were against (Maine Legislature, 4/12/21b). The Deputy Secretary of State, Joann Bautista, testified in favor of this bill on behalf of the Secretary of State’s office. The two paragraphs below are extracted from her full testimony (Maine Legislature, 4/12/21c).

Not allowing our young people the opportunity to get involved in elections at the municipal level, means we are essentially stopping them from making voting a ritual habit and practicing lifelong civic engagement. Not only that, a Danish professor from the Copenhagen Business School, studied Danish election data and identified a “trickle up phenomenon” – where families had voting-aged youth at home, it also increased the chance their parent or guardian would vote too. Enfranchising young voters is necessary for the survival of our democracy.

In summary, there is overwhelming support for lowering the voting age – from municipal to the federal level to countries around the world that have already implemented inclusive voting laws. Meaningful civics information coupled with giving young people the opportunity to become true participants in democracy can lead to less cynicism and disillusionment in their elected leaders and government and ultimately, a more representative democracy.

Many of the opponents cited their belief that 16-year-olds were simply not mature enough, mentioning the many situations where they were not yet considered “adults” (alcohol and cigarette use, criminal justice, military enlistment, etc.). Some also considered the bill a political maneuver to get more progressive candidates elected. The Maine Municipal Association represented by Rebecca Graham offered a more detailed argument against the bill than most other opponents, making the following points (Maine Legislature, 4/12/21d)<sup>3</sup>:

Municipal officials believe that engagement of youth in civil society is a vitally important goal, and one that begins with exercising your civic duty to become an informed citizen. Lowering the voting age requires an increased investment in civics education, which has been a decidedly missing curriculum piece of the public education system for at least a generation.

As the voting age of 18 is also clearly defined in the Maine Constitution under Article 2 Sec. 1, a state constitutional amendment is required to rephrase the age provision. This requires ratification from Maine’s eligible voters through a statewide referendum regardless of if the elections at question are exclusively municipal.

Alternatively, because Maine’s election laws present the age of 18 as a restriction, and not a grant in Title 30-A § 2501, the law would need to be explicit that municipal elections are not governed by state law to circumvent the Constitutional age restriction.

If a municipality takes action to lower its voting age, this action could be challenged in court – and the state court may interpret the voting age provision as meaning that the right to vote is reserved exclusively to those over 18. Nothing in the drafted bill would protect municipalities from this possible litigation.

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<sup>3</sup> In this testimony, the Maine Municipal Association implies that the Maine Constitution’s article about voting qualifications for state elections (“Every citizen of the United States of the age of 18 years and upwards, excepting persons under guardianship for reasons of mental illness, having his or her residence established in this State, shall be an elector for Governor, Senators and Representatives”) applies to municipal elections. However, it is unclear if their interpretation is a consensus opinion or whether a court would rule that it applies. It is possible that the MMA is incorrect in their interpretation and that a change to state law would suffice to allow municipalities to lower the voting age for municipal elections.

Additionally, the barriers to provide proof of residency, enrollment in a party, and proof of citizenship to vote in municipal elections will not be changed by this proposed bill. Each already remain barriers for residents who pay rent, utilities, and other bills in the name of a co-habitant.

While officials support the encouragement of youth participation in government, even if LD 1051 were amended to be a constitutional amendment question for Maine's voters to decide, they believe the money required to administer the question or litigate ... the outcomes of future municipal elections would be better invested in promoting and supporting civics engagement for Maine's youth and public at large. For all these reasons municipal officials are opposed to LD 1051 as drafted.

The Maine Town and City Clerks' Association also testified, but took no position, focusing on possible implementation challenges that would be faced by election clerks (Maine Legislature 4/12/21e):

This bill would allow voters who are 16 years of age, but not yet 18 years of age, to vote in municipal elections but not state or federal elections. The responsibility would fall on the election clerk to be sure that voters are not being provided ballots to which they are not entitled to vote. Although accuracy is the expectation, errors do happen; therefore, it is possible that underage voters could be mistakenly provided with state or federal ballots. Municipal clerks feel that election laws are best if there is consistency for all voters. Voters may be confused when they do not receive all ballots that other voters receive.

Clerks pointed out that this law may be in conflict with the U.S. and State of Maine Constitutions. This bill, if passed, would also take away municipality's Home Rule Authority regarding municipal elections.

The fiscal note for this bill stated the costs would be "minor and can be absorbed within existing budgeted resources" by the Secretary of State's office (Maine Legislature, 5/7/21).

The State and Local Government Committee held the work session for the bill April 21, 2021, and a divided report was issued with the majority voting ONTP (ought not to pass) and the minority OTPA (ought to pass as amended).

The bill was carried over to the special session held in the summer of 2021. This was the case for many bills due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The floor vote for LD 1051 happened on June 2, 2021. The House of Representatives voted not to pass this bill with a roll call of: Nays: 80, Yeas: 66, Absent: 5, Excused: 0

The main drivers behind both of these bills were groups of young people. One of these organizers, Cole Cochrane, described the state of the Vote16 campaign as follows:

The voting age effort was strong and unified during the 130th Legislature. We were able to muster a broad coalition in support, as well as having a good turnout of youth and advocacy groups at the public hearing for LD 706. However, in order to change the outcome in future legislatures, we need to have expanded support. (Email from Cole Cochrane to Allyson Gardner, 3/14/23)



## **IV. GLOBAL EXPERIENCES**

Worldwide, 21 countries currently have voting ages lower than 18 for some or all their elections. The countries are in Europe, Asia, and Latin America (see Appendix B). To make the discussion of global experiences as relevant as possible to the US situation, the study team decided to focus on the Vote 16 experience of democratic countries that have forms of government and voting procedures similar to those in the US.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the pages that follow describe the highlights of the Vote 16 experience for 12 European countries, plus Canada and New Zealand. While most of these countries have approved voting at 16, some offer interesting examples of unsuccessful efforts.

Austria, one of the first countries in the European Union (EU) to lower the voting age, adopted a legislative change in 2007. This action to allow 16-year-olds to vote in national elections as well as on referendums was part of a broad electoral reform package; it was a top-down process initiated by the governing parties and did not feature bottom-up advocacy by the Austrian citizenry or NGOs. The proposal to lower the voting age was supported by two parties: the Democratic Party (SPO) and the Greens, while the opposition was composed of the center-right people's party (OVP) and the right-wing parties. In regions of the country where the SPO was the governing party, the voting age had been lowered to 16 for previous regional or municipal elections. This included Carinthia and Burgenland in 2000 as well as the capital city of Vienna in 2005 (Aichholzer and Kritzing, 2020, pg. 83).

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<sup>4</sup> Criteria for relevant countries are those which have a 7.0 or higher rating on the Democracy Index according to [worldpopulationreview.com](https://www.worldpopulationreview.com) ("Democracy Index", 2023).

Other European countries that lowered the voting age include<sup>5</sup>:

- Estonia — Legislation was proposed in 2011 and enacted in 2016 for local elections.
- Malta — 16-year-olds could vote in city council elections starting in 2015, and the Maltese Parliament approved national voting rights for 16- and 17-year-olds in March of 2018.
- Scotland — Scottish citizens can vote at 16 for all Scottish elections, including Scottish Parliament and local elections, but the legal age to vote in UK elections remains at 18.<sup>6</sup> Vote 16 was approved by Parliament in 2015, after a two-year effort to enact legislative change. 16- and 17-year-olds were previously authorized to vote in the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014.
- Wales — 16- and 17-year-olds were granted the right to vote in all national and local elections, except Police and Crime (PCC), effective in 2021.
- Isle of Man — Enacted a voting age change law in 2006, which enabled 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in the general election that year.
- Channel Island of Jersey — Followed soon after with a law to lower the age to 16 in 2007. Young voters could elect senators and deputies in the 2008 elections.

Germany can be compared most closely to the US in terms of structure and form of governance because the country consists of separate states with separate legislatures. Elections in Germany are conducted similarly to the US, since election laws are determined separately by each state. Therefore voting age changes can realistically apply to state and municipal elections only. Changes to voting laws at the national level would require a constitutional revision, which has been proposed but has not yet had adequate support for passage.

Currently Germany's legal voting age remains at 18 for national elections, while four states have lowered the age to 16 for state and municipal elections and seven other states have lowered it for municipal elections only (Leininger and Faas, 2020). Although several parties had mentioned lowering the voting age on their 2017 platforms, there has been little recent attention to the issue at the national level. At the state and municipal level there is a patchwork of change, which began in 1996 in the state of Lower Saxony and continues to the present. In all states, changes

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<sup>5</sup> Information about countries and dates listed comes from Estonia: Toots and Idnurm (2020); Malta: Borg and Azzopardi (2021); devolved UK countries and Channel Islands: Johnston and Uberoi (2020).

<sup>6</sup> Scotland and Wales are devolved UK member countries, and voting rights are also devolved. Northern Ireland is also a devolved UK country, but elections remain under the control of UK ministers in Westminster.

for municipal elections came either before changes at the state level or simultaneously. The state of Berlin – already having lowered the age to 16 for municipal voting – was entertaining a law in 2022 to allow 16-year-olds to vote in state elections. Proponents of the change came from governing parties (SPD, Greens, and Left) and the opposition party (FDP) (“Voting age in Berlin to be lowered”, 2022). Although proponents were optimistic, the study team found no confirmation of passage.

In Switzerland, in 2007, the constituent state of Glarus lowered the voting age to 16 for municipal and regional canton (similar to state) elections. Five other regions in the country are currently in the process of proposing legislative changes to lower the voting age, including Zurich, the largest canton. At the national level, a constitutional change by public ballot would be required, and there are efforts in parliament underway to draft such a ballot (“Parliament wants to lower”, 2022).

Several other countries in Europe have considered lowering the voting age but have not yet approved a change. These include Romania, Sweden, Norway, England, and Northern Ireland.

In Norway, pilot trials were conducted in 2011 and 2015 in 20 municipal elections. The trials ended in 2017 when the national government decided that the voting age should remain at 18. The issue was raised again in 2022 and again rejected by the Norwegian Parliament. A key concern of the opposition was having a voting age that was lower than the “age of majority,” which was 18. The proposal was supported by four parties (Red Party, Socialist Left, Labour, and Green) but the center right majority party consisting of Conservatives, Centre, Progress, and Christian Democratic factions formed the larger coalition and was able to block the proposal (“Norway rejects proposal”, 2022).

In the United Kingdom (UK), the Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC) filed a final report of recommendations entitled “Making the Connection: Building Youth Citizenship in the UK” in 2009. The YCC undertook three tasks: to define what citizenship means to young people, to increase young people’s participation in politics and promote active citizenship, and to lead a consultation on whether the voting age should be lowered to 16. The issue of lowering the voting age was discussed in a separate YCC consultation paper entitled: “Old Enough to Make a Mark? Should the Voting Age be Lowered to 16?” (Youth Citizenship Commission, 2008). The document reviewed findings of other groups having recently studied the issue. The other studies reviewed are listed on the next page.

- 2004 Electoral Commission Report recommending not to lower the voting age at that time but wanted the issue to be studied again in 5-7 years
- 2006 Power Report recommending to change the voting age to 16
- 2007 Councillors Commission Report supporting voting at 16, stating that:
- “Allowing young people the chance of voting at 16 would give them a personal stake in citizenship at a time when they were studying the subject at school” (Youth Citizenship Commission, 2008, pg. 23).

In the end, neither the YCC’s “Old enough to make a mark” paper nor the final report covering all three topics came out in support of lowering the voting age. The YCC found that the arguments for and against were strong on both sides of the issue. National polling statistics on the issue reported in the “Old enough” document may also have played a role in the decision as shown by the following quotation:

Public opinion does not seem to support a reduction in the voting age. 78% of adults believed the voting age should remain at 18 (ICM<sup>7</sup>, for the Electoral Commission’s Age of Majority report, 2004). One-third of 18-24 year olds believed the voting age should be lowered compared to only 5% of over 65s. Among 16 and 17 year olds, less than half (43% and 44% respectively) supported keeping the voting age at 18 (Youth Citizenship Commission, 2008, pg. 19).

Government sentiment regarding the voting age in the UK continues to reject the concept of lowering the age to 16, however there is growing support for reconsideration. Many conservative politicians as well as major political parties in the House of Commons are advocating for change. This sentiment is reflected in a statement by Baroness Morgan of Cotes in a press release of the Electoral Reform Society in July 2018:

We cannot now have elections in different parts of the United Kingdom where 16- and 17-year-olds can vote and then other elections where they cannot. But the most patronizing argument ... is that 16- and 17-year-olds aren’t mature enough to vote. Making such a sweeping generalization on the basis of no evidence whatsoever should be given no airtime (Johnston and Oberoi, 2020, pg. 6).

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<sup>7</sup> ICM was originally known as Independent Communications and Marketing prior to being rebranded and renamed ICM Unlimited in 2014. The group conducted opinion polls and surveys. It has now been obtained by Walnut Social Research.

Voting age for the European Parliament is separately determined by each EU country, and the trend to lower the voting age to 16 is becoming more prevalent. In May of 2022, Belgium announced that it had lowered the age from 18 to 16, thus empowering young Belgian citizens and EU citizens living in Belgium to vote in the 2024 elections (“Belgium lowers voting age”, 2022). Germany followed suit in November of 2022 (Carter, 2022). In addition to these two countries, Austria, Greece, and Malta also have set the age to 16. Malta’s approval of lowering the voting age for the European Parliament was concurrent with the 2018 passage of legislation to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in Maltese Parliament elections (Borg and Azzopardi, 2021).

Although European countries have led the movement to lower the voting age in western democracies, both Canada and New Zealand are also moving in this direction. Proposed legislation: An Act to Amend the Canada Elections Act (voting age) was submitted to both chambers of Parliament in 2021: House bill C-210 was defeated in September 2022. Senate bill S-201 is currently in the second reading and awaiting further action.

In 2019 in New Zealand, the youth advocacy group Make it 16 filed a case with the High Court, arguing that denying 16/17-year-old citizens the right to vote violated the country’s Bill of Human Rights as it pertains to age discrimination. (“Our court case”, 2022). The case was based on Section 19 of the Bill of Rights, which stipulates that the right to be free from discrimination begins at age 16. The judge in the High Court case found that though there was age discrimination, the discrimination was justified. After losing in the initial case in late 2020, the group appealed the ruling to the Supreme Court. They won the case in November of 2022.

Enacting a change in New Zealand voting laws at the National level requires a 75% approval by members of Parliament (“New Zealand govt reverses move”, 2023). Currently, the support for adopting a lowering of the voting age does not meet the 75% requirement. At the local level, a simple majority vote is needed. The Prime Minister, Chris Hipkins, has stated that he will introduce a bill for local elections, since there is likelihood that it will pass.

For more detailed information on international voter turnout and participation see Appendix C.

On the international level, the United Nations has not definitively proposed universal voting at age 16; however, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child does promote the rights of adolescents to participate in politics and to have a voice, particularly in issues that directly affect their lives (see sidebar below). This position could be interpreted as support for voting at ages below 18.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)  
In accordance with article 12 of the Convention, States parties should introduce measures to guarantee adolescents the right to express views on all matters of concern to them, in accordance with their age and maturity, and ensure they are given due weight, for example, in decisions relating to their education, health, sexuality, family life and judicial and administrative proceedings. States should ensure that adolescents are involved in the development, implementation and monitoring of all relevant legislation, policies, services and programmes affecting their lives, at school and the community, local, national and international levels.

Source: UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2016).

## **V. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE YOUNG VOTER?**

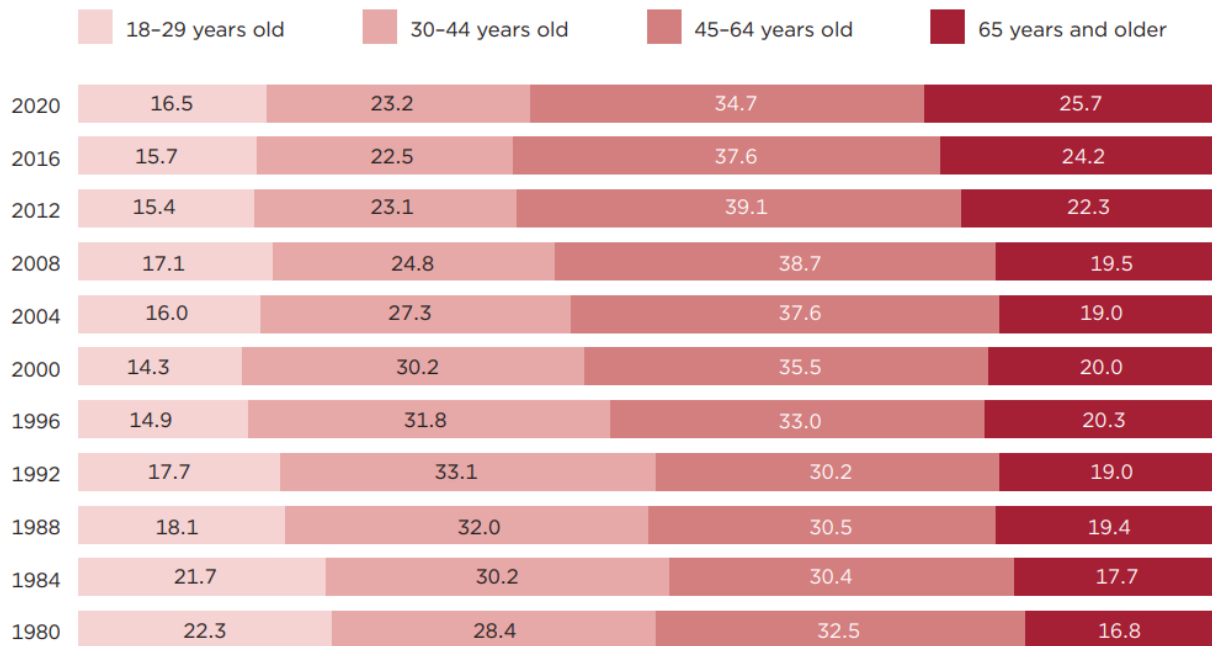
### **[A.]** Demographic shifts in the US may be reducing the political voice of younger citizens

The demographics in recent times have shifted in many ways, not the least of which stems from the increasing proportion of older versus younger members of the population. The percentage of US citizens under 18 has declined from 36% in 1960 to 24% in 2010 (Hart and Atkins, 2011). In 2019, the US Census Bureau predicted a continued decline in the youth population. Expectations are that by 2030, 25% of the population eligible to vote will be 65 and older for the first time ever (Generation Citizen, 2020, pg. 6).

Trends in the age of those voting in presidential elections are illustrated in the graph below and show that the 25% mark has been exceeded for those showing up to vote.

### Composition of American Voters by Age: Presidential Elections, 1980-2020

(In percent)



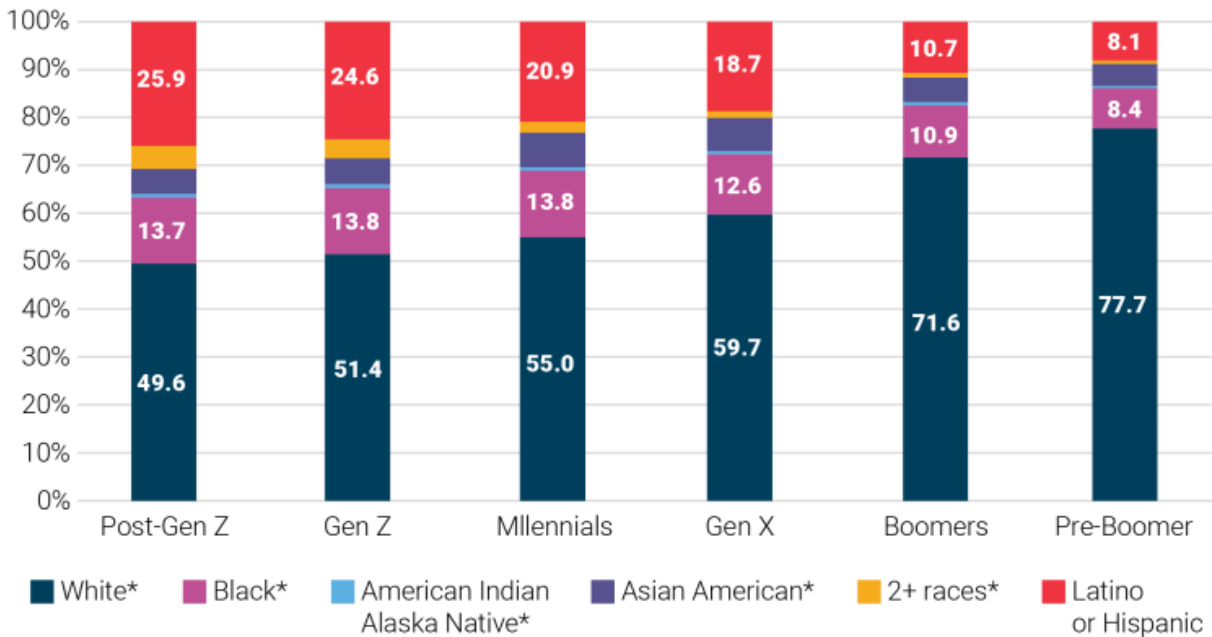
Source: U.S. Census Bureau cited by Fabina and Scherer (2022).

Shifts in US demographics also include changes in the racial and ethnic makeup of the population and the electorate. The proportion of Latinos, Blacks, and Asians in the electorate is on an increasing trajectory in the younger Generation Z (ages 16 - 26) when compared to preceding generations (Anderson, 2020). By 2025, it is estimated that the population of all US individuals ages 14-24 will consist of 50% people of color (“2020 Youth Voter Turnout”, 2021).

Frey (2021), analyzing 2020 Census Bureau population estimates, found the following breakdown of racial profile by age group.



### US Racial Profiles by Generation



Notes: Numbers pertain to July 1, 2019. Asian American includes Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders  
\* Non Hispanic members of race

Source: William H. Frey analysis of Census Bureau population estimates released June 25, 2020.

**B** Metropolitan Policy Program  
at BROOKINGS

The discussion which follows highlights the areas where research suggests that political priorities and preferences of younger citizens tend to differ from those of older citizens. These demographic shifts cited above will be of increasing importance given younger and older voters may have different political and policy priorities and voting rules may risk a disproportionate representation of the different groups.

## **B.** Political and policy priorities of voters by age group

Hart and Atkins (2011) reviewed data by The American National Election Studies (ANES) for the years 1984 – 2008 on political interests for two age groups: 17- to 24-year olds and 65- to 74-year olds and covered respondents' support for federal funding of social security, public schools, and financial aid for colleges. These topics were selected as being representative of concerns of people of all age ranges. Results showed that:

- Support for Social Security funding was mostly aligned between both age groups; overall there appears to be no difference between young and older voters on this issue.
- Support for education funding, both for public schools and for financial aid for colleges, however, differed across groups; young voters are considerably more inclined to support both education issues than older voters.

Hart and Atkins point out that this difference has real implications for public policy. Experience has shown (Poterba 1998 cited by Hart & Atkins) that municipalities that have considerably higher proportions of older voters are less likely to approve school budgets. Assuming that the interests of 16- and 17-year-olds align with those of the 18- to 24-year-old cohort in the ANES data, Hart and Atkins suggest that extending the vote to age 16 would increase the youth representation in the electorate to a more proportional level. Additional more recent information on the differences in priorities is provided below on findings for the 2022 midterm elections.

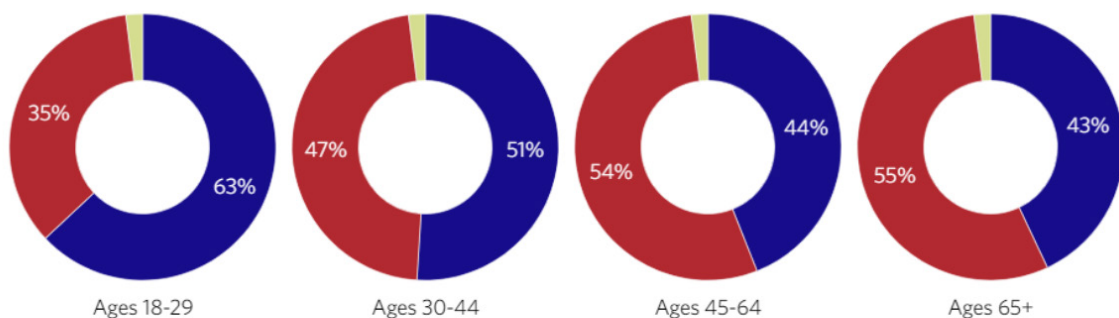
## **C.** Evidence on youth voting in the 2022 midterm elections

The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) compiled information on the 2022 midterm elections comparing the voting tendencies and impacts of 18- to 29-year-old voters with older groups of voters (“Youth Voter Turnout and Impact”, 2022).<sup>8</sup> CIRCLE found that turnout by young voters (18- to 29-year-old) was the second highest in the past 30 years, resulting in a representative impact of 12% of all votes cast.

Political party preference for youth voting in the 2022 midterms differed significantly from that of older voters. High shares of young voters did not identify with either political party. Thirty-eight percent of youth voters identified as independent or “something else” compared to 30% or fewer of older voters over age 45. Young voters’ support did lean democratic as shown by their support for Democrats in the House of Representatives in 2022, which was 63% among 18- to 29-year-old voters, while 55% of voters 65 and older preferred Republicans.

### Age Groups: National Youth Vote Choice for the House of Representatives in the 2022 Midterm Election

■ Democrat ■ Republican ■ Other/No Answer



**CIRCLE** Tufts University Tisch College · CIRCLE

Source: CIRCLE analysis of 2022 Edison national exit poll data

<sup>8</sup> The CIRCLE 2022 report is an estimate of turnout and results calculated from vote tallies, National Election Poll Survey of youth share of the vote reported by Edison Research, and the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey population data.

The CIRCLE analyses and graphs (“Youth Voter Turnout and Impact”, 2022, pp. 7-8) showed that the youth vote played an important role in several key candidate races:

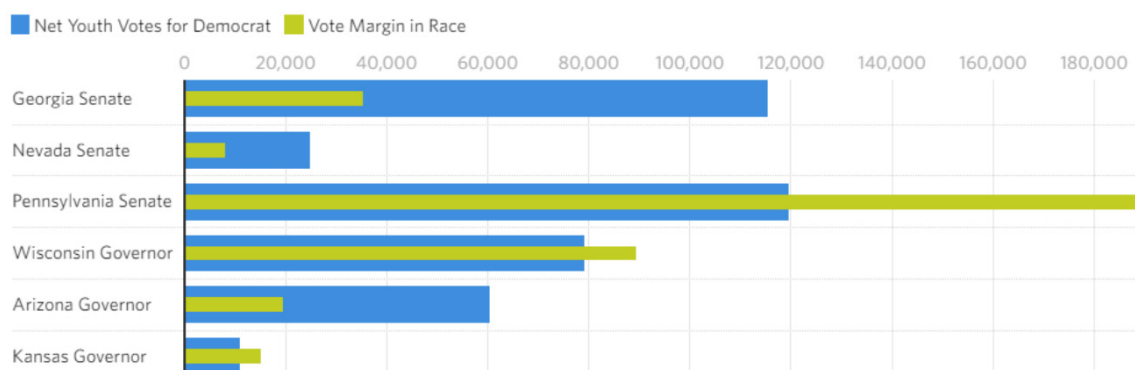
- Arizona Governor’s race – Youth supported Katie Hobbs (D) by a 20 point margin, which contributed to a win by approximately 17,000 votes.
- Nevada Senate – Youth contribution to Catherine Cortez Masto (D) yielded 27,000 net votes.<sup>9</sup>
- Georgia Senate – Youth support for Warnock (D) was 63% vs 56% for voters aged 30-44, and those over 45 favored Walker (R).
- Pennsylvania –  
The age breakdown for the senate race (Fetterman (D)/ Oz(R)) was:
  - + Age 18-29: 70%/28%
  - + Age 30-44: 55%/42%
  - + Age 45+: preferred Oz

Youth also contributed to a 26-point margin in Josh Shapiro’s win of the governor’s race.

- Wisconsin Governor – Young voters played a key part in the Wisconsin Governor’s race and they were instrumental in netting 79,000 votes for Governor Tony Evers (D), who defeated Tim Michels (R) by 89,000 votes.
- Kansas Governor – Young people in Kansas participated with a high turnout, with a representation of 14% of the voting population. Their support for Laura Kelly (D) over Derek Schmidt (R) contributed to Kelly’s 15,000 vote margin, out of which 11,000 votes were cast by young voters.

### Young Voters Were Crucial to Close Races Across the Country

The estimated number of net votes from young people (ages 18-29) for the Democratic candidates in each race and the vote difference/margin of victory as of November 15



**CIRCLE** Tufts University Tisch College - CIRCLE

Source: CIRCLE analysis of AP VoteCast data from The Associated Press and election results reported by major news outlets

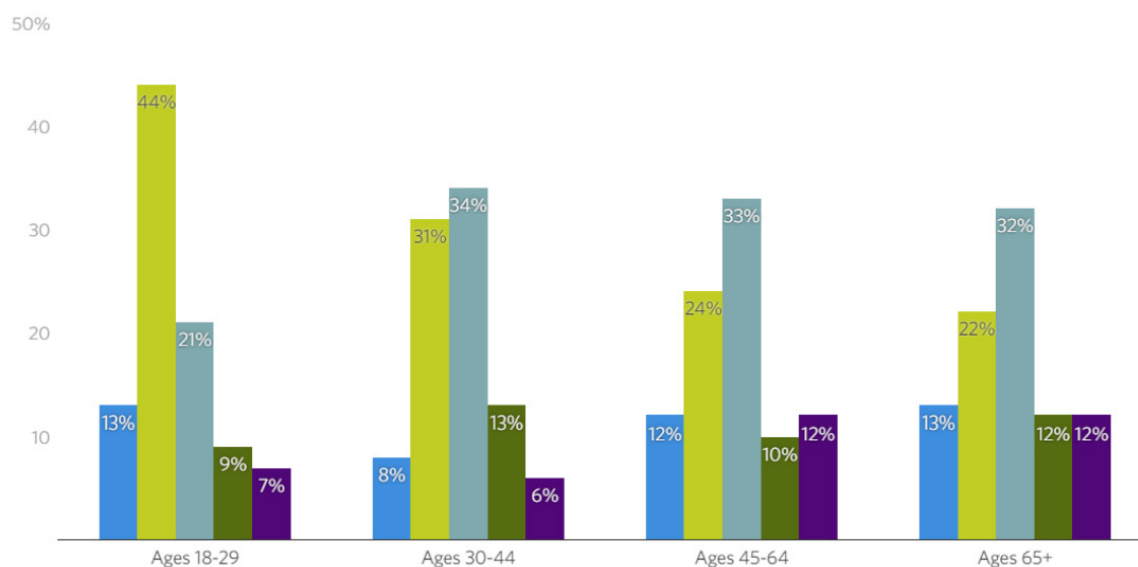
<sup>9</sup> Net votes represent the difference between the votes cast for and against a candidate.

CIRCLE analysis of exit poll data suggests that 18- to 29-year-old voters also differed from other groups on the priority they gave to selected issues, with their top concern being abortion, followed by inflation and crime (see graph below). The 18- to 29-year-old cohort was the only group to select abortion as their number one priority, while older voters were most concerned about inflation (“Youth Voter Turnout and Impact”, 2022, pp. 20-21). The political influence of the younger aged voter would most likely be bolstered by the addition of a 16 to 17-year-old cohort of voters who would be more in line with the 18 to 29-year-old voters’ views that the older generations.

### Young Voters Prioritized Abortion: Older Voters Prioritized Inflation

The percentage of voters, by age group, who chose each issue as the top issue in deciding their vote.

■ Crime ■ Abortion ■ Inflation ■ Gun Policy ■ Immigration



**CIRCLE** Tufts University Tisch College · CIRCLE

Source: CIRCLE analysis of 2022 Edison Research National Election Pool exit poll

## **D.** Growth in youth empowerment and political involvement

During the past two decades youth around the world have promoted organizations and movements reflecting a growing awareness of their need to advocate for issues that are important to them. A few of these efforts are described below.

The National Youth Rights Association (NYRA) was formed by a group of young people in 1998 and has grown since its formation to become the largest national organization fighting for youth rights and against age discrimination. The organization, based in Takoma Park, MD, has chapters in five states with the stated purpose of “defending the freedom, equality, and rights of all young people by challenging age discrimination and prejudice” (National Youth Rights Association, 2023a). Group administrators include adolescents, high school, and college students with different issue priorities. Members participate in many ways to educate communities, promote awareness of important issues and work to change the attitudes of society through community and legal channels. Accomplishments identified on their website (National Youth Rights Association, 2023b) include:

- Addressing discrimination by working with states to overturn laws and with businesses to change discriminatory practices
- Lowering the voting age
- Involvement in civil litigation and submitting research in federal court cases
- Involvement in drafting legislation for youth rights bills and testifying to state and local legislatures

The Gun Violence Prevention Movement, a response to the Parkland school shooting on February 14, 2018, was fueled in large part by youth engagement. CIRCLE issued a report on the movement, indicating that it not only got youth involved in gun violence prevention but also fueled youth involvement in other issues, influenced young voter turnout, and played a role in how young voters evaluate candidates (“The Gun Violence”, 2019). The report included results of a CIRCLE poll of over 2,000 US citizens aged 18- to 24-years old. The poll compared results of a September 2018 pre-election survey to post-election findings to assess the influence of youth activism stemming from a concern about gun violence.

The poll results indicated that 64% of respondents said that they paid some or a lot of attention to news about the shooting, and 43% reported that the shooting influenced their vote choice for Congress and local elections.

The March for Our Lives movement and many other marches and protests around the country were the result of the Parkland shooting. Young people held registration drives increasing the share of young voters (18- to 29-years old) who registered for the 2018 midterm elections nationally from 68.3% in 2016 (a general election) to 69.3% – a noteworthy increase given that interest in midterm voting is usually far lower than that for general elections (“The Gun Violence”, 2019).

As a reaction to the George Floyd and Breonna Taylor killings, 10,000 protests were held country wide, with strong participation by youth concerned about racial injustice. These protests were followed by an increase in youth turnout; the 2020 general election included 50% of the eligible voters aged 18- to 29-year old versus only 39% in 2016 (Hope, 2022).

Section III.B of this report provides background on the youth-driven Votes at 16 movement. Youth currently of non-voting age are starting to see the successes of their involvement in campaigns to lower the voting age. In Greenbelt, MD, efforts were made to lower the voting age to 16 by the Youth Advisory Committee which consists of seven youth aged 18 and younger and two adult non-voting members (Youth Advisory Committee, 2023). The committee successfully placed a nonbinding referendum question about voting at 16 on the November 2017 ballot. The measure received 55% support, up from 23% support in a 2015 survey. The council unanimously voted in favor of the referendum, which led to passage of Vote16 in 2019 (Generation Citizen, 2020).

Although this report focuses on the experiences of US youth, it is important to note that youth political engagement is on the rise elsewhere in the world. A well-known example of this is the organization #FridaysForFuture, founded in 2018 by Greta Thunberg (age 15 at the time) to advocate for climate action. This movement has grown steadily since its founding and now has members in almost all countries, including the US, where 113 events out of 1,211 globally were reported in March of 2022 (Fridays for Future, 2023). The group maintains an interactive database which records the activities taking place in cities and countries around the world.

Other examples of European and Canadian youth calling for action on climate change issues have been described by Wilczek (2019), who notes that several efforts have resulted in concrete policy responses. For example, protests run by the Extinction Rebellion movement, an advocacy group focused on environmental issues, led the British Parliament to declare a climate emergency. The German Green Party made history by coming in second place with 20.5% of the vote. The Green Party enjoyed above average support from younger voters (34% of the 18- to 24-year old vote and 27% of the 25- to 35-year old age group).



## **VI. RESEARCH FINDINGS ON QUESTIONS RAISED ABOUT LOWERING THE VOTING AGE**

Increased advocacy for voting at 16, coupled with the decline in voting age internationally and in pockets within the US, has encouraged social scientists, political scientists, neuroscientists, and others to produce a substantial body of research on voting age issues. This chapter highlights six questions most frequently raised by skeptics of lowering the voting age and includes references to research cited by either the opponents or proponents to support their positions, summarizing the research results available on each issue. The material presented was predominantly obtained from evidence-based research or expert opinion with limited references to opinion pieces not supported by evidence-based research or scholarly legal opinion.

The questions addressed in this chapter include:

- a. Is a 16-year-old competent to vote?
- b. Will voting choices be overly influenced by parents or others?
- c. Will younger voters use lesser quality information sources than older voters?
- d. Will the 16/17-year-old bother to vote?
- e. Is this just a progressive power grab?
- f. What legal issues could arise should efforts to lower the voting the age be pursued?

## **A.** Is a 16-year-old competent to vote?

Many opponents of lowering the voting age argue a 16- or 17-year-old does not possess the maturity to vote (ProCon.org, 2020). These views are similar to personal opinions used to restrict rights to others in the past including women, 18- to 21-year-olds, and non-White racial groups. The concept of maturity is also quite broad and risks being subjected to personal bias or potential stereotyping. Evidence-based studies have focused on competency, developmental science and decision-making capacity in place of referencing maturity. For the purposes of this study, the material which follows will emphasize key findings from evidence-based studies to answer the questions: does the typical 16-year-old possess the competency to vote, and, what have been the quality of the choices made by 16- and 17-year-olds in situations where they already have the vote?

Early neuroscience research from a 1999 study examined the development of the brain at different ages using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). The authors concluded that the brain, particularly the prefrontal cortex, was still developing during the late teen years (Giedd et al., 1999). Seven years later, the Giedd et. al. results were first included in discussions of youth competency to vote by Chan and Clayton (2006) who interpreted the MRI results as further evidence that teens were not competent to vote. They argued that because the prefrontal cortex of the brain helps to address dilemmas, consider trade-offs, and make decisions, young voters would not be competent to vote. Despite the authors' statement that further work was needed to conclusively arrive at that finding, for many years the Chan and Clayton article has been frequently cited by those opposing lowering the voting age. The authors also raised the question of whether age alone should in fact serve as a qualifying condition for competency to vote given there is no oversight as to whether older individuals may not be competent.

Since 2006, the field of developmental neuroscience has greatly expanded and, as a result, a vast array of research currently exists that uses updated methodology and new approaches in neurodevelopment and neurocognitive techniques. Findings conflict with the Chan and Clayton conclusion on competency. In 2009, for example, developmental psychologists tested the cognitive and decision-making abilities of almost

one thousand youth. They reported that “...scores increased between ages 11 and 16 and then leveled off, with no improvement after this age” (Steinberg et al., 2009, p. 592). These results gave the authors greater confidence in the absence of age differences in cognitive capacity after age 16.

The above study approach was repeated in 2019 with over 5,000 age 10- to 30-year-old individuals and confirmed that an adolescent’s cognitive capacity to make deliberate decisions reaches adult levels by age 16 (Icnogle et al., 2019). The authors noted that an individual’s psychosocial maturity for decision making in highly emotionally aroused situations, is reached somewhat later at age 18 or older (Icnogle et al., 2019). Today, given the overall research on the cognitive skills involved in voting, psychologists are in general agreement that 16 and 17-year-olds are as fully capable as any adult to engage in the process needed to vote (Douglas, 2017).

Researchers have also examined how the 16- and 17-year-old’s voter readiness compares to their closest age group – 18- to 23-year-olds. In a 2011 study by professors at Rutgers University, over 6,400 individuals across age spans were surveyed for the qualities associated with voting – civic knowledge, skills, and cognitive ability. The results showed no difference for those from age 16 to 18 versus those aged 18 to 23. In fact, 16-year-old Americans scored higher in areas related to civic knowledge than those in their early twenties. The researchers concluded adolescents in this age range were developmentally ready to vote (Hart and Atkins, 2011).

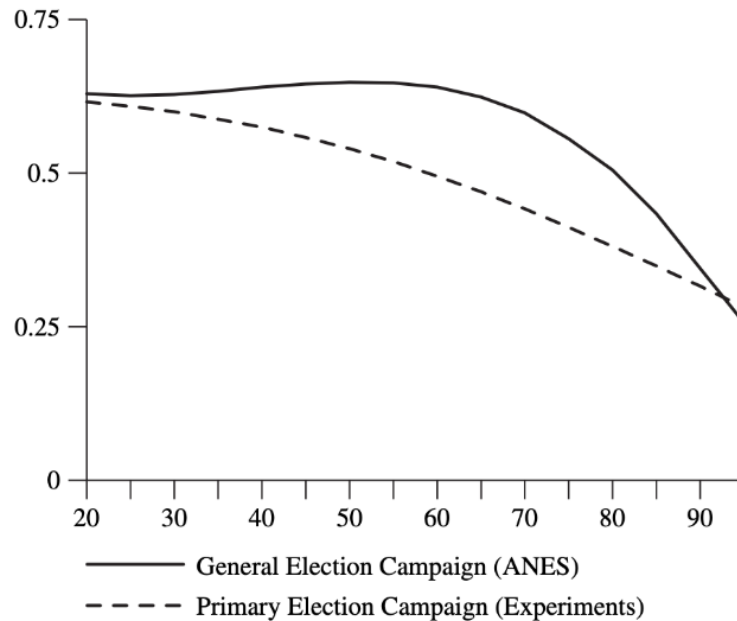
Research involving direct assessment of the development of different cognitive skills has also yielded valuable information on decision-making during the adolescent years. This research examined hot and cold cognition in teens, terms used to define two different sets of skills acquired by the brain. Cold cognition skills are those used to make well-thought-out choices using informed decision-making, non-emotional information processing, and reasoning. Such skills are used in logical reasoning, planning, and approaching a problem such as voting, and have been shown to be solidly established by 15 and do not improve in later years (Steinberg, 2014; Barkin, 2021). Hot cognition entails decision-making while under high emotional or stress including responding to intense peer pressure. Such emotion regulation and impulse control is not fully developed until early to mid-twenties, well after individuals have access to voting. Based on these findings, psychologists are in general agreement that “sixteen-year-olds are as strong, cognitively speaking, as twenty-year-olds, forty-year-olds, or anyone else older than them at processing the information necessary to vote” (Douglas, 2017, p. 69). Studies outside the US on the quality of choices made by the 16- or

17-year-old already voting provide further information on the question of competency. A 2012 study in Austria examined the choices young people made in the 2007 elections preceding the 2009 European Parliament Elections. Researchers oversampled young people under 26 and examined the quality of their vote choice. Quality was determined by whether their decisions accurately reflected their party preferences and whether their choices represented their interests well. Researchers found “no convincing evidence that the voting decisions of voters under 18 are in any way of lesser quality, that is, less congruent, than that of older groups of voters” (Wagner et al., 2012, p. 380).

In Ghent, Belgium, researchers also concluded the younger voter was just as able as an adult voter to cast a vote that was in line with their ideology (Stiers et al., 2020). Findings drew on data from a mock-election involving over 11,000 adolescents grouped by the ages of 15, 16-17, 18-19 and their parents. The authors also postulated that early participation in elections would further increase the vote quality of these voters since it would likely increase a young voters’ interest in politics. Using the Ghent data, other researchers compared age and political maturity, the latter term defined as “the theoretical threshold that adolescents should reach to have similar ‘matured’ political attitudes and behaviors as the general voting population” (Okolikj & Hooghe, 2022, p. 102). Their findings indicated that positional attitudes and ideological views were already formed at age 15, a finding which the authors stated lent support to lowering the voting age to 16.

Social scientists Lau and Redlawsk (2006, 2008) have examined in detail the effects of age on political cognition across all age groups above age 18. This research has shed light on the standard to which the younger voter should be held regarding competency, as compared to the older voter. Their research found that increasing age was associated with less information searching and a less accurate memory of political information. Age also had “minimal effects on the probability of correct voting until the mid-60s” when they saw “very sharp declines thereafter” (Lau and Redlawsk, 2008, p. 168)(See figure). “Correct” was defined as a choice in which the participants’ own political position aligned with objective measures of a given candidate’s political position.

### Age Effects on Probability of a Correct Vote In US Presidential Elections, 1980 - 2004



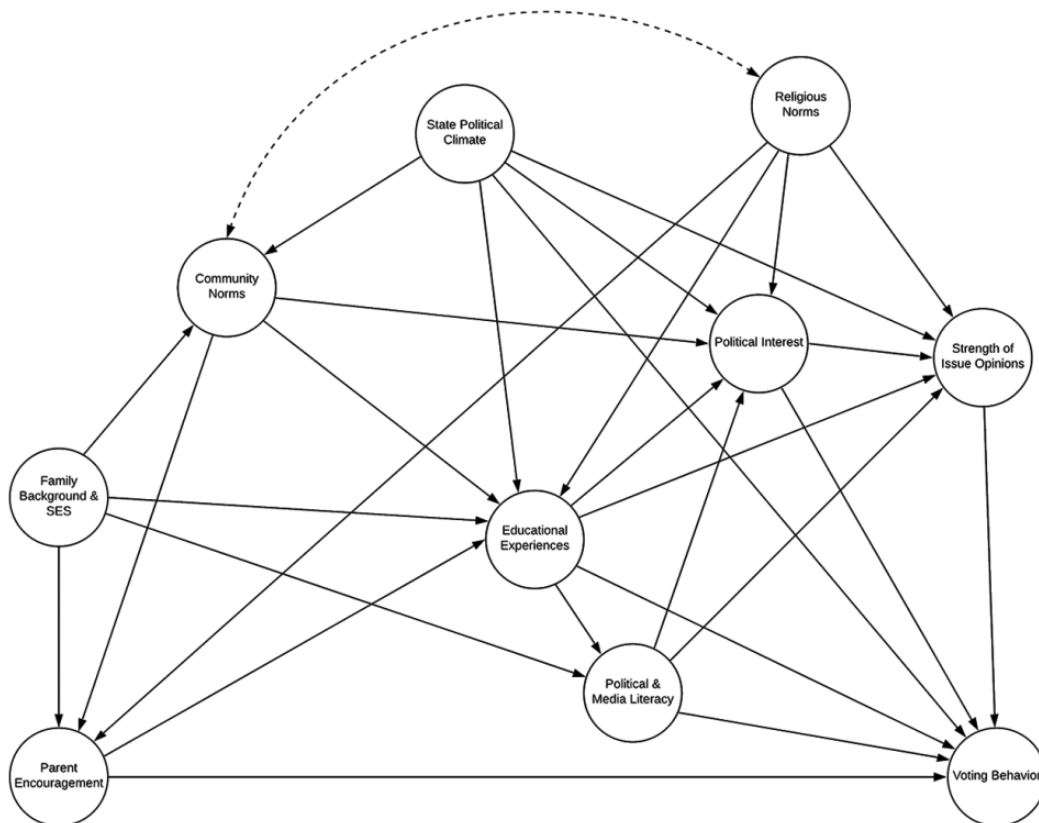
*Note:* General election campaign estimates based on analysis of 1980 through 2004 ANES surveys. Primary election campaign estimates come from experiments conducted by Lau and Redlawsk (2006).

Source: Lau & Redlawsk (2008), p. 183, citing Lau & Redlawsk (2006).

The extensive neurodevelopmental and follow-up research on whether the 16- and 17-year-old is competent to vote indicates the 16-year-old has the cognitive capacity for the decision making required to place a vote.

## **B.** Will voting choices be overly influenced by parents or others?

Political socialization is the process by which young people gain political knowledge, determines their values, and develops their ideology. A common argument by opponents of lowering the voting age is that the inexperienced 16- and 17-year-old living at home will simply be pressured to vote as they are told by their parents (Hancock, 2020). Research reviewed suggests that influences on one's political views, voting choices, and voting frequency are in fact more complex and multidirectional – parents and others influence youth, but youth also influence parents and others – and youth often have opinions that differ from their parents. As shown in the diagram below, parental influence is just one of many that play a role in the political socialization process that affects voting behavior.



Note: SES = socioeconomic status.

Source for diagram: (Seigle-Stechler, 2019, p. 6).

Research on political socialization has shown parental encouragement can positively impact a youth's civic engagement and decision to get out to vote. Analysis of a nationally representative US survey of 3,256 youth 18- to 24-years old showed that those who reported their parents encouraged them to vote had a 67% turnout compared to only 36% for those who did not report encouragement (Seigle-Stechler, 2019). Studies in Scotland of 16- to 17-year-old voters have also shown their families play a positive role by getting them interested in voting (Huebner & Eichhorn, 2020). The 18-year-old is more likely to vote if they are living with guardians who are also civically active (Hernaes, 2019).

A Ghent study using the data from a mock election, engaging over 11,000 adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 and their parents, showed adolescents do in fact resemble the political ideology and attitudes of their parents with family being one of the stronger predictors of future political attitudes. As one might anticipate, an even closer resemblance exists between parents and child's views when politics is a commonly discussed topic in households (Okolikj & Hooghe, 2022).

Additional studies have found the 16- to 17-year-old voter does not simply reproduce the political beliefs of the parent as argued by opponents. A Scottish study, for example, demonstrated that 40% of those younger than 18 had a different view than parents on the vote for Scottish independence (Eichhorn, 2018). In Maryland, researchers examined the impact of influences of parents, teachers, peers, or celebrities on the 16- to 17-year-old voters. Findings showed little evidence to suggest any more influence on this group than the social influences that take place on older adults by families, communities, and historical events (Hart, Atkins, Allred, 2020). Other researchers have concluded that influences on youth specifically should be seen as part of normal experience, not undue and not sufficient to deny them the vote (Oosterhoff et al., 2021). In addition, researchers argue that, given there is no currently available evidence that outside forces such as parents unduly influence a youth's voting choices, the concern is not convincing enough to deny 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote on issues that will impact them (Nelkin, 2020; Oosterhoff et al., 2021).

The impact of reverse socialization – the young influencing the adults within a household – has also been reviewed extensively (Lobet & Cavalcante, 2014). While parents may influence a youth, it is also likely the youth will bring a different though smaller dynamic to the conversations and influence the attitudes of the parent (Okolikj & Hooghe, 2022; Eichhorn & Hübner, 2022). Researchers suggest one positive consequence of young voters aged 16-17 residing at home will be the resulting increase in the knowledge of and the likelihood others in the household will vote (Zaff et al., 2010). When students were exposed to a school intervention that involved politics, for example, the students' discussions with parents increased at home about an ongoing election. Parents then became more focused on the news and increased their political knowledge (McDevitt & Chafee, 2000).



### **C.** Will younger voters use lesser quality information sources than older voters?

Using quality sources to gain the political knowledge to guide voting choices is an important component of decision making for all citizens. With shifts away from traditional news shows and print media, 18% of US adults now use social media as their source for political and election news, a behavior shown to correlate with being less knowledgeable politically and less engaged with the news (Mitchell et al., 2020).

Forty-eight percent of 18- to 29-year-olds reported social media was their primary source for political news (Mitchell et al., 2020). Opponents to lowering the voting age have expressed the belief that youth's higher reliance on social media for information will expose them to biased and faulty material, influencing them to not fully examine all sides of an issue when making voting decisions (Gresham, 2023). Of note, limited studies exist on how older voters may use selected media sources and also risk exposure to bias or misinformation. A US study conducted in New Jersey actually showed the younger age group did more searching for information, more information processing, and had more accurate memories of political information than middle aged and older adults (Lau & Redlawsk, 2008).

Researchers have studied political knowledge and information sources of the younger voter to better understand whether their information sources and media habits have a detrimental impact on the quality of their voting or knowledge base. Research in Austria examined a sample of 805 voters in two different age groups (16- and 17-year-olds and 18- to 31-year-olds) to compare their political knowledge. Findings showed 16- and 17-year-olds presented similar levels of political knowledge as the older voters up to 31 years of age (Wagner et al., 2012). Young people eligible to vote at 16 in Scotland were shown to use a variety of information sources to inform their voting decisions and held nuanced and well-founded views on Scottish independence (Huebner & Eichhorn, 2020). In the US, using a large nationally representative sample of American households,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The sample included a youth group of 4,217 participants aged 14-18 and an adult sample of 2,250 participants.

researchers reported that 16- and 17-year-olds scored equivalent to ages 18 to 21 but behind middle-aged adults when asked questions related to political skill, efficacy, and interest (Hart and Atkins, 2011).

US concerns about the use of various information sources in decision making across all age groups has led educators to acknowledge the need to teach media literacy. Media literacy refers to an individual having critical thinking skills around media, an awareness of how messages may unduly influence them, and an ability to distinguish reliable from unreliable sources. Should the voting age be lowered to 16, media literacy programs as a component of civic education in high school could provide valuable training to improve the information gathering skills of newly enfranchised youth at a time that they will be casting their first vote. Such training could offset the widespread use of unreliable information sources currently taking place across all age groups. See Section VIII of this report, Jolls & Johnsen, 2018; Schulten, 2022; and the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) website for more information on media literacy.

## **D.** Will the 16- or 17-year-old bother to vote?

The US currently trails most developed countries in national election turnout, ranking 31st among the 50 countries studied (Desilver, 2022). Younger age groups in the US have predictably had a lower turnout than older voters. The US Census Bureau reported that for the 2020 election, for example, young adult voters (age 18-29) had the lowest turnout (51.4%) compared to those aged 65 to 74 who had the highest (76%) (Census Bureau, 2021). Despite this low 2020 young voter turnout, data for other midterm and general elections had been showing increasing engagement over time for those 18- to 29-years-old. In 2018, young adult turnout rates exceeded 35 percent in 31 states (including Washington, D.C.) compared to 2014 when not one state had registered a rate that high (Frey, 2019 citing data from Census Bureau, 2019).

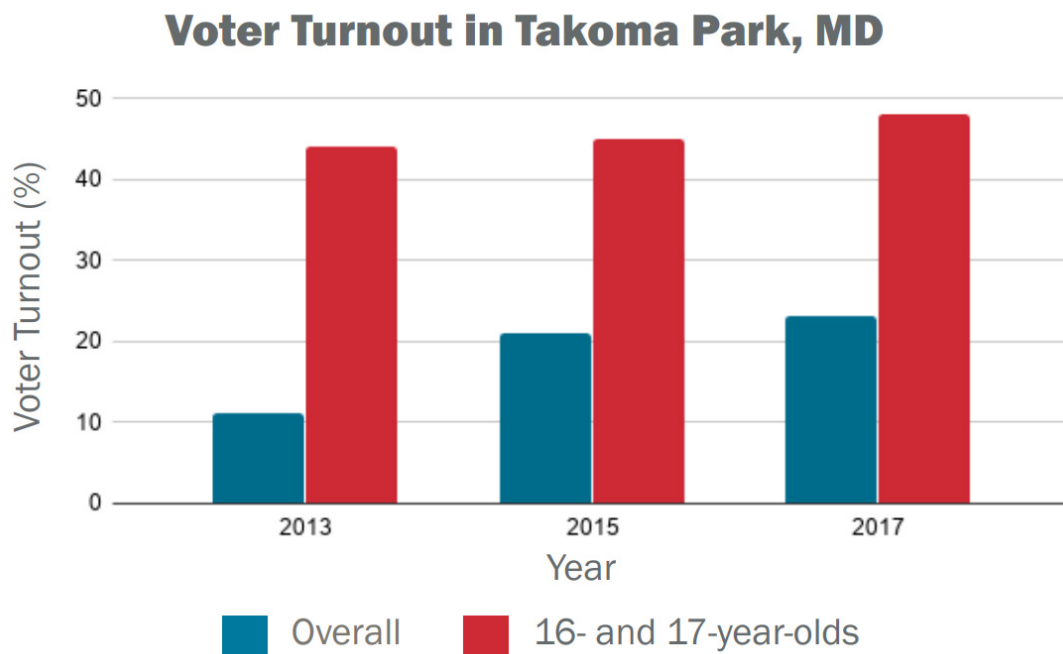
Opponents of lowering the voting age have attributed the low turnout for the 18- to 29-year-old as lack of interest in voting and have used their low turnout as an argument against lowering the voting age further (ProCon.org, 2020; Chan and Clayton, 2006).

On the other hand, proponents of voting at 16 cite multiple barriers faced by the 18-year-old first-time voter that likely contribute to their low turnout – barriers that are not generally experienced by the 16- and 17-year-old. Among the challenges are possible changes of residence or school, military service, employment priorities, logistical challenges associated with moving or changing jobs, and irregular school and work schedules (Wagner et al., 2012; Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014; Hart and Atkins, 2011). Additionally many states have eliminated student ID cards as a valid form of voter ID, creating an additional barrier for young voters. Proponents argue the relative stability of the 16- and 17-year-old home and school environment are positive influences more likely to encourage youth to engage in the political process, find their polling places to vote, and remain more civically engaged in the future (Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014; ProCon.org, 2020).

The limited research on voter turnout for the 16- and 17-year-old largely refutes the opponents' concerns that they will not vote if eligible.

In Chicago's primary in 2014, seventeen-year-olds had a higher turnout

rate than people aged 20-50 (Pearson, 2014). In Takoma Park, Maryland, in 2013, after the voting age was lowered to 16, voters under 18 exceeded the average turnout in both 2013 and 2014 municipal elections with a turnout rate four times higher than voters over 18 years of age (Hart, P., 2013). As shown in the graph below, this high turnout rate continued into 2015 and 2017, providing support for the additional research finding that early voting during the teen years may contribute to the habit of life-long voting (Gerber et al., 2003; Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014; Bronner & Ifkovits, 2019).



Source: Generation Citizen, 2020, p. 6

Outside the US, multiple studies in Austria, Norway, and Germany also confirm that 16- and 17-year-olds turn out to vote when provided the opportunity. The turnout rate was either similar to or higher than the average turnout for both the entire population and the 18- to 21-year-old group (Zeglovits and Aichhlozer, 2014; Huebner & Eichhorn, 2020; Franklin, 2020). As age increased from 16 to 20, turnout decreased somewhat, a finding similar to the drop off in voting for the first time 18-year-old voter (Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014).

## **E.** Is this just a progressive power grab?

Opponents of lowering the voting age have voiced the concern in opinion pieces that efforts to lower the voting age are solely a Democratic political power grab (Battenfield, 2019; Kirk, 2019). As noted earlier, younger voters are more likely to identify as liberal, particularly on social and economic issues including climate change, gun violence, and abortion rights; this offers opponents to voting at 16 some grounds for concern (Schulte, 2020; Eichhorn & Hübner, 2022). Despite the data suggesting that young voters are “leftward leaning,” 38% of 18- to 29-year-olds stated they had not selected a major party and were independents or “something else” (“Youth Voter Turnout and Impact”, 12/2022).

A comprehensive study examining the potential impact of voters 25 and younger in twenty-one Western democracies between 1948 and 2019 reported that the younger voters served as important drivers of changes in electoral outcomes. The young voter often supported the winning party, set electoral trends and, as a result, their views then dominated in subsequent elections (Rekker, 2022). Given this finding, adding a large group of younger, liberal-leaning voters aged 16-17 years could have a significant influence on elections and future policy decisions. The question as to whether a group’s potential political leanings should carry weight when deciding whether to give group members a right to vote is a topic for further discussion.

Research has shown that young voters have not yet developed “strong attachments” to one political party and are less likely to identify with a single party than older voters (Dinas, 2014; Chan and Clayton, 2006; Claggett, 1981; Dassonneville, 2016; Van der Brug & Franklin, 2020; Rekker, 2022). Sixteen and 17-year-olds were found to stay politically consistent in their beliefs across multiple elections (Franklin 2020; Hart, Atkins, Allred, 2020), yet their partisan identity appears to be no more or less stable than that of adults. A community’s influence on one’s partisan identity is less than that of the influence of active adults in a young person’s life, though the influence of adults has been shown to have only a modest impact. It has also been shown that immediate social events such as the George Floyd protests or the pandemic had little effect on partisan identification (Hart, Atkins, Allred, 2020).

Most young people in the US do not have favorable views of national politicians or parties. The majority of young people, 56%, are frustrated with politicians in Washington, D.C. However, this is not the case for their local governments. Young voters feel more positively about their civic engagement and impact at the local level (Alliance for Youth Organizing-Civiqs, 2022).

Proponents of the Vote16 movement deny the movement is politically motivated and argue the effort to include 16- and 17-year-old voters transcends party lines and supports democracy overall. Bringing in the younger population is believed to heighten engagement in the democratic process, strengthen voting as a habit, and motivate bringing civic education and critical thinking skills into the high school classroom to support future well informed voters (“Busting the myths”, no date).

**F.** What legal issues could arise should efforts to lower the voting the age be pursued?

US voting rights are set by our election laws and the state and federal constitutions. At the federal level, decreasing the voting age would require a constitutional amendment with a 2/3 majority in both the House and Senate agreeing to approve sending the amendment to voters. Should such a proposed amendment be successfully advanced in Congress, each state would then consider it, and, if thirty-eight states ratify the amendment, the lower voting age would become part of the Constitution.

The US Constitution contains no legal barriers to prevent local or state jurisdictions from lowering their voting age for their own elections. The means of lowering the voting age at the local level does vary depending on whether voting age provisions exist in state law or the state constitution, as well as whether the state has home rule. Common legal barriers to lowering the voting age for local elections are described in Douglas (2017) along with recommended solutions; they are summarized below:

- State voter qualifications are restrictive for local elections (includes Maine - see section IX for more discussion). Solution: State legislature amends the law or state constitution to allow local governments to set different standards for local elections.
- Municipalities lack local power or home rule over their local elections. Solution: State legislatures amend the law or constitution to allow the change or create an exemption.
- Court challenges take place based on state law. Solution: When able, the state defers to local control in the name of local democracy.
- Practical issues related to running an election with voters only voting for local, not national or state elections. Solution: Explore using voting technology, though this may present a challenge for small towns with minimal budget flexibility.

Some efforts to lower the voting age in Europe were opposed by parliamentarians and others who did not want to have multiple “ages of majority”. The same issue has been raised in the US, however, the US already has multiple ages of majority for participating in what are considered adult behaviors (e.g., driving, smoking, alcohol consumption,

military service, access to credit, full-time employment, emancipation from one's parents – and voting). In most cases, US ages of majority are determined by state legislatures and range from 14 to 18 depending on the issue and whether parents consent is required; the US has few national rules about the age of majority, although having to be 18 years old to vote in federal elections is one of them.

Should states pursue lowering the voting age, opponents have raised a potential problem of exposing youth to greater legal risk. One opposing legal scholar's argument cites the risk of "adultification," a term used should the 16- or 17-year-old be pushed into civic adulthood because they can vote with the resulting loss of their legal minor status. "Lowering the voting age will therefore undermine the protective commitments we make to youth in school, in the justice system, and in the child welfare system" (Silbaugh, 2020, p. 1689). The argument is that if given the adult capacity to vote, similar to when women were given the right, 16- or 17-year-olds may be held legally responsible for other adult decision-making (e.g., criminal behavior) or excluded from currently available services (e.g., child welfare benefits). It has been noted that this argument leaves out the cases where youth are already sentenced to life without parole or sentenced as an adult depending on the crime.

Proponents of lowering the voting age argue that extending the right to vote to 16- and 17-year-olds is consistent with other changes in their legal status such as being able to drive, working without restrictions, paying taxes, and being able to live independently if officially emancipated from parents. Also argued is the importance of allowing this age group to have a say in local affairs and the laws that will be shaping their future (ProCon.org, 2020; Douglas, 2017).



## **VII. PREDICTING FUTURE IMPACTS OF LOWERING THE VOTING AGE**

Predicting the future is always a challenge; this is particularly true for predicting the likely impacts of expanding the vote to 16- to 17-year-olds given the economic, social, and political diversity across towns, cities, and states in the US. Empirical research on the impacts of lowering the voting age remains scarce and is mostly associated with the European experience. This creates some challenges as it is difficult to extrapolate outcomes documented in one locality to other localities. Even when there is US research to draw on, the challenge remains of deciding whether outcomes for a slightly older age group (e.g., 18- to 24- or 18 to 29-year-olds) can be expected to apply to the 16- or 17-year-old voter.

Despite the limited number of studies and the red-flags raised by interpreting the results from one study as an indicator of future results, the evidence on three types of outcomes – civic engagement, voting turnout, and policy impacts – has been considered by a number of researchers and are summarized below.

## **A.** Impact on future civic engagement

Civic engagement involves a wide range of activities including volunteering, activism, voting, and participating in campaigning; it is a critical component of a well-functioning democracy.

A New York University Brennan Center for Justice report examined how young adults over 18 participate in politics and their community and concluded that early engagement has long term benefits for both young people themselves and their communities (Hope, 2022). In an extensive study on civic engagement and the transition to adulthood, researchers cite how the development of attitudes and habits around civic participation often begin in adolescence and young adulthood (Flanagan et al., 2009).

Research in the US on the long-term impact of voting at 16- or 17-years-old is limited given that cities having adopted the change are few and adoption has been recent. Outside the US, however, research has been done examining the impact as this age group has moved into adulthood. In thirteen countries with a voting age below 18, researchers found no negative effects on young people's future engagement or civic attitudes following the lowering of the voting age. Instead, in many instances the opposite was true (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021). Researchers found that voters who had first voted at 16 showed more positive democratic attitudes, democratic satisfaction, and political trust (Petrarca, 2020; Aichholzer & Kritzing, 2020). Young adults who first voted at 16-17 in Scotland were found over time to become more engaged in politics and showed greater levels of confidence in their own ability to understand politics and make decisions (Huebner & Eichhorn, 2020). Proponents of the Vote16 movement have also suggested that the resulting greater outreach and attention from organizations and political parties directed to the younger voting bloc would likely further stimulate youth to become civically engaged ("4 reasons to lower," no date).

The above studies showing positive effects of a lower voting age on civic engagement provide some grounds for anticipating generalized growth in civic engagement among newly enfranchised 16- to 17-year-old voters as more communities lower the voting age. The heightened civic engagement would likely continue as the young voters grow older.

## **B.** Impact on future voting turnout

Numerous studies have shown the habit of voting is developed early on and is less likely to become a habit if first time voting is delayed (Berg 2013; Zeglovits and Aichholzer 2014; Bronner and Ifkovits 2019; Gerber et al., 2003). The current cohort of first-time US voters (generally in the 18- to 24-year-old age group), do not have a stellar record for turnout when compared to older adults (Section VI. D.). This raises the question of whether the current behavior of 18- to 24-year-olds should serve as a guide for predicting turnout for 16- to 17-year-olds. Empirical research summarized below in fact suggests the 18- to 24-year-old behavior is not a good guide for predicting 16- to 17-year-old turnout overtime.

Much discussion has taken place on the multiple challenges that keep the 18-year-old first time voters from the polls. The situation of the 18-year-old has been contrasted to the relatively more stable home and school settings of 16- to 17-year-olds. Comparisons suggest that greater stability favors higher turnout for 16- to 17-year-olds (Section VI. D). Researchers have found that eligibility to vote at 16 was in fact linked to a continued voting participation and a reduction in the drop-off in voting that had taken place for young adults aged 20-35 (Franklin, 2020; Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021; Eichhorn & Hübner, 2022). In Austria, researchers showed a sustained, measured impact on voting; they reported an average of a 5% increase in overall turnout documented for the 20 years following the lowering of the voting age (Aichholzer and Kritzing, 2020). Findings in Takoma Park, Maryland, as shown earlier in Section VI. D., also provide support for greater voter turnout over time for the 16- to 17-year-old first-time voter.

Research findings suggest that earlier voting eligibility at the age of 16- to 17-year-old, even if at first only in local elections, will contribute to the development of voting as a lifelong habit; it serves as an important catalyst to vote in future local, state, and national elections (Hope, 2022). Proponents also argue the above positive effect of early voting will produce more habitual, long-term voters and, as a result, push the government to better align with citizens' preferences ("4 reasons to lower", no date). Another positive impact on voting was shown in several studies that involved 16- to 17-year-olds in mock elections; even though the elections were not real, the conversations and engagement the youth brought home caused their parents to be more likely to vote (Daahlgard, 2018).

These multiple empirical results for situations where voting age has been lowered to 16 suggest that casting a first vote at 16 can have life-long positive impacts on turnout behavior and also influence others in the home to vote, thereby increasing voter turnout overall.

## **C.** Impact on future policy decisions

When considering the possibility of expanding the electorate at the local, state, or federal level, it is important to consider the potential impact on policy. As discussed in Section V, even young people who are not yet enfranchised are very active in addressing their present and future concerns and have used methods other than voting to make their voices heard and to encourage their political representatives to address these issues. Today's youth express a belief that they are dealing with far more complex and serious issues at a younger age than older generations faced. Their concerns are broad, including issues already mentioned such as climate change, gun violence, civil rights and abortion. In addition, many youth are dealing with anxiety and depression, bullying, drug addiction, alcohol consumption, social pressure, poverty, and teen pregnancy (Horowitz & Graf, 2019).

As described in Section VI.F, the potential for the younger voter to set electoral trends and have their views dominate in subsequent elections has led researchers to describe them as important future drivers of electoral outcomes and policy making (Rekker, 2022). Because many young voters do not favor a particular party, they not only have an effect on party trends (favoring, as they do, parties that have high momentum and parties that are newly formed), but they also tend to become trend setters, often influencing choices made by the older population (Rekker, 2022). Researchers anticipate that younger voters could be expected to have an influence on the broad range of issues of greatest concern to them, including the choice of political candidates, abortion, climate change, voting rights, crime, social justice, and economic justice (Anderson, 2020).

One example of the potential for a direct impact on policy specifically attributable to 16- and 17-year-old voters occurred in the Scotland 2014 Referendum Vote for Independence (Douglas, 2020). Although the Referendum did not pass, young voters, unlike older voters, were very favorable toward Independence, with 62.5% in favor and 37.5% against the issue. Based upon this experience, advocates for the lower voting age are hopeful that young voters will influence the outcome of future elections. One study estimated that 73% of 16- and 17-year-old voters indicated that their interest in politics had increased significantly due to this issue. In the aftermath of the Referendum vote, for example, there was a notable

increase in the number of youth who joined political parties (Huebner, 2021). In Norway, in both the 2011 and the 2015 elections, there was a notable increase in candidates under the age of 25 who were elected to office when 16-year-old-voters participated in the trials (Bergh, 2016.)

In the US, as indicated in Section V, there is less information available on the 16- to 17-year-old's impact given the limited experience to date. The next younger group, the 18- to 29-year-old cohort, however, had a significant impact on candidate selection and issues in the 2022 U.S. midterm election. The impact of 16- and 17-year-old voters, if brought into the electorate, would likely have a similar effect, and contribute even greater influence on policy outcomes reflecting their priorities in future elections. Extrapolating from findings for the age group 18-29, should an influx of 16- and 17-year-old voters take place, this new group is less likely to enter with the fixed party affiliation characteristic of voters aged 30 and above. If this is true, Rekker (2022) states that the newly enfranchised are more likely to remain open to diverse perspectives and to process a range of information and opinions to arrive at their policy positions ("Young people's ambivalent", 2018).

In August 2021, the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy Civic Innovation Center convened a nationwide group of researchers, community leaders, young voters, and nonprofit advocacy organizations to explore the potential impacts of lowering the voting age to 16 in Maryland and across the United States. The effort is in partnership with the Vote16 Research Network (Vote16 Research Network, ND). Thus far, the group has focused efforts on Maryland, which is the only state with multiple jurisdictions that allow 16-year-olds to vote in local municipal elections. These localities are all in the University of Maryland's backyard and are potentially rich sources of learning about the impact of youth voting on civic engagement and policy. This type of research appears to be a step in the right direction for informing US voters about the influence this group of new voters may have, particularly at the local level (Hale & Campbell, 2021).

As the US population undergoes shifting age demographics, the effect of expanding the electorate to include 16- to 17-year-olds would result in a more even balance across the different age groups and their varied priorities. As newly eligible voters, greater outreach and attention from various organizations and political parties would likely be given to address their interests and concerns. If begun at the local level, young voters would bring their particular perspective and have direct input into their communities, for example, voting in school budgets, local elections and referendums. Early access to voting, particularly if combined with civic education and media literacy training, could create a more educated and motivated future habitual voter likely to influence a range of policies by using their vote or becoming civically engaged. At the state or national level, should further voting expansion take place, the influence of this age group would be even more impactful on the policies they feel are of most concern to them and their future.

## **VIII. IMPACT OF CIVIC EDUCATION ON THE YOUNGER VOTER**

Could lowering the voting age strengthen the incentives to improve civics education? Schools play an essential role in preparing young voters for the responsibilities associated with participation in a well-informed electorate. Effective civics education yields increased participation in elections (Kern, 2022). It provides information about the democratic process and learning experiences that enable participation in the process, describes the history of our form of government and how it continues to function today, and promotes the role of citizens in the democratic process through civic engagement and voting. Civics education is critical in providing the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary for students to become informed and engaged citizens (Shapiro & Brown, 2016). Considering an expansion of voting rights to 16-year-olds suggests an exploration of the place of civics education in schools (Andes et al., 2020).



## **A.** Best Practices: Theory and Practice

This map provides an overview of the state of high school civics education and focuses on state requirements for civics courses and civic exams, placing each state into one of four categories:

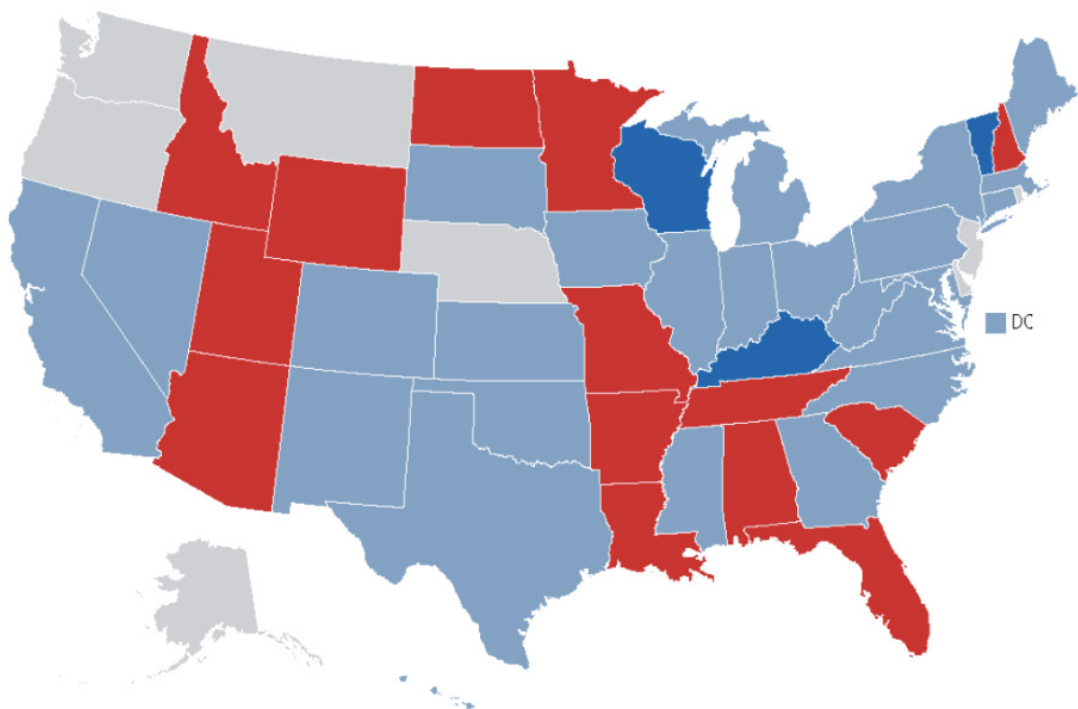
State requires a civics course (light blue)

State requires a civics exam (dark blue)

State requires both course and exam (red)

State has no civics requirements (gray)

## State-by-State Look at Civics Learning in High School



Source: Shapiro & Brown, 2016.

There are a variety of approaches to educating students in civics. Common themes in accepted best practices mentioned in studies by Jeffrey and Sargrad (2019) and Kiesa et al. (2022a) include:

- State standards in social studies that require civics courses and content from pre-K to 12th grade
- Service learning for informed action and participation
- Encouragement of civic engagement through individual issue-based projects
- Classroom discussions on current and controversial issues
- Media/digital literacy education (see sidebar below)

### **What is media/digital literacy?**

Overall, there is a lack of public understanding about what it means to be “media literate.” Media literacy education is not simply addressing “fake news” or teaching skills in using information and communication technologies. Certainly, those areas are a part of media literacy, but media literacy education comprises a broader critical field of study and cross-disciplinary pedagogy anchored in cultivating critical thinking and reflective habits of mind about the messages we receive and create.

Source: Culver & Redmond (2019).

To determine how well schools in states across the US were implementing these or similar practices, the Center for American Progress published a report on the state of civics education in America; the authors analyzed civics education requirements for all 50 states and the District of Columbia (Jeffrey & Sargrad, 2019; see Table 1, pg. 4 for details).

Six measures were used to assess the degree to which states adhere to certain curricular and assessment practices identified as factors that help to educate and engage young voters.

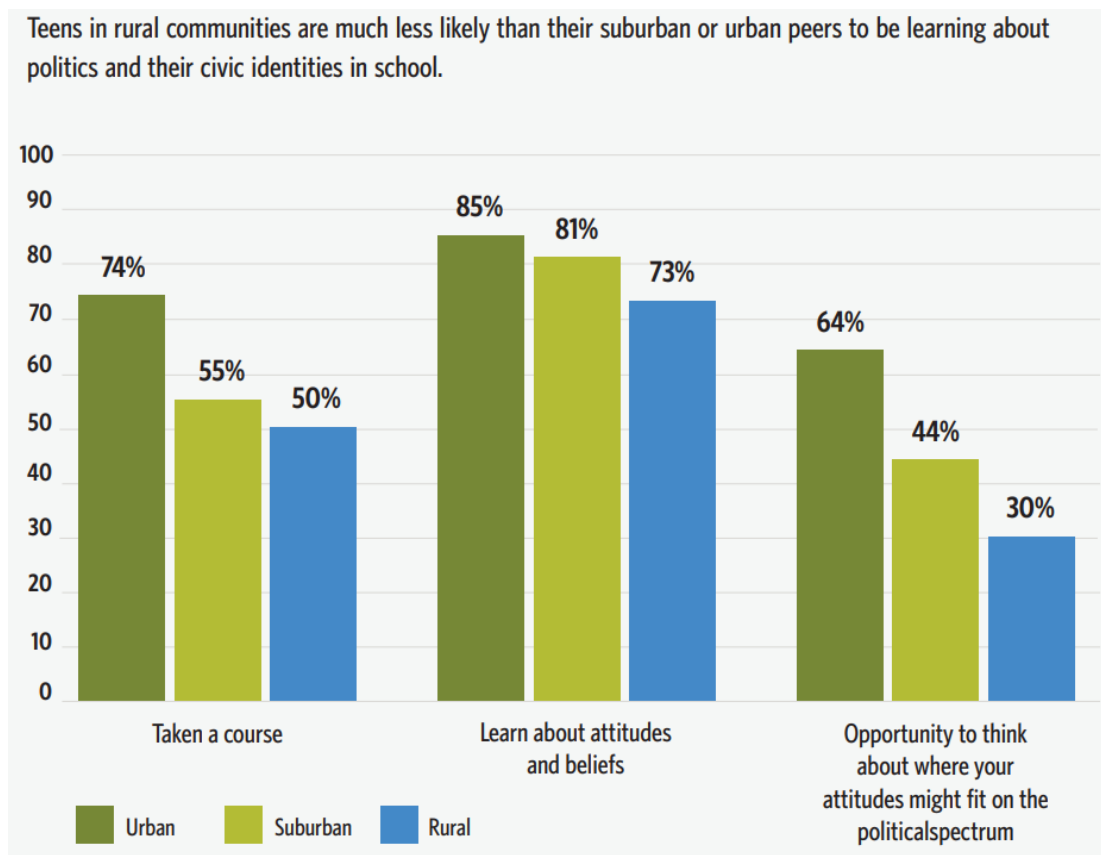
- Civics or US government courses offered
- Minimum number of credits required for graduation
- Mean score on the Advanced Placement exam for US government and politics
- Community service requirement
- Civics exam
- Five key elements of curriculum offered, including:
  - 1) an explanation or comparison of democracy
  - 2) the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights
  - 3) public participation
  - 4) information on state and local voting rules
  - 5) media literacy and the role and influence of media

Overall results estimated the level at which states committed curricular resources and attention to civic education. At the time of this study (2018), Maine did not require a stand-alone civics course, had no minimum number of credits, community service, or final civics exam required for graduation. On a scale of 1-5, the mean score on the Advanced Placement exam for US government and politics was 2.79, with national scores ranging from 1.94 in New Mexico to 3.30 in Vermont. Maine met 3 out of 5 curricular standards: (a) explanation/comparison of democracy, (b) Constitution and Bill of Rights, and (c) public participation. Maine did not meet standards in the areas of (a) information on state and local voting rules, and (b) media literacy and the role and influence of media (Jeffrey & Sargrad, 2019).

Since 1998, overall test scores in the US on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics exam have shown that less than 25 percent of students are proficient in the subject. Additionally, gaps persist between the scores of Black and Hispanic students and those of their White peers as well as by English language learner, income, and disability status (Jeffrey & Sargrad, 2019). This trend has been shown across exams and recent studies are highlighting the systemic factors behind these disparities. It is now believed that exams are an imperfect indicator of “proficiency” due to these systemic factors, as well as the reasons that some students might perform poorly on an exam despite understanding the material: lack of literacy, lack of English proficiency, dyslexia/anxiety/ other cognitive and behavioral difficulties with test taking, time constraints or situational distractions, poor sleep the night before, etc. (Rosales & Walker, 2021).

There are also significant gaps in the opportunities for civic learning between teens living in urban and rural areas. Urban teens, for example, are 20% more likely to have taken a course in US Government of a higher quality that incorporates best practices, while 60% of rural teens feel as if they live in a “Civic Desert” as illustrated in the following graph (Kiesa et al., 2022a, p. 37). Civic deserts are “communities without opportunities for civic engagement” and are increasingly common in the US (Atwell et al., 2017, p. 4).

### Civic Learning Opportunities Among Urban, Suburban, and Rural Teens



Source: Kiesa et al., 2022a, p. 37.

In Takoma Park, MD, the first city to initiate voting at 16, students are exposed to civics education from pre-K to 12th grade, with civics courses and project requirements mandated for graduation. Maryland is the first state to incorporate service-learning experiences into graduation requirements and all public-school students in Maryland must take at least one year of civics or government courses (Jeffrey & Sargrad, 2019).

As a part of Maine's Learning Results, curricular standards for civics and government are included as one of four strands in the Social Studies Standards (Maine Department of Education, 2019). While teachers may attempt to cover all standards, the degree to which they are addressed is inconsistent. In addition, state-wide assessments in grades 3-8, and 10 focus on math and literacy, with science assessed in grades 5, 8, and 11. Students are assessed in other content areas such as social studies utilizing district or school measures, but these assessments are not given the attention and funding of content areas measured in state-wide tests. The national average of funds dedicated to the teaching of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) is \$50.00 per student compared to \$.05 per student for social studies (Kern, 2022). This emphasis on funding content areas measured in state-wide tests often leads to less support for service and experiential education, both of which are key opportunities for civic learning.

Implementing best practices in civics education in a divisive political environment has often strained schools, school boards, teachers, and students who are at the forefront of heated debate regarding free speech and decisions about what students are taught. Many teachers are concerned about appearing to be partisan. Some state legislatures are proposing legislation that may negatively impact the opportunity for high-quality civic education by limiting topics that can be discussed in public schools (Kiesa et al., 2022b).

However, efforts by teachers reported by CIRCLE in 2020 suggest that teaching about democracy in a nonpartisan manner is possible by focusing on how our system of voting operates rather than who to vote for. Additional strategies mentioned in Kiesa et al. (2022b) include:

- Focusing on relevant issues and examples that connect to students' lives
- Developing skills, including, but not limited to, determining the credibility of online information, assessing candidates and their stance on important issues, and knowing how to get involved in elections through opportunities like serving as a poll worker or volunteering to register others to vote
- Pairing individual reflection with group discussion
- Creating an environment for students to explore their political identities
- Including opportunities for practice (i.e. statewide and school based mock elections and debates)

Examples of several states and municipalities that have worked to improve high school civic education are described by Douglas (2020, p. 1475); they include:

- Massachusetts mandates that students complete an action civics project that forces them to grapple with the policy issues of the day.
- Illinois Democracy Schools offer a more holistic approach, infusing the entire curriculum with a “Lived Civics” framework to “center race, identity, and the lived experiences of young people as core elements of civic education efforts.”
- In San Francisco, efforts to lower the voting age for city elections led to the acknowledgment that a lower voting age needed to be coupled with improving civics education. The school board unanimously supported the voting age proposition and pledged to improve civics instruction in the city.

There is general agreement that civics education is essential to the formation of an informed electorate, yet not all agree as to how to provide instruction. As noted in commonly accepted best practices, modern curriculum includes opportunities for students to become actively involved in local and national government issues and discussions. Some opponents of this approach suggest that such activities and ideas promote progressive rather than conservative causes. In addition, opponents, including some teachers, worry that basic civics knowledge should be emphasized and will suffer from time devoted to “action civics” (Hess & Rice, 2020)

## **B.** Current practices in other countries

Other countries that have lowered the voting age to 16 employ a variety of approaches in order to promote the process of students developing political preferences and attitudes about electoral participation. Curricular expectations may focus on knowledge or on developing social and behavioral skills.

Estonia is an example of a knowledge-oriented country in which cognitive competencies rather than engagement in social and political life is emphasized. Political neutrality and keeping debates out of schools were key principles for school staff and the National Youth Council. (Toots & Idnurm, 2020, p. 183). Although there was an early push to include more social skills, teachers' priority was teaching critical thinking. Lowering the voting age had no direct effect on priorities (Toots & Idnurm, 2020, p.177).

In Scotland, the voting age was lowered to 16 for all elections in 2015. At this time, schools and teachers played an important role, by emphasizing political engagement. Teachers were provided with guidance packages furnished by the government and created by university researchers on how to instruct using impartial facts. Another significant factor was the Scottish cultural norm of trust for teachers to "facilitate an open debate while not indoctrinating students as they actively discuss the political issues of the day" (Douglas, 2020, p. 1456).

In Austria, when the voting age was lowered to 16 in 2015, changes to school curricula were put in place, with mandatory civic and citizenship education starting in 6th grade and instructional support for teachers provided by a central service facility within the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, as well as academic non-profits. The Austrian Parliament provided workshops for 8- to 14-year-olds on electoral participation, how democracy works, and literacy media (Aichholzer & Kritzinger, 2020, p. 83).

**C.** What role might (high school) civic education play if voting is lowered to 16 in the US?

In both Takoma Park and Hyattsville MD, the lower voting age has provided an opportunity for teachers to establish greater relevance in classroom discussion, but it has not yet had a noticeable effect on school or district social studies policy. It should be noted that students from these two communities attend schools that are made up of students from other local communities that have yet to lower the voting age.

Given the state of civic education in the US, greater efforts by all stakeholders in academia and greater public awareness would be needed to incorporate identified best practices into what are already overcrowded curricular demands. States, for example, with rigorous curricular requirements could provide suggestions on how to move forward. Multiple nonprofits such as Generation Citizen, Southern Poverty Law Center, Constitutional Rights Foundation, and the Center for Civic Education also offer support to teachers with the goal of encouraging long-term civic engagement (Shapiro & Brown, 2016).



### Civic education measures in 2019

Civic education requirements by state

● Standard Met ○ Standard Not Met

State	Requires stand-alone civics/U.S. Government course?	Minimum number of credits*	Advanced Placement U.S. government and politics mean score (2019)**	Meets full curriculum requirements? (5 standards)***	Requires community services?	Requires civics exam to graduate?
Alabama	Y	0.5	2.25	● ● ● ● ●	N	Y
Alaska	N	0	2.66	N/A	N	N
Arizona	Y	0.5	2.88	● ○ ● ● ●	N	Y
Arkansas	Y	0.5	3.04	● ● ● ● ●	Provides credit	Y
California	Y	0.5	2.64	● ● ● ● ●	N	N
Colorado	Y	0.5	2.76	● ● ● ● ●	N	N
Connecticut	Y	0.5	2.99	● ● ● ● ●	Provides credit	N
Delaware	N	0	2.75	N/A	Provides credit	N
District of Columbia	Y	1	2.39	● ● ● ● ●	Y	N
Florida	Y	0.5	2.58	● ● ● ○ ●	Provides credit	N****
Georgia	Y	0.5	2.86	● ● ● ● ●	Provides credit	N
Hawaii	Y	1.5	2.62	● ● ● ● ●	Provides credit	N
Idaho	Y	1	2.96	● ● ● ● ○	N	Y
Illinois	Y	0.5	2.83	○ ● ● ○ ●	Provides credit	N
Indiana	Y	0.5	2.69	● ● ● ● ●	Provides credit	Y
Iowa	Y	0.5	2.82	● ● ● ○ ●	N	N
Kansas	Y	1	2.97	● ● ● ● ●	N	N
Kentucky	N	0	2.72	● ● ● ● ●	N	Y
Louisiana	Y	1	2.25	● ● ● ● ●	N	Y
Maine	N	0	2.79	● ● ● ○ ○	N	N
Maryland	Y	1	3.00	● ● ● ● ●	Y	Y
Massachusetts	N	0	3.03	N/A	N	N
Michigan	Y	0.5	2.85	● ● ● ● ●	N	N
Minnesota	Y	0.5	3.01	● ● ● ● ●	Provides credit	Y
Mississippi	Y	0.5	1.96	● ● ● ● ●	N	N
Missouri	Y	0.5	2.73	● ● ○ ○ ○	Provides credit	Y

\* The number of credits determines the length of the course, with 0.5 credits equaling one semester.

\*\* This column includes the mean score of every student in the state who took the Advanced Placement U.S. government and politics test in 2019.

\*\*\* "Full curriculum" includes course materials and/or standards that address: 1) "Explanation/Comparison of Democracy"; 2) "Constitution & Bill of Rights"; 3) "Public Participation"; 4) information on state and local voting rules; and 5) media literacy and the role and influence of media. Sarah Shapiro and Catherine Brown, "The State of Civics Education" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2018), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/02/21/446857/state-civics-education/>.

\*\*\*\*Correction, December 19, 2019: This figure has been updated to clarify that Florida does not have a civics exam requirement in high school. Sources: Authors' calculations are based on data collected from state departments of education, the Education Commission of the States, Achieve, and the College Board. Data are on file with the authors.



## Voting Age Study | Lowering the Voting Age to 16

TABLE 1

### Civic education measures in 2019

Civic education requirements by state

● Standard Met ○ Standard Not Met

State	Requires stand-alone civics/U.S. Government course?	Minimum number of credits*	Advanced Placement U.S. government and politics mean score (2019)**	Meets full curriculum requirements? (5 standards)***	Requires community services?	Requires civics exam to graduate?
Montana	N	0	2.85	N/A	N	N
Nebraska	N	0	2.51	N/A	N	N
Nevada	Y	1	2.59	● ● ● ○ ●	Provides credit	Y
New Hampshire	Y	0.5	3.11	● ● ● ● ○	Provides credit	Y
New Jersey	N	0	3.16	N/A	Provides credit	N
New Mexico	Y	0.5	1.94	● ● ● ● ●	Provides credit	N
New York	Y	0.5	2.82	○ ● ● ● ●	N	N
North Carolina	Y	1	2.78	● ● ● ● ●	N	N
North Dakota	Y	0.5	2.65	● ● ● ● ●	Provides credit	Y
Ohio	Y	0.5	2.88	○ ● ● ○ ○	Provides credit	Y
Oklahoma	Y	0.5	2.53	● ● ● ● ●	Provides credit	N
Oregon	N	0	2.83	N/A	Provides credit	N
Pennsylvania	Y	0.5	2.91	● ● ● ● ●	N	N
Rhode Island	N	0	2.65	N/A	N	N
South Carolina	Y	0.5	2.99	● ● ● ○ ●	N	Y
South Dakota	Y	0.5	3.27	● ● ● ● ○	Provides credit	N
Tennessee	Y	0.5	2.62	● ● ● ● ●	Provides credit	Y
Texas	Y	0.5	2.71	● ● ● ● ●	Provides credit	N
Utah	Y	0.5	3.11	● ● ● ● ○	N	Y
Vermont	N	0	3.30	N/A	N	N
Virginia	Y	1	3.02	● ● ● ● ●	N	N
Washington	Y	0.5	2.99	● ● ● ● ○	Provides credit	N
West Virginia	Y	1	2.45	● ● ● ● ●	Provides credit	N
Wisconsin	Y	0.5	3.01	● ● ● ● ●	N	Y
Wyoming	Y	0.5	2.51	● ● ● ● ○	N	Y

\* The number of credits determines the length of the course, with 0.5 credits equaling one semester.

\*\* This column includes the mean score of every student in the state who took the Advanced Placement U.S. government and politics test in 2019.

\*\*\* "Full curriculum" includes course materials and/or standards that address: 1) "Explanation/Comparison of Democracy"; 2) "Constitution & Bill of Rights"; 3) "Public Participation"; 4) information on state and local voting rules; and 5) media literacy and the role and influence of media. Sarah Shapiro and Catherine Brown, "The State of Civics Education" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2018), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/02/21/446857/state-civics-education/>.

\*\*\*\*Correction, December 19, 2019: This figure has been updated to clarify that Florida does not have a civics exam requirement in high school.

Sources: Authors' calculations are based on data collected from state departments of education, the Education Commission of the States, Achieve, and the College Board. Data are on file with the authors.



## **IX. PATHS TO IMPLEMENTATION IN MAINE**

“

Maine’s state Constitution phrases the voting age as a grant, but the state election code presents it as a restriction. Further, while Maine’s Constitution provides for municipal home rule, the state election code specifically states that “The qualifications for voting in a municipal election conducted under this Title are governed solely by [the state election code’s voter qualification statute, which is phrased as a restriction]” (Title 30-A § 2501). Therefore, in order for municipalities to lower their voting ages in Maine, the state election code must be changed to phrase the voter qualification provision as a grant. To eliminate ambiguity, the statute previously mentioned (§ 2501) could also be eliminated or changed to specifically state that the qualifications for voting in municipal elections are not governed by state laws. Statewide or city-specific enabling legislation may also be an option.” (Generation Citizen, 2020, p.29)

The quote on the previous page describes the two paths that exist for Maine to expand suffrage to 16-year-olds:

- A change in the state Election Code (Title 21-A Section 111) or the Home Rule Act (Title 30-A Section 2501) to lower or permit municipalities to lower the voting age in municipal elections
- A constitutional amendment to lower the voting age in state elections

The two pieces of failed legislation introduced during the 130th Legislature and described in Section III of this report illustrate each of these paths.

- [LD 1051](#) — An Act To Promote Civic Engagement and Voter Participation for Young People by Lowering the Voting Age for Municipal Elections to 16 Years of Age – was proposed by Representative Morales and concerned only municipal elections.
- [LD 706](#) — An Act To Lower the Voting Age to 16 Years of Age – was proposed by Representative O’Neil and represented the first step in the process of approving a state constitutional amendment.

The first method can lead to lowering the voting age in municipal elections one municipality at a time. This is what has been done in seven cities across Maryland and California. While this approach has been successful in Maryland and California, neither of these states needed to enact permissive state laws in order to allow municipalities to lower their voting age. These laws were already in place and supported by similar precedent (Generation Citizen, 2020). So while both are great examples of this pathway neither are the exact templates Maine would need to follow. Lowering the voting age in municipal elections is often an easier and more incremental approach and builds grassroots support for lowering the voting age through one-on-one conversations and community meetings. Though as seen in California, this approach can also face administrative barriers. This approach requires city clerks to develop a secondary voter file for 16- and 17-year-olds, which has to be managed separately.

Currently, Maine already maintains a separate voter file for 16-year-olds at the state level, because they are eligible to preregister to vote. However, this file is only a fraction of 16- and 17-year-olds in the state. This system is not designed to provide what the local city clerks would need.

As mentioned in Section III, a key component of lowering the voting age for municipal elections is being a home rule state. In some states, known as home rule states, the state’s constitution grants municipalities and/or counties the ability to pass laws to govern themselves as they see fit (so long as they obey the state and federal laws and constitutions). In other states, only limited authority has been granted to local governments by

the passage of statutes in the state legislature. In these states, a city or county must obtain permission from the state legislature if it wishes to pass a law or ordinance or change their municipal charter which is not specifically permitted under existing state legislation. In states without home rule, or with limited home rule, lowering the voting age to 16 has not passed for any type of election (state or municipal.)

While Maine is a home rule state and has been considered such since 1969 (University of Maine School of Law, Garbrecht Law Library, 2023), state laws can and do preempt municipal action in certain areas. Such is the case with Maine's state election code, which would need to be changed to allow for municipalities to lower their voting age (Generation Citizen, 2020). Although there is some debate about this, the need to change the code to permit a lower municipal voting age was alluded to in the testimony for LD 1051 from the Maine Municipal Association and the Maine Town and City Clerks' Association (see Section III). The Maine Municipal Association stated that:

...because Maine's election laws present the age of 18 as a restriction, and not a grant in Title 30-A § 2501, the law would need to be explicit that municipal elections are not governed by state law to circumvent the Constitutional age restriction.

If a municipality takes action to lower its voting age, this action could be challenged in court – and the state court may interpret the voting age provision (in the state constitution) as meaning that the right to vote is reserved exclusively to those over 18. (Maine Legislature, 4/12/21d)

The second method, a constitutional amendment, requires a two-thirds supporting vote from both bodies of the Legislature, and then the amendment must be approved by a simple majority of the people as a ballot referendum in the next general election (Maine Government, 11/2021, Legislative History Collection). This method is a much lengthier and a more difficult process than the statutory electoral code approach, but it changes the voting age at the state level and spreads out the administrative burden of developing a new system. Making this change through a constitutional amendment would automatically initiate a change to the election code applicable to municipal elections.

Some would argue a constitutional amendment is required for either path. This is based on an interpretation of the Maine State Constitution that implies the voting age is a restriction rather than a grant and this restriction applies to both state and municipal elections. Typically in Maine neither political party controls two-thirds of the legislature. To the extent that legislators vote along party lines, a constitutional amendment therefore requires a bipartisan approach, which often proves elusive. It is a more difficult process that has previously held LWVME or LWVUS back from action.

## **X. SUMMARY**

The movement to lower the voting age to 16 in the United States has gained increasing attention, having already been established in over a dozen other countries (Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Bosnia, Croatia, Ecuador, Hungary, and Scotland among others). In the US, voting at 16 is currently enacted in municipal elections for five Maryland towns and approved but not yet implemented for two California municipalities.

Although surveys show large numbers of Americans do not support lowering the voting age, youth involvement in US politics has increased substantially, and a number of organizations have been created to advocate for issues important to them. Vote16USA, organized by the non-profit Generation Citizen, is the predominant voice supporting a lower voting age in the United States, particularly for municipal elections.

The aim of this report is to provide LWVME members with background information on the question of whether LWVME should support, oppose, or remain neutral on future legislation proposed to lower the voting age to 16 for either municipal or state elections. The impetus for the study was the proposal of two bills, LD 706 and LD 1051, which advocated for lowering the voting age to 16 in state and municipal elections, respectively. Neither passed. Because LWVME does not currently have a position statement concerning voting age, and the hearings for these two bills suggested that the topic will come up again, LWVME decided to undertake a consensus study process to develop a position statement on the issue.

The research uncovered many solid empirical studies predominantly supporting the pro side of the argument and significantly fewer studies providing evidence on why support should not be given to the change. The study committee has limited the inclusion of personal opinion statements, largely available on the opponents' side, that were not supported by research findings. The lack of research to support the prominent con arguments does not mean that all of these arguments have been

disproven, but rather that there is a continued need for research on issues raised that have mixed results in the studies reviewed.

A methodological challenge for the study team was having to rely on studies that do not directly respond to the issue of voting in the US by 16- and 17-year-olds. The majority of research on the 16- and 17-year-old voter was conducted in other democratic countries that have had the lower voting age for many years. There is an extensive body of US research on youth aged 18- to 24-years old or 18- to 29-years old that is summarized in the report, but very little on 16- and 17-year-olds. Consequently, it is left to the reader to decide if US 16 and 17-year-olds will exhibit the same voting behavior as older youth in the US or 16 and 17-year olds in other countries. This may present a challenge for groups trying to come to consensus about pros and cons of LWVME supporting Vote16.

**A few of the key findings of the report are summarized below.**

- **General competency to vote:** Multiple, solid research findings across varied disciplines have refuted the concern that the 16- and 17-year-old is not competent enough to cast a vote in their best interest.
- **Political cognition:** Multiple international studies conducted on 16- and 17-year-old voters found that they are as likely to cast a “quality” ballot, one that aligns with their ideology or political position, as older voters. Furthermore, researchers warn against rigid expectations about political cognition for youth given that other age groups are not required to demonstrate competence to vote.
- **Civic Education & Knowledge:** 16- and 17-year-olds were more likely to score higher on tests of civic knowledge than individuals in their early 20s. A strong civic education in high school has been linked to better informed and habitual voters. Should the voting age be lowered to high school age students, improving the experience in high school to aid students in their media literacy, decision-making skills, civic engagement, and how to go vote in their communities will serve to strengthen their civic engagement and create habitual voters.



- **Media Literacy:** Significant changes have taken place in the US as to where adults obtain their news and political information with sources shifting from print media to online sources, including social media. Results of studies on how well-informed youth voters are and where they get their information lean in a favorable direction but remain mixed. Improvements in high school civic education have been proposed as a means of further improving media literacy.
- **Parental influence:** The concern that 16- and 17-year-olds will simply vote as told by their parents has not been confirmed. The 16- and 17-year-old may share some of the same political attitudes as their parents, which is consistent with the political socialization of any individual.
- **Voter turnout:** Both international and national research suggest that 16- and 17-year-old voters are highly motivated, with turnout rates generally comparable to or better than those of slightly older (18- to 29-year-old) voters. When provided support and a strong civics education, 16- and 17-year-old youth do turn out to vote, and as a result, continue to vote in subsequent elections at rates higher than those who first voted at an older age.
- **Partisan leanings of youth:** More youth lean towards liberal beliefs than conservative ones, though party allegiance does not take place until well into the twenties. The political priorities of youth may differ from those of the older more conservative voter: for example, climate change and civil rights, and issues that will directly impact them in the future. Should this group be given the vote, they are likely to have significant influence on election outcomes and future policy decisions and also stimulate organizations and political groups to reach out to and include them in decision making.

Although it is difficult to predict the future, research results suggest that lowering the voting age is likely to have positive impacts on civic engagement, voter turnout, and young people's trust in democracy. These impacts will be greatest if civics education across the nation is strengthened as it is critically important for teaching young adults how to participate in the political process and for developing the requisite media literacy to become informed voters.

Enfranchisement of 16- to 17-year-olds is also likely to change the political narrative. As young voters join the ranks of the constituency, the policy priorities of politicians may have to shift towards the concerns of new young voters (climate change, civil rights, gun violence, etc.). Many of these predicted impacts have been demonstrated internationally where voting at a lower age is already an established practice.

In closing, the study team reminds members that a consensus study process is a unique and defining feature of the League of Women Voters, requiring openness, curiosity, and patience to study an issue and then work as a group to find agreement when responding to the consensus questions. The study committee hopes that this report provides adequate background material on the arguments for and against lowering the voting age for members of local units to come to a consensus on the questions in the accompanying Consensus Question Guide. Remember that the consensus is not a vote on each question, but rather the "overall sense of the group and a judgment about whether member understanding and agreement have been achieved" (LWVME 2018).

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## **APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW SUMMARIES & RESOURCES**

Thank you to the following individuals that made time to share their experiences and knowledge with our study team: Chuck Corra, Zo Pancoast, Kurt Daims, Michael Hanmer, Donna Victoria, Kate Stewart, Brandon Klugman, Sam Noverly, Adrianna Zhang, and Julia Rottenburg.

### **Culver City, CA**

The campaign to lower the voting age in Culver City started as a high school club in 2018. According to Julia Rottenburg, a high school junior and the Communications Manager for Vote16 Culver City, these young people were inspired to begin their campaign because they believe that the responsibilities that they already have (e.g., driving, jobs, paying taxes, legal emancipation, teens being criminally charged as adults) should come with the right to vote.

The campaign, organizing, and planning is still run by the same high school club of 32 young people led by a team of six students that organize the other 26 for campaigning, door knocking, and public awareness events. This group started by building connections with their local city council and gaining a spot on the agenda to discuss their measure. In 2018 the scope was only for municipal elections, but in 2022 it was widened to also include the school board races.

By partnering with a mentor, City Councilor Kent, the group wrote the ballot language and submitted their measure to be voted on in the fall of 2022. They launched a huge door to door campaign effort where the high school student organizers knocked on doors everyday after school.



The primary barriers that they faced were lack of funding, lack of public knowledge, and a well funded opposition through the local developers group. While teachers supported their effort, and the Culver City Democratic Club took up their cause, this campaign was completely developed, designed, and delivered by high school students.

### **Takoma Park, MD**

The study team interviewed Donna Victoria, former Takoma Park City Councilor, and Kate Stewart, Mayor of Takoma Park. Both of these elected officials were in office during the initial implementation of lowering the city's voting age to 16.

The city of Takoma Park is a densely populated city that covers half a mile. When the charter amendment to lower the voting age passed, every citizen casting their ballot had to do so at city hall. This has since been changed with four additional locations opening. Takoma Park has also granted the right to vote to felons and non-citizens. Records show that this voting district has an absence of conservative voters and a high proportion of liberals.

The vote to lower the voting age was brought to the ballot during an off year election cycle when an estimated 2,000 voters participated. The vote during this election cycle was 85% White, despite the population of the town being evenly split between people of Color and White families, and the overall residency of the city being closer to 17,000.

Lowering the voting age did not begin as a political issue, but rather arose from a group of progressive young people who wanted the right to vote. Mayor Kate Stewart helped to organize a local Youth Council in Takoma Park who led much of the organizing and outreach for the campaign. These young people have continued to be active with the city council and advocate for initiatives that directly impact their lives (e.g., lighting at bus stops, public library funding, etc.).

Councilor Victoria was opposed to lowering the voting age and still has reservations about the unintended consequences this may produce. Since their town does not have its own school district, students attend school where some of their peers cannot vote in municipal elections. This creates a challenge for teachers. There has been additional concern about the cost of this measure, but since 2013 many concerns have been addressed and Takoma Park has served as a research hub for academics who are studying the impacts of lowering the voting age.

Despite the above challenges, Takoma Park has served as a model for neighboring cities with four other Maryland towns lowering their voting age in recent years. Takoma Park has seen a consistently high rate of 16- and 17-year-olds voting in municipal elections (as shown in research described in the report). The young voters of Takoma Park are active in voter forums and have shown a strong investment in the political system.

Mayor Kate Stewart shared the below powerpoint as an additional resource:

[Expanding Access to Voting: Encouraging 16 year olds to vote](#)

### **San Francisco, CA**

The lowering of the voting age effort started in 2016 and was driven by the San Francisco Youth Commission (SFYC). The Commission is made of 16- to 18-years-old. To form the SFYC, each district supervisor appoints one person from a pool of applicants and the mayor then appoints five additional applicants. The SFYC is a chartered body that exists to advise the Board of Supervisors & Mayor on issues pertaining to youth.

According to Adrianna Zhang, a prior SFYC member, the campaign to lower the voting age to 16 for all San Francisco municipal elections began as a ballot measure in 2016. During this initial campaign the SFYC pulled together a steering committee of 20 stakeholders. They establish a separation between this campaign and the chartered body to give the campaign greater flexibility. This initial ballot measure lost by 4% of the vote. In 2022, the team brought back the measure to lower the voting age to 16. After campaigning to build public awareness, the measure failed to pass by 1% of the vote. The SFYC plans to run this campaign again in 2024.

These young organizers felt that the most consistent arguments against lowering the voting age came from two general points of view:

- 16- and 17-year-olds lack the political knowledge to vote
- Waiting till 18 isn't "too far off"

SFYC partnered with Generation Citizen in order to network with other teams of young people who are working on this issue. They received advice from young organizers in Hawaii, Colorado, and other towns/cities across California.

This summer the campaign is undertaking a survey to learn how many constituents are against lowering the voting age versus how many felt uninformed about the topic as part of their voter education efforts ahead of the 2024 election.

### **Brattleboro, VT**

The issue of lowering the voting age was brought to the attention of Common Sense, a Brattleboro based nonpartisan nonprofit, and their Director Kirt Daims, in 2012 by a group of high school students who were organizing around climate change. This group of students were looking for solutions and actions that teenagers could take to protect their futures. From surveys and group discussion, the topic of extending the voting age to 16 was identified as a priority.

The campaign to lower the voting age in Brattleboro began in 2014 with a small team of grassroots organizers. In 2015, after months of community organizing and conversations, the team approached their select board about voting to approve a measure that would allow 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in municipal elections. This first attempt did not include school board elections and failed to pass with a 7-3 vote against.

In 2019, with greater public support, a vote was held by the selectboard on a proposal to change the town charter to allow 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in both municipal and school board elections. This measure passed with a 9-4 vote in favor. Due to Vermont law, this town charter amendment then had to be approved by the state legislature. It passed this hurdle but was vetoed by the Governor. There is hope for this campaign to continue in 2023.

Link to Brattleboro, VT, [Proposed Legislation from 2022](#) that was vetoed.

### **Vote16 USA/Generation Citizen**

Founded by Generation Citizen, a non-profit organization that works broadly on youth civic engagement, Vote16 USA began in 2015. Vote16 USA was inspired by the growing number of movements across the United States and Scotland's Independence Referendum, which extended suffrage to 16- and 17- years olds.

According to Brandon Klugman, prior staff member and Vote16 national organizer, when this campaign started in the US, folks had not considered the issue and their gut reactions were negative with concerns about maturity, inconsistency, and legal implications. As they worked with campaigns the general public's opinion began to change through exposure and meeting the young organizers who were working for enfranchisement. Successful campaigns saw strong, paid leadership partnering with political champions. Frequently, a goal of these campaigns was to inspire civic education reform.

Chuck Corra, Associate Director of Coalitions & Policy Research, shared the following resources with the study team: [Lowering Voting Age Presentation](#), [Vote 16 Case Study](#)

### **Vote16 Research Network**

Based out of the University of Maryland, this community-led collaborative brings together researchers from across the country who study the impact of lowering the voting age. This research network was created through the work of Sam Novey and Michael Hanmer.

“The Network includes youth advocates, local government officials, educators, and scholars. Together, we’re building a stronger understanding of civic engagement through the innovation of 16- and 17-year old voting. Our work includes the first impact analysis of lowering the voting age in the United States.” (<https://www.vote16research.org/>)

Begun in 2021, Vote16 originally brought together over 45 members from interdisciplinary backgrounds: local government, academia, youth advocacy, education, nonprofit, and civic engagement. Interest in the work was sparked by the opportunity to study the 5 towns in Maryland and 2 in California that have lowered their voting ages.

The League’s Study Committee joined the Vote 16 Research Network to ensure they were staying up-to-date on the latest research and conversations around lowering the voting age.

Sam Novey, Community Scholar at the University of Maryland Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement, shared the following literature review with the study team: [Vote 16 Literature Review](#).

### **Additional Outreach**

A concerted effort was made by our study committee to contact both proponents and opponents of different bills. Similar to the literature review, the study team found a lack of organized opposition to lowering the voting age and individuals or groups interested in speaking in opposition. The following contacts did not respond to a request for an interview:

- Vermont’s Governor Phil Scott
- Maryland’s Mt. Rainier city council members
- California’s John Avalos of San Francisco

## APPENDIX B – LIST OF COUNTRIES ADDRESSING VOTING AT 16

COUNTRY	VOTING AGE/YEAR	ELECTION DETAILS
Argentina	16/2012	All
Austria	16/2008	All
Bosnia	16 if employed/18 if not	
Brazil	16/1988	Mandatory for ages 18-69; optional for ages 16-17 and 70+
Croatia	16 if employed/18 if not	
Cuba	16/Constitution	
East Timor	17	All
Ecuador	16	Mandatory for ages 18-64; optional for ages 16-17 and 65+
Estonia	16/2016	Local (18 all other)
Germany	16/1996 to present (ongoing)	By state (18 for national)
European Union – EU Parliament	16	For Belgium, Germany, Malta, Austria and Greece

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COUNTRY	VOTING AGE/YEAR	ELECTION DETAILS
Guernsey	16	All
Hungary	16 if married/18 if not	
Indonesia	17 and all married persons	
Isle of Man	16/2006	All
Jersey	16/2007	All
Malta	16/2015 for local council	Lowered to age 16 for national elections in 2018
Nicaragua	16/2013	All
Norway	18	Pilot program for 20 municipalities age 16 in 2011 and 2015
Scotland	16/2015	Scottish Parliament and local; age 18 for UK elections
Serbia	16 if employed/18 if not	
Sudan	17	All
Switzerland – Canton of Glarus	16/2007	Local and regional
Wales	16/2021	Welsh assembly and local

Source: Derived from Generation Citizen (2020, Appendix A, p. 21), *Young Voices at the Ballot Box* – White Paper and modified.

## **APPENDIX C – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON KEY INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

Since there has been more than a decade of opportunities to evaluate the impact of legislation to lower the voting age in Europe, there are a variety of country-level studies on the topic. Issues most covered include voter turnout by age and political interest and involvement of young voters. We summarize the key findings in detail on these issues below for several of the countries.

### **[ I ] VOTER TURNOUT:**

#### **Austria<sup>11</sup>**

Aichholzer and Kritzing (2020) compared results on voter turnout for 16- to 21-year-olds from analyses of 5 different Austrian elections that took place from 2005 to 2015. Data for each of the 5 analyses were from a random selection of polling stations in Vienna covering 3 regional elections and 1 parliamentary election, and 1 local election in the city of Krems. Sample size for each election ranged from 1741 voters in the Krems local election to 2989 for the 2010 Vienna regional election. The key finding was that 16- to 21-year-olds consistently had higher turnout than 18- to 20-year-olds. The differences were statistically significant for all elections but the 2005 Vienna Regional election (just 2.3% difference). Turnout differences between 16-17 and 18-20 year olds for the other four elections ranged from 4.2% to 10%.

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<sup>11</sup> Official statistical election data in Austria are collected and distributed by AUTNES – Austrian National Election Study.

**Sampling scheme for electoral lists and sample sizes by election**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Election</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Total polling stations</i>	<i>Sampled polling stations</i>	<i>Age range</i>	<i>Sampled voters (n)</i>
2005	Regional	Vienna	1818	138	16–18	2841
2010	Regional	Vienna	1765	32	16–21	2989
2012	Local	Krems	41	census	16–21	1741
2013	Parliamentary	Vienna	1660	48	16–21	2429
2015	Regional	Vienna	1545	49	16–21	2926

*Note* 2005 data from Kozeluh et al. (2005), 2010/2012 data from Zeglovits and Aichholzer (2014), own calculations for 2013/2015

Source: Aichholzer & Kritzinger, 2020, p. 87

**Sample sizes and differences in turnout by age groups and election**

<i>Year</i>	<i>16–17 y.</i>	<i>18–20 y.</i>	<i>Diff. (%)</i>	<i>(adj.) <math>\chi^2</math>-test</i>
2005	59.70%	57.4% <sup>a</sup>	2.30	$p = .233$
<i>n</i>	1985	871		
2010	64.20%	56.30%	7.90	$p = .004$
<i>n</i>	810	1562		
2012	56.30%	46.30%	10.00	$p = .001$
<i>n</i>	432	912		
2013	68.00%	63.00%	5.00	$p = .020$
<i>n</i>	640	1284		
2015	70.20%	66.00%	4.20	$p = .050$
<i>n</i>	805	1551		

*Note* Data sampled from electoral lists; 2005 data from Kozeluh et al. (2005), 2010/2012 data from Zeglovits and Aichholzer (2014), own calculations for 2013/2015. <sup>a</sup>Only 18-year olds

Source: Aichholzer & Kritzinger, 2020, p. 87.

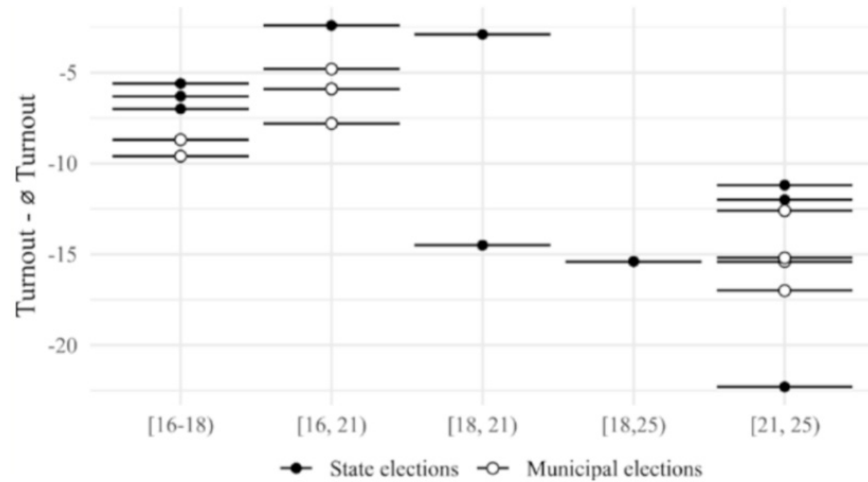


In addition to the comparisons reported above among 16- to 21-year-olds, Zeglovits and Aichholzer (2014) compared 16- to 17-year-old turnout to the average turnout of 67.6% for all voters in the Vienna Regional 2010 election and the 62.6% turnout for the Krems 2012 local elections. They reported that turnout was 2% lower than average for 16 year olds and 5% lower for 17 year olds in Vienna. In Krems, 17 year old turnout was 5% lower than average and 16 year old's turnout 7% lower. In both the Vienna and Krems data sets, turnout for 18- to 25-year-olds fell off, ranging from 7% to 28% below average turnouts. The general conclusion from these analyses is that 16- to 17-year-old voters have better turnout than those in the 18- to 25-year-old age cohorts, but not better than the average turnout for all voters.

### **Germany**

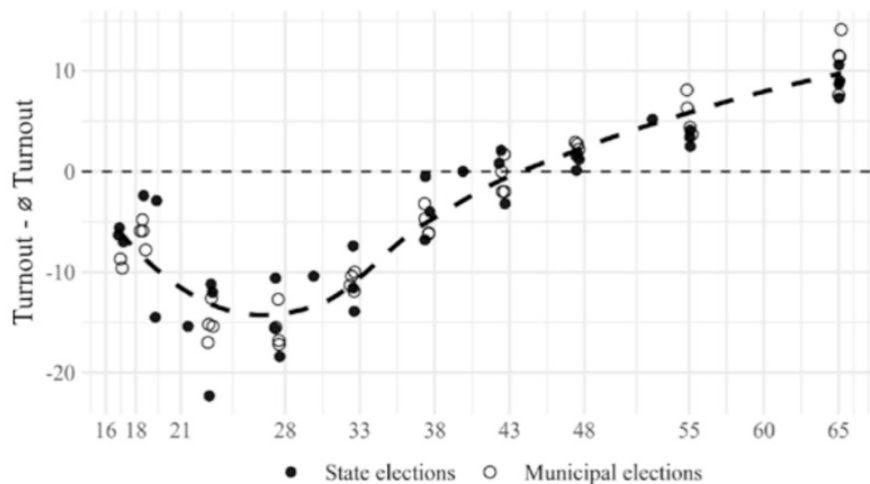
Leininger and Faas (2020) used official representative electoral statistics based on a random sample of voting precincts where voters were asked to provide gender and age group information. The authors compared turnout of 16- to 25-year-olds for 10 of the 48 municipal and state elections that had included 16 year old voters by 2019. Elections covered by the analysis took place from 1999 through 2015 and included results from four state elections and 6 municipal elections. Generalizable comparisons of 16- to 17-year-olds with other ages was not possible because the age categories differed across elections (e.g., 16-17-year-olds were a separate category in some cases but included in the 16 -to 20-year-old age group in others). The authors found, nevertheless, a higher turnout for citizens younger than 21 than for citizens between 21 and 33. In general, however, turnout rates for all 16- to 25-year-olds age groups was lower than the average turnout for each election by anywhere from 5 to 25%. Where data for age groups 16-to 18 was separated from statistics for ages 18 and up, turnout for 16-to 18-year-olds was approximately 7% and 9% below overall average for state elections and municipal elections, respectively.

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Graph shows turnout among age groups below 25 relative to overall (Ø) turnout in an election-based on the representative electoral statistics for ten elections: the 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014 municipal elections in North Rhine-Westphalia, the 1999 and 2009 municipal elections in Saxony-Anhalt, the 2011 and 2015 state elections in Bremen, the 2014 state election in Brandenburg and the 2015 state election in Hamburg.

Source: Leininger & Faas, 2020, p. 155.



Graph shows turnout among all age groups. Dots are centered on the midpoint of an age group. Based on representative electoral statistics from ten elections: see notes of previous figure for list of elections.

Source: Leininger & Faas, 2020, p. 155

## **Norway**

Odegard, Bergh and Saglie (2020) have analyzed voter turnout in Norway using data for the 20 municipalities that participated in the 2011 and 2015 vote-16 trials. 58% of the eligible 16- and 17-year-olds voted in 2011 and 57% in 2015. This compares to an average turnout rate for all 2015 local elections of 64%. Although 16- and 17-year-old turnout was lower in 2015 than the overall average, it exceeded that of citizens aged 19-40 and those over 85. The favorable results of these trials were mentioned by a Parliamentarian in 2022 when the parliament was again considering a bill to lower the voting age: “All of these trial projects gave a positive result. We saw a high turnout in this group, they voted ‘normally’ and more young people were elected to local government.” As previously mentioned, the 2022 effort failed to pass. ([TheLocal, 6-2-22](#))

## **Scotland**

After Scotland lowered the voting age to 16 for the Independence Referendum in 2014, nearly 110,000 16- and 17-year-olds registered to vote (89% of those eligible). The 16- and 17-year-old turnout was 75% (vs. 84.6% overall) based on post-election surveys of a representative sample of voters that was performed by the Election Commission. The 16- and 17-year-old turnout was 21% greater than 18- to- 24-year-old voters (Douglas, 2020). Responses to post-referendum election surveys indicate that expectations for future turnout by young voters are high: 97% indicated that they expected to vote in future elections, and 73% responded that their interest in participation has increased (Johnston & Oberoi, 2020).

2016 was the first year that 16- and 17-year-olds could vote in the Scottish national election. The Electoral Commission issued a report entitled “Report on the administration of the 5 May 2016 Scottish Parliament election”. The assessment on voter turnout and youth participation was summarized by the Electoral Commissioner, John McCormick, as follows:

More than 2.2 million votes were cast on 5 May 2016 – the highest number ever recorded at a general election to the Scottish Parliament. ...

This was, of course, the first national election at which 16- and 17-year-olds were entitled to vote. Approximately 80,000 of them registered to vote at the election and this age group had high levels of awareness and knowledge about the registration process.

Turnout of 16- and 17-year-olds was reported by those surveyed to be 78%, with the observation that younger people tended to be “less likely to say they had voted than older people”, as stated by the Electoral Commissioner.

In both the 2014 referendum election (Douglas, 2020) and the 2016 national election, expectations by proponents of vote 16 were that future elections will continue to have higher overall turnout as a result of expanding the electorate to young voters. In fact, turnout for the 2017 local council election, the first time 16-and 17-year olds could vote in this stand-alone election, yielded the highest overall turnout since 1977 (Johnston& Uberoi, 2020)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Three council elections that were held concurrently with Scottish Parliament elections had higher overall turnouts.

## **[ II ] POLITICAL INTEREST AND INVOLVEMENT:**

### **Germany**

Following the 2017 state election in the northernmost state of Germany, Leininger & Faas (2020) conducted a survey on levels of political interest and knowledge for a sample of 3,000 young people, ages 15 to 18. This election and geographic location were selected because the voting age had been lowered to 16 at that time. Interest was measured by frequency of discussions about politics with family, other pupils or friends and knowledge was measured with questions about political parties and their programs. The results indicated that there was very little difference in political interest across all four ages. When the respondents were divided into two groups — those eligible to vote in 2017 vs those not yet eligible — the eligible group had better interest scores than those not eligible. Responses to questions about political knowledge indicated that 16-18 year olds scored 10% higher than 15 year olds on political knowledge. The authors stated that this difference could possibly be explained by the fact that 15-year-olds were not yet eligible to participate in the elections.

### **Maltese**

Borg and Azzopardi (2021) undertook a small survey of Maltese 16- and 17-year-olds following the lowering of the voting age to 16 in Malta. Their research objectives included an assessment of the levels of political interest and the level of recognition and acceptance of voting responsibility by the newest members of the electorate. Due to funding and time constraints, the sample size was small (143 individuals) and not representative of Malta's 16- and 17-year-old population. Respondents offered self-assessments of their political interest and acceptance of voting responsibility, which the authors described as moderate and high, respectively. Given the shortcomings of the methodology, more research is needed to confirm these impressions.

## **Scotland**

Young people, newly enfranchised in Scotland to vote in the 2014 Independence Referendum, became active in the campaign in favor of separation from the UK. After the referendum, there was a noticeable increase in youth joining political parties. (Huebner, 2021)

The Votes at 16 campaign has collected statistical and survey data relevant to youth political interest in Scotland. According to Eichhorn (2018) the political interest of 16- and 17-year-old voters was on a par with that of the electorate prior to the 2014 election. In addition, they were “significantly more politically involved than 18- to 24-year-olds”. A similar survey was conducted to establish active political engagement in events such as demonstrations and petitions. The results indicate that 57% of Scottish youth had been involved in at least one such event compared to 40% involvement among youth in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Eichhorn 2018).

## **Austria**

In Austria, political interest among adolescents was evaluated using data from the 2013 national elections (Aichholzer & Kritzing, 2020). Three studies were performed in 2013: Zeglovits and Zandonella (2013) reported that there was an increase in political interest among adolescents after the voting age was lowered. Glantschnigg et al. (2013) performed a study to determine whether there was a difference in political interest between first time voters aged 16 and 17 versus those aged 18 – 21. They found that there was no significant difference in political interest among all first time voters between the ages of 16 and 21. Additionally, other research showed that political interest was positively affected by increased political activities in school.