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# Top 10 Reasons to Lower the Voting Age

By Alex Koroknay-Palicz and Keith Mandell

“No right is more precious in a free country than that of having a choice in the election of those who make the laws under which...we must live. Other rights, even the most basic, are illusory if the right to vote is undermined.”<sup>1</sup>

Any big idea to benefit young people must look beyond individual programs or new services that can be provided; a big idea needs to look at real game-changing ideas that make structural changes to the world of youth. Lowering the voting age is one of these game-changing ideas – and an important one whose time has come. Nations such as Brazil, Austria, and Germany have already lowered their voting ages either nationally or locally. The idea has gained significant ground in the United Kingdom and elsewhere around the world. It is time that we here in the United States take a serious look at youth suffrage.

The nature of our democratic system is adversarial. Lawmakers pander to those with the loudest voices, deepest pockets, and most votes. Older Americans, who possess all three, exert tremendous influence on public policy. Young people, in contrast, are unorganized, poor, and legally can't even vote, so it is no wonder that their interests are not well represented. The federal government spends seven times more on the elderly than on young people. Many adults work tirelessly to speak for youth, advocate for youth, and represent youth, but unless young people are able to speak, advocate, and represent themselves – especially at the ballot box – nothing will change.

Youth suffrage is the biggest game changer for young people. Only a few organizations, such as the National Youth Rights Association, have taken on this issue and have seriously advocated for change. Other advocates, both large and small, need to join in the fight to lower the voting age. These are but a few of the most important reasons why.

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## 1. Youth Suffer under a Double Standard of Adult Responsibilities but Not Rights

In 1971, the United States ratified the 26th Amendment to the Constitution, granting the right to vote to 18- to 20-year-olds. The 26th Amendment was the fastest to be ratified in U.S. history. At the height of the Vietnam War, most Americans realized the sick double standard inherent in sending 18-year-old soldiers to fight and die for their country when they weren't allowed to vote. Double standards didn't go away in 1971, though. Right now youth are subject to adult penalties for crimes despite lacking the right to vote.

Frank Zimring found that “between 1992 and 1995, 40 American states relaxed the requirements for transferring an accused under the maximum age of jurisdiction into criminal court,”<sup>2</sup> and “in Colorado, for example, defendants under the maximum age for juvenile court jurisdiction may nonetheless be charged by direct filing in criminal court if they are over 14 years of age and are charged with one of a legislative list of violent crimes.”<sup>3</sup>

What kind of twisted message do we send when we tell youth they are judged to be mature, responsible adults when they commit murder, but silly, brainless kids when they want to vote? This is a double standard, no different than during the Vietnam War. War isn't a dead issue now either; leaders for whom youth can't vote today may send them to war tomorrow. Several hundred Americans have died in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last decade having never been allowed to vote. Lowering the voting age is the fair way to set things straight.

## 2. Youth Pay Taxes and Live under Our Laws; They Should Have the Vote

Just like all other Americans, young Americans pay taxes. In fact, they pay a lot of taxes. Teens pay an estimated \$9.7 billion per year in sales taxes alone.<sup>4</sup> Not to mention many millions in taxes on income. According to the Internal Revenue Service, “You may be a teen, you may not even have a permanent job, but you have to pay taxes on the money you earn.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, in 2010, over 70% of 16 and 17 year olds had jobs.<sup>6</sup> Youth pay billions in taxes to state, local, and federal governments, yet they have absolutely no say over how much is taken. This is what the American Revolution was fought over; this is taxation without representation.

In addition to being affected by taxes, young people are affected by every other law that Americans live under. As fellow citizens in this society, every action or inaction taken by lawmakers affects youth directly, yet they have no say in the matter. In her 1991 testimony before a Minnesota House subcommittee, 14-year-old Rebecca Tilsen said:

If 16-year-olds are old enough to drink the water polluted by the industries that you regulate, if 16-year-olds are old enough to breathe the air ruined by garbage burners that government built, if 16-year-olds are old enough to walk on the streets made unsafe by terrible drugs and crime policies, if 16-year-olds are old enough to live in poverty in the richest country in the world, if 16-year-olds are old enough to get sick in a country with the worst public health-care programs in the world, and if 16-year-olds are old enough to attend school districts that you underfund, then 16-year-olds are old enough to play a part in making them better.

The just power of government comes from the consent of the governed. As it stands now, youth are governed – more than any other group, in fact – but do not consent. This goes against all that it means to be an American. Like all tax-paying, law-abiding Americans, youth must be given the right to vote.

### 3. Politicians Will Represent Youth Interests if Youth Can Vote

Politicians represent various constituencies; currently, young people are no one's constituency. Why should politicians care about the needs and wishes of youth when they have no ability to vote for or against them? Lowering the voting age will give politicians a real reason to respect the desires of young people.

Youth feel alienated from politics and politicians; lowering the voting age will include them in the process. The words spoken before the Senate Judiciary Committee supporting lowering the voting age in 1971 are as true now as they were then:

The anachronistic voting-age limitation tends to alienate [youth] from systematic political processes and to drive them to into a search for an alternative, sometimes violent, means to express their frustrations over the gap between the nation's deals and actions. Lowering the voting age will provide them with a direct, constructive and democratic channel for making their views felt and for giving them a responsible stake in the future of the nation.<sup>7</sup>

### 4. Youth Have a Unique Perspective; They'll Never Have Those Experiences Again

A common argument against lowering the voting age is that it isn't a burden to wait a few years. Denying youth the right to vote isn't the same as denying women or racial minorities, according to those who oppose lowering the voting age, because in a few years young people will grow up and be able to vote. Why go through the trouble to lower the age to 16 when after two years they'll be able to vote anyway? If it were that simple, then perhaps these opponents would have a point – but it isn't.

Would it be acceptable to limit the right to vote to those with a certain income, reasoning that it is a flexible standard, and those with less income must only work

harder or wait until they too make enough to vote? No, it wouldn't. Voters vote based on their individual circumstances; when those circumstances change, their voting habits often change as well. The concerns of a 14-year-old are different than those of a 24-year-old, just as the concerns of a poor man differ from those of a rich man. The beliefs and priorities of 16-year-olds as a class are unique to them; we cannot expect former 16-year-olds to have as accurate a perspective on the issues that affect them as those who are currently that age. If we care at all about the needs and desires of youth, they must be allowed to vote for themselves.

### **5. Sixteen Is a Better Age to Introduce Voting than 18; 16-Year-Olds Are Stationary**

Currently, the right to vote is granted at perhaps the worst possible moment in one's life. At 18, many youth leave the homes and communities they have lived in for most of their lives, either to go away to college or to move away from home in search of work. At the moment they are supposed to vote they either have a new community that they are unfamiliar with or they must attempt to vote via absentee ballot back home, a process that turns off many new voters.

Lowering the voting age to 16 will give the vote to people who have roots in a community, have an appreciation for local issues, and will be more concerned about voting than will those just two years older. Youth have comfortable surroundings – school, parents, and stable friends – and they feel connected to their community. These are factors that will increase their desire and need to vote.

The experience of some European countries that have lowered the voting age to 16 locally confirms these assumptions. In 1996 in Germany, 16- to 17-year-olds in the city of Hannover had 56.5% turnout, compared to 49.1% turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds,<sup>8</sup> and in the city of Braunschweig, 16- to 17-year-olds had 50.4% turnout, compared to 44.5% turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds.<sup>9</sup> In 1999 the German state of Saxony-Anhalt saw higher turnout among 16- to 17-year-olds (33%) than among 18- to 21-year-olds (32%) or 21- to 25-year-olds (24%).<sup>10</sup> Before it lowered the voting age nationwide, Austria also had several states and cities with a voting age of 16, and in the city of Graz in January 2003, 16- to 17-year-olds turned out at a higher rate (58%) than the total voter turnout (57%).<sup>11</sup> Young people want to vote and will vote if only we give them the chance.

### **6. Lowering the Voting Age Will Increase Voter Turnout**

For several reasons, lowering the voting age will increase voter turnout. It is common knowledge that the earlier in life a habit is formed, the more likely it is that that habit or interest will continue throughout life. If attempts are made to prevent young people from picking up bad habits, why are no attempts made to get youth started with good habits, such as voting? If citizens begin voting earlier, and get into the habit of doing so earlier, they are more likely to stick with it throughout their lives.

Not only will young voters' turnout increase for the remainder of their lives, but the turnout of their parents will increase as well:

A 1996 survey by Bruce Merrill, an Arizona State University journalism professor, found a strong increase in turnout. Merrill compared turnout of registered voters in five cities with Kids Voting with turnout in five cities without the program. Merrill found that between five and ten percent of respondents reported Kids Voting was a factor in their decision to vote. This indicated that 600,000 adults nationwide were encouraged to vote by the program.<sup>12</sup>

Kids Voting is a program in which children participate in a mock vote and accompany their parents to the polls on Election Day. Reports show that even this modest gesture toward including youth increased the interest in voting of their whole family. Parents were more likely to discuss politics with their kids, and thus an estimated 600,000 adult voters were more likely to vote as a result. Lowering the voting age will strengthen this democracy for all of us.

## 7. If We Let Stupid Adults Vote, Why Not Let Smart Youth Vote?

Richard Farson said that the argument that youth “should not vote because they lack the ability to make informed and intelligent decisions is valid only if that standard is applied to all citizens.” But this standard is not applied to all citizens, only young people. “We do not deprive a senile person of this right, nor do we deprive any of the millions of alcoholics, neurotics, psychotics and assorted fanatics who live outside hospitals of it. We seldom ever prevent those who are hospitalized for mental illness from voting,” said Farson.<sup>13</sup>

Even beyond senile, neurotic, and psychotic adults, regular adults often do not meet the unrealistic standard that opponents to youth voting propose. Turn on the *Tonight Show* one night and see the collection of adult buffoons who can't tell Jay Leno who the vice president is, or who have forgotten how many states are in this country. For example, polls have shown that about 70% of adults can't name their own state's senators.<sup>14</sup> Another poll found that three-quarters of Americans could not name their House member.<sup>15</sup> A third showed that almost two-thirds of adults could not name any United States Supreme Court justices.<sup>16</sup> Adults are even more confused about the issues themselves. In a *Washington Post* poll, adults mistakenly thought foreign aid made up 26% of the budget (it made up only 2%).<sup>17</sup> Yet these adults are happily given the right to vote.

The fact is, intelligence or maturity is not the basis upon which the right to vote is granted; if that were the case, all voters would need to pass a test before voting. However, “...under voting rights jurisprudence, literacy tests are highly suspect (and indeed are banned under federal law), and lack of education or information about election issues is not a basis for withholding the franchise.”<sup>18</sup>

Youth shouldn't be held to a stricter standard than adults. Lower the voting age.

## 8. Youth Will Vote Well

It is silly to fear that huge masses of youth will rush to the voting booths and unwittingly vote for Mickey Mouse and Hannah Montana. By and large, those individuals with no interest in politics and no knowledge on the subject will stay home from the polls and not vote. This mechanism works for adult voters as well. Youth will behave no differently.

In addition to fearing that youth will foolishly throw their votes away, some worry about youth voting for dangerous radicals. These fears are unfounded as well. “We should remember, too, that many people today vote at first, and often for many years after, exactly as their parents voted. We are all deeply influenced, in politics as everything else, by the words and example of people we love and trust,” said educational theorist John Holt.<sup>19</sup> One’s political leanings are influenced by their communities and their families, and it is likely that young voters will vote in much the same way as their parents – not because they are coerced to do so, but because of shared values.

With the voting age at 16, there would be a greater opportunity to educate new voters, as most are in high school. If the voting age were lowered, schools would most likely schedule civics classes to introduce the issues and prepare new voters. It stands to reason that these young voters would not only be sufficiently prepared to vote, but might in fact be better prepared to vote than their elders.

For example, students who took the comprehensive We the People (WTP) constitutional law program scored *better* than adults 18–80 in knowledge of government and politics (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
Test score comparison: We the People (WTP) students and adults<sup>20</sup>

QUESTION	WTP Students Answering Correctly	Adults (18-80) Answering Correctly
Could name the vice-president	96%	74%
Understood the meaning of “Judicial Review”	96%	66%
Knew Two-Thirds Veto Override Requirement	87%	34%
Knew which political party controlled the House of Representatives	68%	68%
Could explain political party ideology	87%	57%

High school students are more than adequately qualified to vote. The federal Voting Rights Acts of 1965 (42 U.S.C. § 1971(c)) states that any person who has not been adjudged an incompetent and who has completed the sixth grade in a public school in, or a private school accredited by, any State or territory, the District of Columbia, or the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico where instruction is carried on predominantly in the English language, possesses sufficient literacy, comprehension, and intelligence to vote in any election.

Thus, if a 6th-grade education is adequate for voting purposes, certainly the 10th-grade education most 16-year-olds possess would be more than adequate.

Noting that youth will most likely vote well, we must wonder, is it at all possible for a voter to vote incorrectly? Did voters choose poorly when they elected Bush in 2004? Democrats would say so. Did voters choose poorly when they elected Obama in 2008? Republicans would say so. If youth were able to vote for either of them, or against either of them, would they be voting incorrectly? I don't believe so. All voters have their own reasons for voting. We may disagree with their reasons, but we must respect their right to make a decision. As we must do with youth.

## 9. Youth Want the Right to Vote and Will Turn Out

One hundred years ago, when voting rights for women were being considered, many wondered whether women even wanted to vote or whether the whole suffrage movement was just being stirred up by a few troublemakers. It is no different today when some question whether young people truly desire to vote. Thankfully, modern polling gives us glimpses of the answer. In a *Washington Post* survey, 73% of 12- to 17-year-old respondents were “very interested” or “fairly interested” in politics; 95% of these young people viewed voting in a presidential election as “very important” or “fairly important.”<sup>21</sup> In a 1991 Minneapolis mock election, 73% of 12- to 17-year-olds who participated in a mock election supported a voting age of 16.<sup>22</sup> And in a national poll conducted by Do Something, a majority of young people favored lowering the voting age below 18.<sup>23</sup>

Not only do young people in this country want to vote, there is evidence that when given the chance young people will turn out and vote. In addition to high voter turnout rates among youth in Germany, Austria, and around the world, young people have turned out to vote here in the United States. Although most examples in the United States involve mock voting (because the voting age hasn't yet been lowered here), there are some interesting primary election results. In 1991, in a mock election for the Minneapolis school board, 12- to 17-year-olds had 40% turnout compared to a 5.6% turnout among adults.<sup>24</sup> A Kids Voting mock election in Washington, D.C., in 1994 had 50% turnout among youth, compared to 40% for adults.<sup>25</sup> And in 2003 in Baltimore, an actual election in which 17-year-olds and some 16-year-olds were able to vote in the mayoral primary because they would be 18 by the time of the general election (more than one year later), 35% of registered 16- and 17-year-olds turned out, compared to 36% of the general population.<sup>26</sup>

## 10. Lowering the Voting Age Will Provide an Intrinsic Benefit to the Lives of Youth

Granting youth the right to vote will have a direct effect on their character, intelligence, and sense of responsibility. Is it any wonder why many youth feel apathetic toward politics? After 18 years of their life being told that their opinions don't matter, and that they are just foolish children who should be seen and not heard, is it surprising that many people over 18 feel turned off by politics and don't vote? We can see this contrast between volunteering and politics. Teenagers have amazingly high levels of volunteering and community service, however, many find politics unappealing. But even small gestures, such as mock voting, have a large effect on teens' interest in politics: "More than 71% of students [participating in Kids Voting USA] reported frequently or occasionally questioning parents about elections at home. These same students also viewed voting with great importance. About 94% felt it was very important or somewhat important to vote."<sup>27</sup> Including youth in a real, substantive way in politics will lead to even more interest as they take their public-spirited nature into the political realm.

Many opponents of lowering the voting age assume that youth who are apathetic today will be no different when given the right to vote; this is wrong. Responsibility comes with rights, not the other way around. Avrun Stroll said, "It is not a pre-condition of self-government that those that govern be wise, educated, mature, responsible and so on, but instead these are the results which self-government is designed to produce."<sup>28</sup> Educator and youth rights theorist John Holt argues that if youth "think their choices and decisions make a difference to them, in their own lives, they will have every reason to try to choose and decide more wisely. But if what they think makes no difference, why bother to think?" He stresses this point again: "It is not just power, but impotence, that corrupts people. It gives them the mind and soul of slaves. It makes them indifferent, lazy, cynical, irresponsible, and, above all, stupid."<sup>29</sup>

Lowering the voting age may not be the magic bullet to improve the lives of youth, but by giving them a real stake in their future and in their present lives it will push them to become involved, active citizens of this great nation. The National Youth Rights Association strongly urges lawmakers and individuals in this country to seriously consider lowering the voting age.

**Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup> *Wesberry v. Saunders*, 376 U.S. 1, 17 (1964).
- <sup>2</sup> Frank Zimring, *American Youth Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 108.
- <sup>3</sup> Zimring, *American Youth Violence*, 119.
- <sup>4</sup> According to the Sales Tax Clearinghouse (<http://thestic.com/STrates.stm>), the average sales tax in the country is 5.62%. According to a study by Interep (<http://www.interep.com/pr/PRTeen02.pdf>), teens spent \$172 billion in 2001.
- <sup>5</sup> "Tax Interactive," <http://www.irs.gov/individuals/page/0,,id%3D15579,00.html> (accessed February 22, 2003).
- <sup>6</sup> Analysis of statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey" (<http://data.bls.gov:8080/PDQ/servlet/SurveyOutputServlet;jsessionid=6230596a875159a65564>) and (<http://data.bls.gov:8080/PDQ/servlet/SurveyOutputServlet;jsessionid=62307b81350275f49731>), Accessed June 17, 2010.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, *Report on Lowering the Voting Age to 18*, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., 1971, S. Rep. 26, 5.
- <sup>8</sup> "Teens Show Voting Desire in Germany," *Phoenix Gazette*, September 19, 1996.
- <sup>9</sup> "Age of Electoral Majority: Report and Recommendations," The Electoral Commission, April 2004, p. 16.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- <sup>11</sup> "Local Governments in Austria, the Politico-Administrative System and New Developments since the 1990's," *Diputacio Barcelona xarxa de municipis*, p. 52.
- <sup>12</sup> John Stuart Hall, "Elections and Civic Education: The Case of Kids Voting USA," *National Civic Review*, Spring 1998, 79.
- <sup>13</sup> Richard Farson, *Birthrights* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974).
- <sup>14</sup> Ralph Reiland, "What to Do, What to Do?" Pittsburgh Live column, October 24, 2004, [http://pittsburghlive.com/x/tribune-review/opinion/columnists/reiland/s\\_264990.html](http://pittsburghlive.com/x/tribune-review/opinion/columnists/reiland/s_264990.html).
- <sup>15</sup> Richard Morin, "Who's in Control? Many Don't Know or Care; Knowledge Gap Affects Attitudes and Participation," *Washington Post*, January 29, 1996, A1.
- <sup>16</sup> Findlaw, "Nearly Two-Thirds of Americans Can't Name Any U.S. Supreme Court Justices, Says FindLaw Survey," news release, June 20, 2003, <http://company.findlaw.com/pr/2003/062003.scotus.html>.
- <sup>17</sup> Morin, "Who's in Control?"
- <sup>18</sup> Davis, Samuel, et al., *Children In the Legal System*. Westbury, New York: The Foundation Press, Inc, 1997, p. 126.
- <sup>19</sup> John Holt, *Escape from Childhood* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1974).
- <sup>20</sup> We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution: Knowledge of and Support for Democratic Institutions and Processes by Participating Students, at [http://web.archive.org/web/20050421225647/http://www.civiced.org/research\\_students2000.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20050421225647/http://www.civiced.org/research_students2000.html) Accessed June 17, 2010.
- <sup>21</sup> Sharon Warden, "Teen Views on America and Politics," *Washington Post*, October 30, 1992, E1.

- <sup>22</sup> Education Week on the Web, November 27, 1991, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/vol-11/13boxh11> (no longer available online).
- <sup>23</sup> “Lowering the Voting Age: Online Polling Results from U.S. Youth,” Do Something, Inc., May 8, 2006.
- <sup>24</sup> Education Week on the Web.
- <sup>25</sup> Richard C. Tenwolde, “Teaching Ballot Box Practices,” *Washington Post*, November 17, 1994, J1.
- <sup>26</sup> Kriss Worthington and Darryl Moore, youth voting resolution, considered by Berkeley, California, City Council May 24, 2005, <http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/citycouncil/2005citycouncil/packet/052405/2005-05-24%20Item%2025.pdf>.
- <sup>27</sup> “Proposal to Lower the Voting Age,” <http://www.youthrights.org/voteproposal.html> (accessed February 22, 2003).
- <sup>28</sup> Avrum Stroll, “Censorship, Models and Self-Government,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1967): 81.
- <sup>29</sup> John Holt, *Escape from Childhood* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1974). p. 156