

Should the Voting Age Be Lowered?

In many states, 16-year-olds can drive, get a job, and must pay taxes on their wages. But one thing most of them aren't allowed to do? Vote.

The 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1971, lowered the voting age to 18 from 21. But while the amendment gives every American who's at least 18 the right to vote, it doesn't prevent cities or states from allowing those younger to cast ballots. In fact, a few U.S. cities already allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local elections, and lawmakers in California, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island are considering lowering the voting age to 17. Now a recent wave of student activism is further fueling the debate about lowering the voting age nationwide.

Two researchers square off about whether that would be a good idea.

YES The students who are calling for gun control in the aftermath of the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida, are challenging the stereotype of American kids as lazy and uninterested in politics. Unfortunately, when it comes to electing lawmakers whose decisions about gun control and other issues affect their lives, these teens lack any real power. This needs to change.

Critics will no doubt raise questions about the ability of 16-year-olds to make informed decisions in the voting booth. Aren't the brains of young people not fully developed enough to make good judgments? Aren't young people impulsive and hotheaded?

Not in a situation like voting, which isn't something done on the spur of the moment. It's done calmly in a voting booth and with much deliberation. Studies show that by age 16, young people in this kind of situation can gather and process information, weigh pros and cons, and reason logically with facts. Teens may sometimes make bad deliberative choices, but they don't make them any more often than adults do.

Allowing people to begin voting earlier might increase future turnout.

There's also a civic argument for allowing younger teens to vote. Take the dozen or so countries that allow people to vote at 16, including Argentina, Austria, Brazil, and Nicaragua. In such countries, voter turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds is significantly higher than it is among older young adults.

That's important because there's evidence that people who don't vote the first time they're eligible are less likely to cast ballots regularly in the future. Considering that 18- to 24-year-olds have the lowest turnout of any age group in the U.S., allowing people

to begin voting even younger—when they're more likely to cast ballots—might increase future turnout.

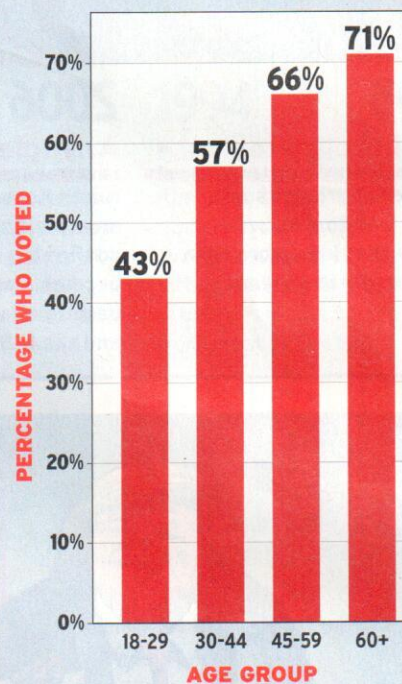
The current push to lower the voting age is motivated by outrage that those most vulnerable to school shootings have no say in how such atrocities are best prevented. Let's give those young people more than just their voices to make a change. •

—LAURENCE STEINBERG

Professor of Psychology, Temple University

VOTER TURNOUT BY AGE GROUP

In the 2016 presidential election, young people had the lowest turnout of any age group—continuing a longtime trend.



SOURCE: UNITED STATES ELECTIONS PROJECT



A 19-year-old votes for the first time, in the California primary in June.

NO Following the student protests against gun violence in school has come a renewed call to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote. But it would be a mistake to lower the voting age. Demonstrating is not the same as voting, which requires a higher level of civic responsibility and knowledge.

In fact, test results show that many students lack a basic understanding of the structure and function of the U.S. government. Many teens don't even know the names of their U.S. senators or how to amend the Constitution. Instead of lowering the voting age, we should focus more on improving civics education.

The last time the voting age was changed was during the Vietnam War, when it was lowered from 21 to 18. The argument then was that if young people were old enough to fight and lose their lives in war, they should be able to vote for their national leaders. It's hard to find such a powerful reason to lower the voting age today.

In the last few decades, we've learned a great deal about the human brain and how it develops. Researchers

generally agree that the brain is still developing until the mid-20s, with skills such as moral reasoning coming later than we once thought.

With this new research in mind, many states have raised the age at which teens are allowed to do certain things, not lowered it. The drinking age has been raised from 18 to 21. And the age to drive a car without any conditions has increased from 16 to 17 or 18 in most states.

People in favor of allowing younger teens to vote say that it would increase overall turnout in U.S. elections. But that's unlikely. Traditionally, young Americans are far less likely to cast ballots than their older counterparts.

We don't allow 16-year-olds to join the military or serve on juries. Nor should we allow them to vote. After all, voting is one of our most important civic duties. It shouldn't be taken lightly. •

Voting requires a higher level of civic responsibility and knowledge.

—DAVID DAVENPORT

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