

Senate Bill 10 – Lowering the Voting Age to 16

Young Activist Pushes To Lower Voting Age To 16 As 'The Logical Next Step' For Gen Z

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Young adults are known for taking to the streets in protest. Now, there's a youth-driven push to bring more of them to the ballot box.

Tyler Okeke, a 19-year-old activist, is among those who champion lowering the voting age from 18 to 16.

Okeke is working to increase the number of eligible voters in the country's most diverse generation and amplify their voices on decisions that will affect their future.

Currently, young adults gain the right to vote at 18, the same time they're undergoing significant life transitions, said Okeke, a youth organizer with the nonprofit Power California and a student at the University of Chicago. He said young, newly enfranchised voters often postpone navigating the voting process to focus on employment, higher education and settling into new cities.

"If this wasn't work that I was doing for years, I probably wouldn't know the process of getting an absentee ballot to vote in a California election while I go to college in Chicago," Okeke, who is originally from Los Angeles, told NPR's Ailsa Chang on *All Things Considered*.

Okeke said 16-year-olds, in particular, are poised to translate their civic education into civic engagement. The U.S. history that students typically learn at that age, combined with the power to vote at the same time, he said, would create "lifelong, habitual voters."

For decades, young people between 18 and 29 have [voted in the lowest numbers](#) of any age group.

During the 2018 midterm elections, however, the percentage of 18- to 29-year-old voters [jumped to a historic high](#) compared with previous midterms. Many in Generation Z, who were born in 1997 or later, were newly [motivated by recent mass shootings](#) to vote in an effort to reform gun policies.

[Over the past few months](#), Gen Z activists have been a driving force in causes such as climate change, the Black Lives Matter movement and LGBTQ rights. A [new poll from Power California](#) shows that 18- to 29-year-old voters in the state put "stopping police brutality against Black Americans" as their most important political issue. That came out ahead of the need for coronavirus aid, even though more than one-third of those surveyed said they are struggling to pay rent or buy basic needs.

If the voting age were lowered, it wouldn't be the first time. The voting age was 21 before the 26th Amendment was ratified in 1971. At the time, young people argued that if they could be drafted to fight America's wars at 18, their voices should also count in elections.

Howard University law students, from left, Chanel Sherrod, Domonique Dille and Temitope Aladetimi brought handmade signs to a protest near the White House last Saturday.

The idea of lowering the voting age has drawn some support, largely from Democrats. Although the effort failed, Rep. Ayanna Pressley, D-Mass., proposed an amendment to lower the national voting age to 16 in House Democrats' voting overhaul bill last year.

Easing age limitations is on the California ballot this November. If passed, Proposition 18 would allow 17-year-olds, who will be 18 by the time of the following general election, to vote in primary and special elections. Eighteen states and Washington, D.C., already allow such pre-18 voter participation.

Some Republican critics cast the push as a tactic to strengthen the Democratic electorate, given that Gen Zers tend to be more liberal on social issues than previous generations.

And Americans of both major parties overwhelmingly oppose extending voting to 16- and 17-year-olds, according to a Hill-HarrisX poll. Opponents often argue that people at that age aren't mature enough or don't know enough to vote.

Okeke disagrees. Having grown up with the Internet, younger generations have greater access to information, well beyond the pages of a textbook, he said.

Armed with that information, youth are "getting frustrated" with their lack of political power, Okeke said, after "exhausting" the tools they do have, such as social media campaigning and protesting.

"When we look down the road, we don't see a hopeful future. We don't see a future where we'll have access to clean water and clean air, and equitable schools," he said. "Voting is just the logical next step in making sure that a generation — that is so passionate about change and is so deeply affected by the decisions that are being made now — that we are inserted into policy-making and have a say in our democracy."

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The Case for Lowering the Voting Age

<https://econsultsolutions.com/the-case-for-lowering-the-voting-age/>

Election Day is when U.S. citizens exercise their right to vote for policies and political leaders. Starting from age 18 (and sometimes younger), they can register to vote. In Pennsylvania, the largest age groups of registered voters are in the 25 to 34 and 55 to 64 categories, with each one representing 17% of registered voters, for a total of 34%. In contrast, the smallest group of registered voters was the 18 to 24 cohort, representing 8% of registered voters.

In Philadelphia, the results are similar. The largest bloc of registered voters is those ages 25 to 34, with 254,479 voters (25%), and the smallest defined voting group is once again between the ages of 18 to 24, with a total of 83,386 voters (8%). Even accounting for the inconsistency in group size and population spread, younger registered voters make up a disproportionately smaller percentage of the total voting pool.

Youth in Philadelphia and across the country are becoming more civically engaged and speaking out on issues that affect them, from calls for gun reform and the need to address climate change to city wide walk outs in support of Palestine. So why do young voters represent such a disproportionately low rate of voters compared to the amount of youth that are eligible to vote?

According to Tufts' Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Pennsylvania has some of the highest youth participation, with an increase in turnout of 19.5% from 2014 to 2022 (a total of 31.7%) for voting eligible 18 to 29-year-olds. Youth in Philadelphia have many opportunities for civic engagement: attending candidate forums, writing letters to lawmakers, attending school-wide assemblies, and more.

A push to lower the voting age has been a topic in multiple cities as well. San Francisco and Boston are two examples of cities that considered or are considering allowing 16-year-olds to vote. In San Francisco, the San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR) has studied and supported this cause. 16- and 17-year-olds can be tried as adults in court or legal processing, as well as pay taxes and drive, which are responsibilities often associated with being an adult, yet these age groups are denied voting privileges. Lowering the voting age would mean that 16- and 17-year-olds would gain two years of experience in voting prior to graduating high school, and could lead younger citizens to become more engaged and educated on political issues. Following the engagement of younger voters, lowering the voting age also has many benefits as voting is habitual. Casting a ballot once increases the likelihood that you will vote again next time. Allowing individuals to vote at 16 or 17 not only emboldens youth to become more civically engaged, but also increases the likelihood that they will vote after high school, instead of voting for the first time during a major transition period in life (getting a full-time job and/or pursuing higher education).

Many arguments against lowering the legal voting age often revolve around the idea that 16- and 17-year-olds do not know enough about civics or have the maturity or neurological capacity to think for themselves, often being influenced by parents, teachers, and friends. However, a study by Daniel Hart and David Atkins shows that members of this age group have roughly the same political knowledge as 21-year-olds and other legally enfranchised peoples, making the laws around who gets to vote in the US more or less arbitrary. Additionally, when we turn to developmental science, scientists distinguish between two different types of cognition: "hot" cognition, which occurs in decisions which are made under the influence of a group, under stress, or in a hurry, and "cold" cognition, which describes decisions that are made when people have time and can make reasoned judgements. While a 16-year-old may not be very good at making decisions that require "hot" cognition, they are just as capable of making decisions that require "cold" cognition. Studies also show that logical reasoning matures by the age of 15. All voters, regardless of age, are constantly being influenced by outside forces and to insist that individuals under the age of 18 are incapable of voting due to their proximity to influence is a hypocritical argument. Schools don't just teach different issue areas that are relevant to youth, they also teach students how to find reliable information and sources that can best inform voting decisions. Additionally, studies have shown that the independent, analytical, and empathetic abilities in 16- and 17-year-olds are developed enough for them to make these decisions on their own.

As issues that require cross cultural and generational collaboration become more pressing, we must realize the importance of encouraging youth to pursue civic responsibility, championing campaigns for voting reform and pioneering the way for progressive policies that work to address the issues that matter to youth. As we look towards the impacts that adults can have, we encourage all to consider lowering the voting age, setting up the youth of tomorrow for success and a lifetime of civic engagement.