

Advantages and Disadvantages of Lowering the Voting Age to Sixteen

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The 1971 amendment on voting rights, Twenty-sixth Amendment, introduced a new order on the eligibility of the electorate. Motivated by President Roosevelt ratification of the military draft age to 18, it followed that any American citizen aged at least 18 years (previously 21 years), was eligible to vote in both State and Federal elections. After long periods of stasis, the past decade has seen some progressive efforts to lower the active voting age to 16 or lower. In the European Union zone, some states in Germany have allowed 16-year olds to participate in state elections. In Australia, the electorate eligibility has been set at age 16 since 2007. Outside of Europe, the South American region has followed closely, with countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and Cuba allowing persons aged below 18 to vote in national elections. Clearly, for progressive and mature democracies, legislators and the citizenry have drawn some traction over the appropriate voting age. While the proponents of lowering the voting age argue strongly in favour of the competency and maturity of the minors in making right judgements on electing persons to represent their rights, a majority of the voters have remained sceptical about this. Can minors make well-grounded and deliberative political decisions? The answer lies heavily on a balance of probabilities, yes and no, depending on the eye that judges.

The ability of minors to make well-informed decisions, political efficacy, and their cognitive ability to judge on trade-offs affecting their civic rights has been a thorny issue in this debate. Neurologists base the research on this area upon cognitive scores. In what the researchers have termed as ‘cold cognition’, which is basically one’s intellectual capacity when they are uninterrupted and alone. In these situational judgement scenarios, one’s cognition skills will guide their ability to make informed choices based solely on logic and facts. Studies have well-proved that persons within the age range of 16 are mentally mature

and have been observed to score similarly as adults on this scope. On the other hand, sceptics hold a view that adolescents are known to be 'hot headed', hence they are highly likely to make impulsive decisions in their day-to-day activities; which can well be transferred to their voting patterns. Furthermore, in an ideal social setting, the amount and frequency of political talk that parents engage with their children at home is scanty, and not enough to improve the children's political knowledge. Also, persons under the age of 18 have been observed to have little to no interest in political affairs. Teenagers are on a lesser measure on their responsibility and accountability to the laws on labour, taxation, contract, and even entry into the military; and hence will approach decision making in elections with a less-than proportionate interest as compared to persons aged above 18.

The protagonists of lowering the voting age argue that allowing persons to participate in elections from their teenage years will factor greatly in improving voter turnout rates. Among other developed nations, the US has statistically presented the lowest citizen participation rates in voting. Teenagers, in the age range of 13 and over, are learning about government and the state civic structure at their various levels at school. In this kind of environment, they are mentally equipped to participate in elections. Furthermore, under parental support, teenagers can easily access first time registration and corresponding choice of polling stations; which actually has been linked as a major obstacle to voter participation. Furthermore, in an environment where parents take the responsibility to guide their children on voting and registration, it can serve as a ripple effect to enhance their interest and that of adults at large to participate in deliberative democracy. Contrary to these arguments, statistics by the Census Bureau indicate persons falling in the age group, 18-29 years, represent the highest proportion contributing to the general population low voter turnout. It is arguable that persons within and around that age range are yet to embrace voting until later

years. In the 2014 US midterm elections, only 15% of active voters in the age range 18-29 participated, whereas 29.5% and 54.5% for age groups 30-44, and 60 years and over, respectively (United States Census Bureau, 2015). Furthermore, in the US Nationwide assessment of civic knowledge, the age bracket 18-29, only garnered a meager 20% of the entire age group population to attain a 'proficient' grade (United States Census Bureau, 2015). It is therefore arguable that introducing persons below 18 years would actually add to the backlog of the least proficient and politically knowledgeable set; which will reflect in the quality of the election results and hence leaders.

Democracy in its very core tenants advocates for allowing equal rights and equal value of the vote casted by all that are eligible to vote, and hence have a voice to weigh in their interest and direction of the state. Tremell and Wilhelm (2015) present a philosophical approach towards answering the question on who fits into the voting registry. They advocate for plurality in voting; a system that allows the majority, but not all, of the mentally sound mind citizenry to participate in voting. In their meta-analysis of various philosophers' inclination on representative democracy, they are quick to point out that mental aptitude should be a key consideration. As such, persons with basic arithmetic skills and ability to read and write are assumed to have the right state of mind to make informed political decisions. In that light, it is arguable that teenagers in high school should have a voice in voting to weigh in their interests. The recent student activism and riots in high school regarding gun laws is an excellent example giving reason as to why the teenagers need a voice in voting. In the US, at age 16, teenagers experience a shift in responsibility to the law in terms of driving, working, and paying taxes; as such, they should have a voice in electing legislators to represent their interests. However, an aggregate of various polls by mainstream media and social media platforms, indicates that about 80% of Americans are against

lowering of the voting age, 50% will support the eligibility age to remain at 18, and some 44% will find it more prudent if the voting age is taken back to 21.

Politics is built around political party affiliations. Studies have shown that in the early teenage years, the minds are yet to develop fully to choose the right party affiliation, and hence, children often acquire knowledge from the internet and social media. Thus, the children's participation can be highly manipulated and they are likely to participate at 'decoration levels', that is, non-participation in democracy levels. Furthermore, in an environment that the political information is disseminated with emotional aggressiveness, and vulgar language; then, it can be anticipated to bring up a generation that appreciates hostility, mistrust, and ethnocentrism, which is characteristic of political campaigns.

Historically, democracies have progressively advanced from barring women to voting, allowing only the educated to vote, and to the present equal vote, equal right, equal value. An optimistic lens will find a myriad of positives in allowing teenagers to vote (13 years and over). Introducing the right political knowledge from the teenage years will go a long way in instilling the values of a nation, model good citizenship, and inculcate values of inclusive relationships. A democratic system of government is superior to its counterparts as it allows the citizens to define their future through democratic processes, and treats the citizenry in equal degree. Theoretically, a system of government that bridges the tenant of equality of all citizens; case in point, excluding a portion of the electorate without solid reason, can well be termed as a partial democracy or even a void democracy ab initio.

Lowering the voting age will do more good than harm. Any argument to the contrary will weigh more to contravene the progress and consensus of modern democracy.

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