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No, We Shouldn't Lower The Voting Age To 16



David Davenport Contributor ⓘ

I look deeper at the policies behind the headlines.

Ever on the bleeding edge of change, San Francisco is placing a measure on the November ballot to allow 16-year olds to vote. Congresswoman [Nancy Pelosi](#) can barely contain her enthusiasm, “because when kids are in school, they’re so interested, they’re so engaged.” Tell that to the teachers whose students, according to surveys, don’t know who their U.S. senator is or how to amend the Constitution. Pelosi’s real enthusiasm is more partisan, of course, since young people are frequently liberal until they start paying taxes and really have to deal with the government, which does not happen at 16.



(AP Photo/Patrick Semansky)

I'm sorry but if having 16-year olds in the voting booth is the answer to some civic problem we have, I guess I don't know what the question is. People point to pitiful voter turnout, but is simply adding more eligible voters the answer to civic malaise? One organization that supports this nationally, FairVote, says it will have a "trickle-up effect," getting parents more engaged. I suppose when my teenagers wanted to support Ralph Nader for president, it mildly engaged my ridicule instincts.

The last time the voting age was changed nationally was in 1971, with the adoption of the 26th Amendment to the Constitution. With 18-year olds fighting in Vietnam, it seemed wrong to say they couldn't vote for their national leaders until they were 21. In other words, there was some serious and logical reason to make the change, which doesn't seem evident here. In fact, other legal age thresholds have been going up, not down. The drinking age is 21, and the age when kids may drive a car without any conditions has now increased to 17 or 18 by most state laws, not 16. In other words, the law has moved toward greater maturity before responsibility, not less.



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If it is a question of maturity, researchers generally agree that the brain is still developing until the mid-20s, with moral reasoning and abstract thought coming later in the cycle than previously thought. Perhaps it should also be a question of having a real stake in the process—such as serving in the military

(age 18, or 17 with parental consent) or writing a check to the government to pay your taxes. Or, how about requiring younger voters to pass the citizenship test as an incentive and qualifier, tying civic engagement with civic education?

In fairness, there is not exactly a stampede in favor of lowering the voting age, though it is taking place. Two cities in Maryland—Tacoma Park (population 10,000) and Hyattsville (population 18,000)—have lowered the voting age to 16 for municipal elections only. In the primaries, 22 states allow 17-year olds to vote if they will turn 18 prior to the general election in the fall. I suppose this makes some sense, allowing the same voters to narrow the field who will ultimately choose the winner.

Lowering the voting age is tricky under the law. The federal law allows it, since the wording of the 26th Amendment provides that citizens over 18 may not be denied the right to vote based on age. Arguably the Constitution could again be amended to change the age to 16, though the bar for such amendments is high, requiring two-thirds of both houses of Congress and three-fourths of the state legislatures to approve. The real locus for change, however, would be in state legislatures, since the states basically control elections under the Constitution. Efforts by cities such as San Francisco and the two cities in Maryland can only affect their own municipal elections, which are likely to be of limited interest to teenagers, just as they tend to be for other voters.

I think Major League Baseball replay reviews have a good standard for changing things like the question of voting age. Unless the review shows “indisputable video evidence” that the play on the field was called incorrectly, the call stands. OK, maybe we don't need “indisputable” evidence, but how about some evidence that we need or even want 16-year olds voting? It's just not there.



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