

Lowering the Voting Age in Local Elections: A Policy Proposal

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1. Executive Summary.

The state of Florida is a leader in voter turnout and civics education in the United States; however, they could be doing more to increase the two by combining these strengths and encouraging their energized youth population to engage in their democracy. Following the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, students and young citizens in Florida have proven to be vocal activists and educated constituents with strong opinions on matters important to their communities. The state of Florida, then, should let them to advocate for themselves and allow them to vote in elections that affect them personally like local school board and state representatives. In this way, by granting 16 and 17-year olds voting rights, they can develop healthy civic behaviors, proven to lead to habitual voting in adulthood, while still in the stable and educated environment of a high school student. They will be able to utilize their Florida civics education and apply it toward positive change in their communities.

2. Statement of issue or problem. The state government of Florida should include younger voices in democracy by allowing 16 and 17-year-old citizens to vote in local elections.

3. Background

The state of Florida has relatively high voter turnout in comparison to national averages especially in the recent primary and general elections of 2014 and 2016. Despite this relative high standing, turnout is still low in the midterm and presidential elections overall when only about 30% and 60% of the eligible populations are voting, respectively. It has been proven at a national level that voter turnout among American youth (those age 18-24) is significantly lower than their adult and elderly counterparts.

In the past, Florida has passed legislation to improve civic education in hopes that this youth disengagement could be improved upon. It has shown significant success in increasing middle school education and proficiency in the area of civics but its impact on the state's youth engagement could be bolstered by a legislative lowering of voting age in local elections to include 16 and 17-year-olds.

With the surge of youth activism stemming from the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in the city of Parkland, the young voices of our state have made it clear that they want their voices to be heard. The minds of 16 and 17-year-olds across the state are being shaped by the civics curricula in their high schools and as a result, they are at a critical stage to begin using their right to vote and forming voting habits. Studies have shown that voting is habitual so that participating in one election increases one's probability of participation in future ones. Therefore, by starting the formation of this important civic habit when an individual is in a more stable time in their lives, has encouragement from family and friends, and can access civic education from their schools, they will be more likely to continue voting into adulthood.

The current national voting age of 18 is a tumultuous and unstable time in young adults' lives. Most 18-year-olds are beginning college, joining the full-time workforce, and moving out of their parents' home. These large-scale life changes in combination with the physical movement of location makes voting difficult for 18-year olds, and often they miss out on voting in their first election. This, in turn, makes them less likely to have established voting habits in the future. In contrast, younger voters ages 16 and 17 would be more supported and stable and are therefore better candidates for initiating sustainable voting habits that would continue into twenties and beyond.

Lastly, the current voting age at the national level was changed just over 50 years ago by young people who wanted to be heard. The 26th Amendment which was passed in 1971 lowered the federal voting age to 18 from its previous place at age 21, because citizens 18 and older were being drafted but could not vote for the people in power to have a say. Since the arbitrary age of 21 was decided by our Founding Fathers as a continuation of the British system of government, there is no strong reasoning or historical precedent behind our official legal voting age. Instead, there is a precedent of adjustment and inclusivity in voting policy to account for citizens who are directly affected by laws and grant them a voice in their democracy.

Young people, aged 16 and 17, are energized citizens and deserving constituents. They are attending schools that are impacted by their local school board's decisions and driving on roads with laws dictated by the state. They work part-time jobs and pay taxes that are controlled by their local and state governments. The state has given them the tools to be educated and engaged; now all that's left for Florida to do is allow them to exercise them.

4. Statement of the state's interests in the issue.

The state of Florida has already shown interest in increasing young people's civic engagement by pushing for civic education reform. According to The Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act, all grades must have some form of civics education in their language arts curricula beginning in the 2011-2012 school year. It was also later amended to require civics proficiency as a stipulation for admission into middle school and an End of Course exam at the middle school level to be graded as part of their course grades. This law and its amendments demonstrate the state's dedication to accountability in civics education for its youth population.

Most recently, after the Parkland shooting at Stoneman Douglass High School students there and across the state expressed their want to exercise this knowledge of civics and political engagement and put their education into action. Their activism and persistence gave an unprecedented voice to Florida's youth and mobilized them to register and vote in the 2018 Primary elections in record numbers. The state of Florida has done their part in educating their youth, but allowing even more of their constituents to express their political power in a more tangible and directly effective way could create waves of political engagement across party lines, generational divides, and Florida's state boundaries.

5. Success in other states.

The first place in the United States to implement this controversial policy was in the municipalities of Tacoma Park and Hyattsville in Maryland. The 16 and 17-year-old citizens who were made eligible and registered turned out at a rate of 44% when the overall municipal turnout was at 11%. This clearly shows the engagement from young voters when compared to the entire population and would inevitably encourage more constituents to vote to match the high participation of the youth. When thinking about the habitual voter research mentioned above as well, one can imagine the impact that those 44% of young voters would continue to have on the electorate as they grew older. Since it is such a new and controversial policy, little has been studied outside of those towns in Maryland to determine the long-term effects of this plan. However, Florida has the ability to help set the standard for engaging young people in its democracy and its local politics just as they helped develop the standard for civics education. Florida's youth are a powerful and educated force and their participation in their local communities would mean a more thriving democracy for all Florida residents.

6. Policy suggestion.

Lower the voting age to 16 for all local elections.

7. Advantages and disadvantages of the policy.

Lowering the voting age in the state of Florida to allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in the local elections would have a tremendous impact on voter turnout. Local elections have consistently low turnout and providing young people the opportunity to participate in them would improve this issue as well as improve voter turnout in state-wide and national elections in future years. Local elections are a great place to start for young people because they are small in scope, their campaigns are run by their accessible community leaders, and the election's impact is felt close to home in their neighborhoods, schools, and families.

These more inclusive elections would encourage more young people to vote but also help apply the civic education that was fought so hard for in the past years. This civic education is so important to engaging today's youth but without implementation through voting and activism, it is meaningless. Allowing them to put their knowledge into practice will give them the power to have an impact in laws and policies that affect them. And what's more, youth voting's impact doesn't stop with the youth; it also involves whole families and households. Encouraging young people to vote will motivate parents and loved ones to vote, and thus, bring whole communities to the polls in larger numbers.

It is important to note that this policy is a non-partisan effort and is not intended to sway the electorate one way or another. Research shows that young people are socialized at home toward their parent's party and most likely end up adopting those ideologies for themselves. So, in this way, the expanding of the electorate simply allows for a larger portion of the community's voices to be heard in a meaningful way. In addition, these newly eligible participants provide an opportunity for major political parties to engage with and recruit young people.

One of the disadvantages of this policy could be an increased crowd on election day. However, through the Civics Scholars research conducted in the Spring this was shown to not be a major issue in Florida. In addition, Early Voting during school hours could be encouraged by the school system to combat this potential problem. Another disadvantage could be the addition of a new pool of potentially uninformed voters. This has been disproven, though, and has been shown by researchers for this cause that young people ages 16 and 17 are of the cognitive ability to make the same sound political decisions as their older counterparts. If anything, since they are more immersed in the civics education and engagement of their schools, they may even be more ready to vote.

Overall, there are no major disadvantages of allowing younger citizens to vote and those that exist have easy solutions. The positive impact far outweighs the potential for negative consequences. Implementing this policy would mean further institutionalizing youth civic education in Florida and increasing civic engagement in 16 and 17-year-olds. However, the effects of this policy will ripple far beyond this young voter group and encourage active citizenship participation in democracy across all ages and political parties in the state. An increase in Florida citizens actively participating in local politics is impactful for all state constituents in cultivating community success, accountability, and overall improvement.

8. Sources consulted or recommended.

https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1602&context=law_facpub This discusses the research done in the Maryland cities as well as studies on the cognitive and psychological ability of 16 and 17-year-olds. In addition, it lays out the arguments regarding the lack of historical precedent in the current voter age amendment.

<https://blogs.harvard.edu/civics/files/2011/06/FL-OConnor-Act-FAQ.pdf> This document details the Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act and its amendments. It also provides a set of Frequently Asked Questions and answers relating to the structure and implementation of the law in schools across the state.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED574388.pdf> - CIRCLE working paper – Case Study on the push for an increase and standardization of Florida's civics education from in the early 2000s. This push resulted in the passage of the "Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act" which created the requirement of civics education in the language arts curriculum for K-12 and a mandated passage of an End of Course (EOC) exam for an assessment of middle schoolers' civics education.

<http://www.fldoe.org/policy/articulation/postsec-civics-lit.stml> - Postsecondary Civics Literacy from the Department of Education – in 2017, Florida amended Section 1007.25 to ensure that individuals entering college or state university could demonstrate basic civics knowledge like an understanding of the Constitution, democracy, and the functionality of the national government.