

Young Voices at the Ballot Box

Lowering the Voting Age for Local Elections in 2017 and Beyond

BY GENERATION CITIZEN

Most would agree that American democracy needs a shot in the arm. Around 60 percent of eligible citizens usually vote for president, fewer than 25 percent vote in most Mayoral elections, and public trust in government is at an historic low.

We need bold, innovative solutions to spark participation in politics and ensure that elected officials honestly represent the interests of their constituents. One possibility, which has been gaining momentum and deserves a prominent place in the “solution bank,” is extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year olds in local elections.

Youth activists and local elected officials have pursued this idea in a number of cities for over a decade. Takoma Park, Maryland, broke through in 2013 as the first American city to allow 16-year olds to vote in local elections, and its neighbor Hyattsville followed suit in 2015. At the end of 2015, Generation Citizen launched the Vote16USA campaign to help support local efforts and promote the idea nationally, hoping to serve as a clearinghouse for those interested in, and already working on, the issue.

In the 14 months since, despite the initial skepticism that many demonstrate over the idea, lowering the voting age has been solidified as a serious policy proposal worthy of mainstream consideration. More than 75 media outlets have covered the issue since Vote16USA’s launch, including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Vox*, and *Rolling Stone*. Most importantly, the issue was put before voters for the first time as ballot measures in San Francisco and Berkeley, California.

In Berkeley, 70 percent of voters voted yes to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year olds for

the city’s school board elections. The goal in San Francisco was more ambitious—lowering the voting age to 16 for all municipal elections. An early poll in April pegged the measure at 36 percent support, well below the 50 percent threshold needed to pass. Typically, ballot measures that pass begin with approximately 60 percent, to hold the inevitable backlash.

Over the next several months, however, youth leaders significantly swayed public opinion with a message focused on increasing voter turnout in the long run by building habitual voters at a young age. Nearly every elected official in the city supported the campaign, and in November it ultimately earned over 172,000 votes to finish just two percent shy of passing.

The youth-led ballot measure campaigns in Berkeley and San Francisco prove that lowering the local voting age is a viable policy solution that the public is ready to consider. These measures provide us a playbook for how to approach future campaigns in cities around the country. There is now more interest in this policy than ever, from youth, voters, and state and local elected officials around the country.

The landscape around lowering the voting age has changed dramatically since the 2015 publication of Vote16USA’s first white paper, “Young Voices at the Ballot Box,” necessitating this update. This paper presents the same core research and arguments with updates to reflect the past year’s progress. The paper also lays out updated, concrete next steps to advance the cause, and includes an updated legal feasibility study.

Why Should We Lower The Voting Age To 16?

Often, at first glance, the idea of lowering the voting age to 16 provokes skepticism from the public. Why

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should we lower the voting age if so many 18-year olds do not even vote in the first place? And aren't 16-year olds just kids?

A longer glance reveals that extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year olds in local elections is an opportune and strategic way to strengthen our overall democracy. While further evaluation is needed to more comprehensively determine the potential effects of lowering the voting age, research does exist, from this country and others, to suggest that lowering the voting age can improve voter participation and overall civic engagement, while the potential downsides are minimal.

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Reason 1: We Need to Encourage Effective and Relevant Civic Learning

Lowering the voting age on the local level can drive demand for effective civics education in schools, reviving a discipline that has been pushed to the side as schools focus on achieving accountability metrics in other subjects.

Enfranchising 16- and 17-year olds, even in a limited capacity, has the power to invigorate civics education in high schools. In all subjects, students learn best when the material presented is relevant to their lives. But, for many students, it can be difficult to feel a connection between the political process described in textbooks and the issues, that affect them every day. Civics class risks falling short by teaching young people how government works without any ability to actually participate in it. This disconnect may provide one of the reasons that Americans struggle at understanding how our government works. For example, only approximately one third of American adults can name the three branches of government, and a third can't even name a single branch.¹

Letting 16- and 17-year olds vote will bring much-needed relevance to civics classes, which can help address this lack of civic knowledge amongst the public.

In addition to motivating students to engage with civics classes, lowering the voting age can lead schools to focus more attention on effective civics education. When students are able to vote in local elections before leaving high school, it becomes harder for districts to ignore this crucial discipline. The high school classroom is the ideal place to teach and engage young people about important local issues, and lowering the voting age can inspire schools to take advantage of this opportunity.

This held true in San Francisco in 2016. The Board of Education voted unanimously to endorse the Vote16SF campaign, and simultaneously passed a resolution that committed to bolstering the district's civic education curriculum to ensure 16- and 17-year olds would be ready to approach the ballot if Prop F passed.

As we call for lowering the voting age in local elections, significant initiatives (including funding for civic learning in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and state mandates for a civics education class) are simultaneously underway to strengthen civics education nationwide. These efforts naturally go hand in hand with the push to lower the voting age, and in tandem they have the potential to create a virtuous cycle that dramatically boosts civic engagement. Lowering the voting age can catalyze demand for stronger civics education, which even further cultivates an engaged and active citizenry.

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Research shows that people who attend high schools with a strong culture of civic engagement have higher turnout rates in their 30s, regardless of their individual opinions on the importance of voting.² Expanding voting to 16- and 17-year olds can inspire both students and schools to renew their focus on civics, creating the potential for long-lasting, positive societal impact.

Reason 2: We Need to Make Voting a Habit

Government performs best with strong participation from the public, and the best way citizens can participate in government is by voting. Lowering the voting age can lead to a long-term increase in voter turnout, bringing more citizens in touch with their government and pushing the government to better serve its people. Increased turnout is especially important in local elections, where turnout has been plummeting in recent years and some cities are struggling to get even 20 percent of voters to the polls.³

First and foremost, voting is a habit—a path-dependent process—and a person’s first election is critical to establishing that habit.⁴ Evidence from Takoma Park, Maryland, and European countries that have lowered the voting age supports the argument that the age of 16 is a better time to start the habit of voting than 18.

In Takoma Park, the turnout rate for 16- and 17-year olds exceeded any other demographic in the city’s 2013 elections.⁵ Evidence from Europe is also favorable. Austria lowered its voting age to 16 for all of the country’s elections in 2008, and turnout among 16- and 17-year olds has been higher than for older first time voters.⁶ In the 2011 local elections in Norway, 21 municipalities used a voting age of 16 as a trial, and 16- and 17-year-old turnout was much higher than turnout among regular first-time voters (aged 18–21 years).⁷

Furthermore, research indicates that voting in one election can increase the probability that a person will vote in the next election by over 50 percent, and shows that early voting experiences are an important determinant of future voting behavior.⁸ Young people start forming voting habits when they reach the voting age and confront their first election.

While some Americans vote in the first election they are eligible for and become habitual voters, the majority of the electorate does not vote upon initial eligibility. Statistically, these individuals become habitual nonvoters for at least the next few elections, until they pick up the habit later in life. This helps explain why turnout for voters younger than 30 is worse than for any other age group.

Importantly, the overall voter turnout rate has dropped since the national voting age was lowered to 18 in 1971, through a constitutional amendment that was passed to align the voting age with the age for military service. The drop in turnout is not necessarily because people younger than 21 are less inclined to vote, but rather, because 18- and 19-year olds are at a traditionally unstable point in life. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, the main reason why young people claim they do not vote is because they are too busy.⁹ At the age of 18, this “busy” quotient, may be the highest, as people are adjusting to new responsibilities for the first time and may also struggle to determine the logistics of voting in a new location, without guidance from family or educators.

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It is clear that since most 18-year olds are in the midst of major life transitions, this age is a particularly problematic time to establish the habit of voting. Sixteen-year olds, however, are in a much better position to confront their first elections.

Lowering the voting age to 16 for local elections would ensure that each new voter experiences at least one election while in high school (assuming two-year election cycles in each locality). This allows them to establish the habit of voting in a stable environment. Sixteen- and 17-year olds can absorb their parents’ beliefs that voting is important, and schools can help students understand the logistics and establish voting as an accepted norm. If a person casts a ballot in the first election they are eligible for at age 16 or 17, it is statistically more likely that they will continue to participate in subsequent elections. The resulting higher turnout can lead to a more representative and higher performing government.

Research also shows that political participation is a social act, and citizens’ social circles heavily

influence turnout. Social networks based on high schools and family life are more likely to encourage voting than the brand-new networks 18-year olds join after they leave the parental nest.

As researchers from Denmark conclude, “Today when voters become eligible at 18 years of age, most young voters have had none or few participatory opportunities before leaving home. A younger voting age would create more opportunities for acquiring the habit of voting before leaving home.”¹⁰ Helping 16- and 17-year olds establish this important habit is a key step to increasing long-term voter turnout, and thus creating a more effective and accountable government. Lowering the voting age has shown to be effective at increasing turnout among first-time voters, and research demonstrates that once someone casts their first ballot they are likely to continue the habit of voting for years to come. Lowering the voting age can effectively help young people create the habit of voting, increasing overall turnout in the long run.

Reason 3: Sixteen- and Seventeen-Year Olds Have a Stake in the Game, and Politicians Must Pay Attention to Them

Youth are affected by local political issues, including education funding, school board decisions, employment initiatives, police programs, and public works projects. They work without limits on hours and pay taxes on their income, can drive in most states, and in some cases, are tried in adult courts. Fifty-eight percent of youth participate in volunteer activities, and many 16- and 17-year olds have been living in their communities for years and feel a deep connection to local issues.¹¹ They deserve the right to vote on issues that affect them on the local level.

The most reliable way for ordinary citizens to influence the government is through their votes, but those under 18 are excluded from the electorate. Allowing 16- and 17-year olds to vote in municipal elections would force local politicians to listen to their voices and address their concerns.

Reason 4: Sixteen- and Seventeen-Year Olds Are Ready to Vote

Furthermore, research shows that 16- and 17-year olds are equivalent to 18-year olds in their capacities

to function as citizens and vote responsibly. On average, 16-year olds possess the same level of civic knowledge as older young adults, and they also demonstrate equal levels of self-reported political skill and political efficacy. This does not mean that 16-year olds have the same political acumen as 30- or 40-year olds. But they do statistically have the same knowledge and skills as 21-year olds.¹² Therefore, it seems that they have the knowledge and acumen necessary to vote. Additionally, their voting choices on the aggregate were not substantially different from young adults.

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Research also demonstrates that 16- and 17-year olds are both neurologically and socially mature enough to vote. Not only do they have requisite civic knowledge and skills, but they have the mental reasoning ability necessary to make informed choices.

It is important to note that this study did show that adolescents under the age of 16 seem to have less political acumen. Sixteen seems to be the specific age to which lowering the voting age makes sense according to their political acumen.

Additionally, a study on the quality of vote choices among Austrian 16- and 17-year olds concluded that 16- and 17-year olds’ vote choices reflected their political preferences just as well as older voters’ choices.¹³ This evidence strongly indicates that 16- and 17-year olds are as ready to vote as 18-year olds, and denying them that right is an arbitrary policy.

Why Sixteen?

As efforts to lower the voting age in the United States have emerged in the past few years, most individuals and groups involved have advocated for lowering the age to 16. Some groups have targeted the age of 17, while a few commentators have argued for even lower ages, like 12.

Takoma Park and Hyattsville successfully lowered their municipal voting ages to 16, and the efforts

in San Francisco and Berkeley were also focused on the age 16. The unsuccessful effort in Lowell, Massachusetts targeted 17, largely because organizers thought it was a more winnable proposition than 16.

As these efforts continue to grow and expand into a cohesive movement, it is important that relevant stakeholders utilize the same specific goal of lowering the voting age to 16 for municipal elections. Turning 16 is a significant milestone in our society; 16-year olds can drive in most states, work and pay taxes on their income, and potentially be tried as an adult in court. Lowering the voting age to 16 also ensures that every high school student experiences one election before graduating (assuming 2-year cycles). Lastly, research shows there is a difference between 16-year olds and younger teenagers when it comes to abilities.

Addressing Myths About Lowering The Voting Age

Like any new, bold idea, lowering the voting age faces an array of counterarguments, and these deserve adequate consideration. Ultimately, most counterarguments come down to claims surrounding the maturity and ability of 16- and 17-year olds. Youth is a nebulous concept, and, in reality, legal age-based distinctions in our society are arbitrary and based on what is deemed best for society at large, as judged at a certain point in time. Lowering the voting age to 16 is in the best interests of our democracy, and arguments against doing so are only myths. Some of the most relevant specific counterarguments are addressed as follows:

Myth 1: Sixteen-Year Olds Are Not Mature Enough to Vote

This gut reaction is misguided. It is true that research exists showing 16-year olds' brains are still developing and they do not perform as well as older adults in impulse-driven situations in which emotions run high. However, the decision-making process for voting does not fall into this impulse-driven category. Rather, it depends on "cold cognition," a thought out decision-making process in which 16-year olds perform just as well as adults.¹⁴ Research shows that 16-year olds are indeed ready to vote.¹⁵ We need to work to get past this initial gut reaction, especially since an initial,

negative response usually does not even begin to consider how lowering the voting age can improve our democracy as a whole.

Myth 2: Sixteen-Year Olds Aren't Really Adults

Sixteen-year olds play an important role in our society, and the age has special significance in our culture. Sixteen-year olds can drive in most states, work without any restriction on hours, pay taxes, and in some cases be tried for crimes as adults. Also, high school students volunteer at twice the rate of adults, which shows a commitment to their communities that is deserving of a vote in local elections.¹⁶ The legal definition linking adulthood to the age of 18 should not affect voter eligibility.

It is also important to emphasize that these efforts are to lower only the voting age to 16. All other legal age limits should be set in accordance to what is best for each individual issue. Our country has set the driving age, in most states, at 16, and the drinking age at 21. For this specific issue, the voting age should be 16.

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Myth 3: Lowering the Voting Age Is a Progressive Power Grab

The perception that young voters favor Democrats is often overstated—in a 2014 Pew survey, 50 percent of millennials self-identified as political independents,¹⁷ and longitudinal polling data on political ideology shows that millennials are trending conservatively.¹⁸ Accordingly, many political strategists believe the millennial generation is up for grabs.

Moreover, the effort to lower the voting age transcends party lines. The main goal of the effort is to invigorate our democracy by fostering active and engaged citizens. A more lively political discourse—in classrooms and in the broader public

sphere—can stimulate ideas from across the political spectrum. The effort to lower the voting age is based on increasing participation in democracy, not promoting any one ideology.

Myth 4: Sixteen- and Seventeen-Year Olds Will Copy Their Parents' Vote

Data from the 2014 Scottish independence referendum suggests this claim is untrue. A survey conducted prior to the referendum found that over 40 percent of young people had different voting intentions than a parent interviewed.¹⁹ This claim will need to be studied more in the United States, but given the data on youth political preferences, it seems that young people demonstrate and express political beliefs independent from those of their parents.

Successful Implementation

Takoma Park and Hyattsville became the first American cities to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year olds for local elections in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Both cities are suburbs of Washington, D.C., with populations around 18,000. Maryland's legal structure made it relatively simple for the cities to lower the voting age—the city councils only needed to vote in favor of a charter amendment and they could implement the change. In Takoma Park, the proposal was passed in the context of a larger effort to expand voting rights through several reforms, including same-day voter registration. In Hyattsville, the reform passed as a standalone measure. One council member proposed the idea, and a grassroots effort convinced other members of the proposal's merits. The Maryland-based organization FairVote, which studies and promotes a number of election reforms, supported the efforts in both cities.

In Takoma Park's 2013 elections, the first after the change, 44 percent of registered 16- and 17-year olds voted, the highest rate among any age group. For a more detailed examination of how these cities lowered the local voting age and what the initial effects have been, see Vote16USA's report, *Lowering the Voting Age for Local Elections in Takoma Park and Hyattsville: A Case Study*.²¹

San Francisco. In 2016, San Francisco made history as the first city in the United States to put the

question of lowering the voting age for all local elections before voters as a ballot measure. More than 172,000 citizens voted in favor of the proposal, which finished just two percentage points shy of passing, a tremendous achievement for a youth-led campaign on the ballot for the first time.

A survey conducted prior to the referendum found that over 40 percent of young people had different voting intentions than a parent interviewed.

The effort began in 2014, when high school students in the city were struck by the fact that they and their peers were significantly impacted by local elections but had no voice in the process. Youth leaders brought a proposal to lower the local voting age to the San Francisco Youth Commission, where the Vote16SF campaign was born. In less than two years, students working on the campaign earned the support of nearly every elected official and political club in the city. The Board of Education unanimously endorsed the proposal, and the Board of Supervisors voted 9-2 to put it on the ballot at the November 2016 election.

Initial polling showed just 36 percent of voters would support the measure, but youth pressed forward, and earned 48 percent of the vote after months of campaigning. This dramatic increase demonstrates that public education efforts can substantially shift public opinion on the issue, especially when young voices are at the center. This campaign proves that lowering the voting age on the local level is a viable policy idea that voters are ready to seriously consider. Campaign leaders expect to bring the issue back to the ballot and win in 2018 or 2020.

For more on the historic San Francisco campaign and its keys to success, see Vote16USA's case study report.

Berkeley, CA, joined its neighbor San Francisco in making history in 2016. Youth leaders in the city successfully advocated for a ballot measure that would lower the voting age for school board elections in Berkeley to 16. The city council voted to put the measure on the ballot, and it passed with

an overwhelming 70 percent of the vote. The city council still must vote to implement the change, and is expected to do so in early 2017. This is an historic success that again proves voters are ready to give 16-year olds the right to participate in local elections.

In 2015, a city council member introduced the Youth Vote Amendment Act of 2015, which would extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year olds for all D.C. elections. The legislation gained multiple co-sponsors but did not advance beyond committee. The legislation will be reintroduced in 2017. It only needs a majority city council vote to become law—no referendum is required. Local youth-serving organizations are organizing students to lead advocacy efforts, following the strategies that worked well in San Francisco.

Multiple efforts are underway to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year olds in Colorado. Students in Boulder are advocating for a lower voting age in municipal elections, while a coalition called Student Voice Student Vote is organizing around a state bill that would lower the voting age for school board elections statewide.

Efforts to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year olds in New Mexico are emerging in early 2017. On the city level, young people in Albuquerque are organizing to advocate for lowering the voting age in municipal elections. On the state level, Rep. Javier Martinez has introduced legislation that would lower the voting age for school board elections statewide. Rep. Martinez introduced similar legislation in 2015; it garnered 16 co-sponsors but did not advance beyond committee.

Students in Illinois are exploring possibilities for lowering the voting age on the city level in Chicago, Evanston, and Downers Grove, while also pursuing state level legislation that would make it easier for cities to implement 16-year-old voting once approved.

Current Landscape Internationally

The concept of 16- and 17-year-old voting has seen considerably more momentum internationally.

Brazil, Ecuador, Argentina, Nicaragua, Austria, and Scotland, all let 16-year olds vote, and the voting age in Indonesia is 17. Austria lowered its voting age to 16 for all of the country's elections in 2008, and turnout among 16- and 17-year olds has been higher than the previous average for first time voters.²² Austria presents a particularly important case study; the voting age reform was accompanied by other measures intended to engage young citizens, including the elevation of the status of civic education in schools.²³ Austria's success shows the promise of a lower voting age combined with a renewed focus on civic education. This combination likely produces the best outcome in terms of civic engagement, as the two initiatives mutually reinforce each other. American cities considering lowering their voting ages should also examine areas for improvement in their schools' civic education programs.

In the 2011 local elections in Norway, 21 municipalities used a voting age of 16 as a trial, and 16- and 17-year-old turnout was much higher than turnout among regular first-time voters (aged 18–21 years).²⁴

More recently, the voting age was set at 16 for the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. Turnout among 16- and 17-year olds was approximately 75 percent, and a post-election survey found that 97 percent of 16- and 17-year olds who voted said they would vote again in future elections, further evidence that a person's first election is habit forming.²⁵ Following that vote, the Scottish parliament decided in 2015 to allow 16- and 17-year olds to vote in all of Scotland's elections going forward.

The United Kingdom considered lowering the voting age to 16 for the 2017 Brexit referendum, but ultimately did not. The upper chamber of parliament supported the proposal, while the lower chamber was opposed. Analysis from Generation Citizen shows that a 16-year-old voting age, coupled with stronger youth turnout, could have made a difference in the referendum.²⁶

Preliminary calculations by Generation Citizen indicate that globally, 7.9 percent of all 17-year olds are eligible to vote, and 4.1 percent of all 16-year

olds can vote. This is not a new idea—it is a good existing idea that should be expanded.

Legal Feasibility In The United States

The legal feasibility of lowering the voting age in any given city depends on state laws, as each state has the authority to establish the requirements for voting in its state and local elections. These requirements are set out in either state Constitutions or statutes. Local governments have varying degrees of authority in determining voter eligibility for their municipal elections, depending on the degree of home rule municipalities are granted in their particular states.

An initial feasibility study by Generation Citizen has determined that city-level campaigns to lower the voting age for local elections seem to be currently feasible in five states, while ten additional states appear to give cities the authority to lower the local voting age but have nuanced laws that may pose hurdles and require further analysis. In these states, cities could lower the voting age for their local elections through city charter amendments. The process varies, but proposed charter amendments usually must be passed by the city council and then approved by voters at the next election. Since this is a legally untested area and some constitutional and statutory provisions are open to interpretation, actions to change the voting age in areas where it seems possible may be subject to legal challenges.

It should be noted that if advocates wish to lower the voting age for an entire state, either a state constitutional amendment or statutory change would be required, depending on the state. An amendment to the U.S. Constitution was required to lower the federal voting age from 21 to 18 in 1971. This change was motivated by a desire to align the voting age with the age for military service, in the context of the Vietnam War.

Next Steps To Advance This Cause

The 2016 election marked an historic moment for the Vote16 movement. Prop F in San Francisco was the nation's first ballot measure to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year olds in municipal elections. After polling at 36 percent in March, the ballot

question earned 48 percent of the vote on Election Day, with over 172,000 San Franciscans voting yes. Across the Bay in Berkeley, a ballot measure to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year olds for school board elections won with 70 percent of the vote. These two ballot measures, but especially Prop F, prove that this is a viable policy solution voters are ready to consider and provide us a playbook for how to approach future ballot measure campaigns to lower the voting age in cities around the country.

Further, the divisive, substance-free 2016 presidential election season stimulated a hunger for new political solutions that compels us to think big about possibilities for Vote16.

In states that do not currently give cities the authority to lower the voting age for local elections, state legislation is required to remove that barrier, and we intend to engage with legislators to advance this legislation in the near future.

Overall, the goal remains to advance this policy on the municipal level, one city at a time, with youth voices at the front and center. Ballot measure campaigns are the vehicle to lowering the voting age in most cities where it is possible. We aim to support multiple ballot measure campaigns in 2018 and/or 2020. In states that do not currently give cities the authority to lower the voting age for local elections, state legislation is required to remove that barrier, and we intend to engage with legislators to advance this legislation in the near future.

Conclusion

The time is ripe to advance Vote16 in cities and states across the country. The 2016 ballot measure campaigns in San Francisco and Berkeley prove the viability of the idea, and the presidential election season left many young people, policymakers, and citizens with a strong desire for bold, concrete solutions to revitalize our democracy starting on the local level.

Extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year olds on the local level can increase turnout in the long run

by making it easier for young people to establish the habit of voting, and 16- and 17-year olds have indeed voted at higher rates than older first-time voters when given the chance. Lowering the voting age can also catalyze improvements in civic education that so many have called for in the past few months, and 16- and 17-year olds have shown they are ready to vote and have a stake in local issues.

Critically, this issue transcends party lines. It is not the idea of one party, and it does not aim to benefit any political ideology. Rather, lowering the voting age is an effort to reinvigorate our democracy by fostering active and engaged citizens.

As the post-election period fades and 2017 comes into full swing, national political discourse will remain alive with discussion and debate on several important issues. The state of our democracy itself is one of those issues, and Vote16 deserves to be part of the conversation. Lowering the voting age is a step in the right direction toward cultivating an engaged and active citizenry that can strengthen our nation for years to come. Now is the time to ensure Vote16's tremendous progress in 2016 turns into real wins in the years to come.

Notes

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