

With teens more politically active, support grows for lowering the voting age to 16

By PBS NewsHour, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.22.18

Word Count **945**

Level **1140L**



Rhea Boyd, 18, of Thomas Jefferson High School in Denver, Colorado, registers to vote online April 6, 2010. Some leaders believe the right to vote should be extended to 16- and 17-year-olds as well. Photo by: Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post via Getty Images

In April 2018, a Washington, D.C., city councilman proposed lowering the voting age in local and federal elections from 18 to 16.

Charles Allen had attempted to pass his bill once before, in 2015. The bill died in committee. This time, he said, he thinks there is more support. Since the early 2010s, a handful of communities, mostly clustered in the suburbs of D.C., have already lowered the voting age to 16 for local elections, and other cities are considering similar legislation.

Across the country, young people are pressuring lawmakers and staging protests against gun violence. They are acting in response to the Parkland, Florida, school shooting. Now, the question of when teens ought to have an electoral voice has resurfaced.

Constitutional law expert Michael Morley said states have the power to decide who gets to vote in state and local elections. He explained that the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 in 1971, in response to young people fighting in the Vietnam War.

Who Has Lowered The Voting Age?

Brandon Klugman is the campaign coordinator at Vote16USA, an organization that lobbies for lowering the voting age. He said that four other cities currently have laws allowing 16- or 17-year-olds to vote. Three of them are in Maryland, while Berkeley, California, allows 16-year-olds to vote in school board elections only.

If 17-year-olds turn 18 before the general election, many states will let them vote in state and presidential primaries.

What Supporters Say

Allen has a long list of reasons he believes the voting age is too high. He thinks 16-year-olds should have a stake in laws that affect them, such as education policy. Research suggests that a strong predictor for voting habits is a record of previous voting. Student activists around the country have also demonstrated that many teenagers "have very well thought out positions and frankly, in many cases, they're leading the adults," Allen said.

For Allen, however, perhaps his greatest motivation is that many 16-year-olds are taxpayers because they have jobs. However, they cannot vote for their own elected representation.

Allen has re-introduced his bill at a time when students and teenagers are participating in advocacy, activism and even government itself.

The national voting rights advocacy group FairVote supports Allen's bill. "Sixteen- and 17-year-olds are affected by the same policies or even policies in a different way than older voters are," said Dave O'Brien, legal fellow at FairVote. "It seems only right that they should have some sort of input into it," he added.

What Critics Say

Some critics say 16-year-olds are not mature enough or do not have enough life experience to vote.

"The arguments for lowering the voting age to 18 don't entirely translate to lowering it to 16," Morley said, referring to the campaign to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 in 1970. "You had the notion that 18 was already adulthood in several other contexts," such as facing the draft, establishing households and starting families. Morley, though, does not necessarily think those arguments apply to 16-year-olds. In most cases, they are still legally required to attend school and generally depend on parental support.

Allen does not see legal adulthood as relevant.

"I think that young people have a stake in election outcomes. At age 16 your relationship with the law changes dramatically, from being able to drive on city streets to having a job and paying taxes," he said.

"There are a lot of 16- and 17-year-olds who also walk around every day with adult responsibilities," Allen said. "Not only are they having jobs, they're a part of helping run a family. Some of them may even have kids of their own. When you think about what those responsibilities are, why shouldn't they have a voice in helping shape that?"

Why It Matters

Historically, political parties have struggled to get 18- to 24-year-olds to show up on Election Day. However, Allen thinks young people are demonstrating a willingness to get engaged. He pointed to Takoma Park, Maryland, as one example. A FairVote study of the 2013 election in Takoma Park showed that about 17 percent of 16- and 17-year-old voters cast a ballot in the local election, about double the 8.5 percent of 18-year-olds.

Neither Allen nor O'Brien sees the issue as favoring one political party over another, but Morley is not as convinced. Data shows that younger people tend to vote Democrat, so lowering the voting age could influence some elections.

What's Next?

Klugman at Vote16USA said many states are making a good effort to increase voter turnout among young people. Currently, 13 states and D.C. allow for voter pre-registration at age 16. A new law in California will pre-register 16 and 17-year-olds to vote when they get a driver's license. They will have to opt out if they do not want to register.

Klugman also said that state legislators in at least three other states — New York, Virginia and Minnesota — have introduced bills to lower the voting age in state and local elections, federal elections or both.

The next step for the D.C. bill is a hearing at the Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety, which Allen is in charge of.

If approved by a majority of the committee's five members, it would go to the full DC Council for its consideration, where a majority of eight out of 13 council members are on board.

It would then move to Mayor Muriel Bowser's desk for approval. Bowser's press secretary, LaToya Foster, said the mayor will support the bill.

By 2020, Allen hopes 16- and 17-year-olds will be able to vote in both local and federal races.