

COMMENTARY

A Lower Voting Age for Some Californians This Election Season

Education Opportunities and Policy Implications



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Right now, for the first time, youth aged 16 and 17 are voting in California school board elections in Oakland and Berkeley. Oakland's Measure QQ passed in November 2020 with 67.9 percent support from voters, and Berkeley's Measure Y1 passed in November 2016 with 70.3 percent support; both measures lowered to 16 years old the voting age for school board elections. These measures have been implemented thanks to the long-term efforts of a community coalition called [Oakland Youth Vote](#), working in collaboration with the [Oakland Unified School District](#) (OUSD) and the [Alameda County Registrar of Voters](#).

Oakland and Berkeley teens are the youngest voters in California, and they join a growing number of 16- and 17-year-olds nationally and internationally who have gained the right to vote through policies that lower the voting age. Eight towns in Maryland as well as Brattleboro, Vermont, allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local elections; and Newark, New Jersey, has joined Oakland and Berkeley in allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in school board elections, though Newark is still working to implement the policy.

Policies to expand voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds are being actively debated in cities and states [across the U.S.](#) Since 1995, California has [12 times](#) considered statewide policy to lower the voting age, most recently in 2023 with [SCA 2](#), which would have lowered the voting age to 17 for all elections. [Internationally](#), 16- and 17-year-olds have gained full voting rights in multiple countries, including Austria, Malta, and Argentina, and the right to vote in local elections in countries such as Scotland and in some German states.

What Is the Purpose of Lowering the Voting Age?

Four main arguments provide the rationale for allowing 16-year-olds to vote and highlight the benefits for young people, education systems, and democracy.

THE CAPACITY ARGUMENT

At 16 years of age, youth have sufficient cognitive, social, and civic capacities to vote. A robust body of [evidence](#) demonstrates that adolescents are capable of deliberative, reasoned decision-making, and that by age 16, adolescents demonstrate adult-like levels of cognitive capacities, including working memory, verbal fluency, planning, and logical reasoning. [Research](#) shows that the brain structures and cognitive functions involved in voting are distinct from the structures and functions involved in the kinds of decision-making that involve high emotional arousal and social-rewarding stimuli. For these reasons, [developmental scientists](#) have for a long time argued that the age for youth rights and policy protections should differ based on the decision-

making context.

[Multiple studies](#) show that 16- and 17-year-olds have similar political knowledge to young adults who have voting rights, and in some cases, youth show more sophistication than adults in [reasoning about political issues](#), [seeking information](#), and [discerning fake news](#). Moreover, [research](#) documents many ways that adolescents are actively improving their communities—further proof that adolescents are interested, motivated, and capable of meaningful civic engagement. In fact, youth-led movements to lower the voting age have been successful in part because as they advocate for voting rights, young people are actively demonstrating youth interest and ability.

THE RIGHTS ARGUMENT

Young people should have the right to weigh in on issues that impact them. Article 12 of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) asserts that children should be able to freely express their views on all issues affecting them, and that their views should be given weight in accordance with their age and maturity. Young people have a personal stake in many issues, including education policy, gun control, climate change, and reproductive rights. Arguably, every policy decision affects young people more because they have to live longer with the consequences.

School board elections are a powerful example of the importance of youth rights, because no one is more affected by school board decisions than students. Students spend the majority of their time in school, giving them the knowledge, the experience, and a very high stake in how schools operate. [School boards](#) make decisions about curriculum, determine a wide range of school policies from school lunch to policing, and set budgetary resources and priorities. As students are primary stakeholders in all school board decisions, the rights argument asserts that young people should not be denied the opportunity to elect leaders who represent their interests. Oakland and Berkeley voters overwhelmingly agreed with this logic, giving young people in their communities a voice in school board elections.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL-TIMING ARGUMENT

It is better developmentally to introduce voting rights at ages 16 and 17 than at age 18. As high school students, 16- and 17-year-olds are more connected to home, school, and community than 18-year-olds, who are likely to be leaving home, graduating from high school, and getting a job or going to college. These transitions often make it harder for first-time voters to navigate registration and voting. The logistics of registering and voting can be confusing to new voters, and they have [other barriers to voting access](#). These barriers may be decreased by introducing voting earlier, so that young people can access information and support in their schools and communities. Further, the earlier in life one begins to vote, the more likely one is to continue voting because voting [becomes habitual](#).

THE CIVIC EDUCATION ARGUMENT

Voting during adolescence is a civic learning opportunity. [International research](#) has shown that voting at age 16 increases a young person's civic knowledge, interest, and engagement immediately after elections and over longer periods of time. Research in Norway, Scotland, and Austria has found that voter turnout was 8–21 percent higher among 16- and 17-year-old voters than among 18-to-21-year-olds; across countries, this higher youth turnouts persist across multiple elections, lasting an estimated [17 years](#). Thus, voting at an earlier age is a real-world civic learning opportunity.

This learning experience can be further enhanced through school-based civic education. [International evidence](#) has documented how some locations revised their civics curriculum in response to a change in voting age. When students gain voting rights, educators may see a clear and pressing need to adopt new civics best practices to prepare students for voting.

A renewed commitment to civic education may already be on the horizon in Oakland as their students head to the ballot box. After Measure QQ granted Oakland 16- and 17-year-olds voting rights for school board elections, Oakland's Board of Education passed Resolution No. [2122-0089](#) to support the measure's implementation, noting that the new law "creates an onramp to broaden

democratic participation among young people” and committing itself to establishing “a Districtwide foundational culture to increase access to voter education and registration.”

What Are the Policy Implications for California?

This November’s school board elections in Oakland and Berkeley will offer proof of concept for incorporating adolescents into the electoral process in California. Especially if the processes and outcomes can be documented through research, these cities’ elections will offer important evidence about and insight into implementation; what civic education best supports students in registering, researching the issues and candidates, and voting; and, in turn, the impact of voting on students’ civic learning and engagement. Additionally, a lower voting age may yield higher turnout across ages: Some evidence suggests that when young people gain voting rights, their [parents are more likely to vote](#).

As more school board elections occur in Oakland and Berkeley, evidence should start to accumulate on the potential benefits to young people, such as increased civic learning and engagement, and to democracy, such as higher voter turnout and thus more representative school board elections. With California-specific evidence to draw on, other municipalities may come to adopt similar legislation, and the state may revive its interest in lowering the voting age.

Socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic disparities in voter registration and turnout have existed in the U.S. for decades. A lower voting age has the potential to enhance equity and reduce these disparities by offering broader access to registration and election information to *all* young people in high schools. However, this goal will be achieved only through thoughtful implementation that attends to equity.

Lowering the voting age could also be a catalyst for greater investment in statewide civic education. California already has several state-level efforts to support civic education, including high school voter education weeks, excused absences for civic and political activities, permission for 16-year-olds to serve as poll workers and preregister to vote, and a [State Seal of Civic Engagement](#) (SSCE) for students who demonstrate excellence in civic education. Adopting a lower voting age could stimulate other initiatives that deepen classroom-based and extracurricular civic education for high school students in California.

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