



## **POLICY: REDUCE VOTING AGE TO 16 IN ALL ELECTIONS**

### **THE ISSUE**

The Board of Trade/Chamber of Commerce community exists to ensure there is a business climate conducive to the success of its members and the community. Government decision makers at all government levels need information on how their decisions are impacting the economy. Many individuals in Surrey under the age of 19 are entrepreneurs and contribute to their local communities through various initiatives, as evidenced through the 2,000 + students that have engaged in Surrey Board of Trade entrepreneurial and career programming.

23% of Surrey's population is under the age of 19. They are our current and future workforce and entrepreneurs. Those individuals that are 16+ are contributing to the economy (paying taxes, participating in our workforce, etc.), but they have no say in how it operates. They participate in a system that is regulated and governed, however, cannot vote for elected representatives that make decisions that impact their lives. Their voice and perspective should count in all government elections. It is imperative that the voting age be reduced to the age of 16 to ensure civic engagement, education, and sustained participation in elections.

### **THE OPPORTUNITY**

In Canada, all citizens who are at least 18 years of age on election day have the right to vote in a general election, except for the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada. We fought long and hard for this right, challenging gender, racial, religious, social status, and administrative restrictions to ensure every Canadian citizen was given the right to vote. After years of battling for the right to vote, we have lost sight of the associated duty that goes along with this right, and that is the inherent responsibility to vote.

Voting is a positive duty owed by citizens to the rest of our society, much like paying taxes, reporting for jury duty, or wearing a seat belt. These duties are reasonable limits we put on our freedom to ensure the success of our democratic society.

We must change the attitudes and habits of Canadians when it comes to voting.

It should be understood from an early age that every Canadian citizen has the right to vote. It is how Canadians choose which leaders represent them. Voting is a responsibility that all Canadians should exercise. Cities, provinces and countries are shaped by the outcome of an election. Voting connects citizens with the political process and with each other. When you take part in an election and express your view, you make democracy work.

There is an opportunity through the K-12 education system to enhance education and awareness of government systems, such as which level of government makes which decisions, why it is important to vote, how democracy works, and much more.

Some municipal<sup>1</sup> and provincial<sup>2</sup> jurisdictions in Canada have considered lowering their voting age. So have other countries, including the United Kingdom<sup>3</sup>, Australia<sup>4</sup> and New Zealand. Thirteen countries<sup>5</sup>, ranging from Brazil to Nicaragua, Ecuador, Austria, Estonia and Malta, already have voting ages under 18<sup>6</sup>. The Council of Europe<sup>7</sup> has urged its member countries to follow suit.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/ubcm-16-vote-age-2019-1.5299066>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-voting-age-16-green-1.5995601>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.politics.co.uk/reference/voting-age-2/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2013.868402>

<sup>5</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/view-large/282896085>

<sup>6</sup> <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsab019>

<sup>7</sup> <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=18015&lang=en>

Young citizens need to be involved in the decisions that determine the future that they're going to inherit. They also need to be able to participate in elections as some already work in the system. Research shows us that when eligible Canadians start voting early, they stay engaged and they continue to be voters.

Economic issues that prevail among young citizens include climate change, crowded classrooms, employment, post-secondary funding, and uncertain futures. 16 and 17 year olds are impacted every day by government decisions. The reason to lower the voting age is simple: in a true democracy, those who are affected by government policy should have a say.

The positive impacts of lowering the voting age have been demonstrated around the world: increased voter turnout. Better policy that meets the needs of everyone. An education system that puts students first. Real climate action. And politicians who must think about building our collective future — not just the next election.

### Will lowering the voting age help voter turnout?

Voting is a habit. It has been proven that if first time voters have social and educational supports — which come naturally when you live with your parents and attend school — they are more likely to vote again. Right now, we ask youth to start voting during a time of transition in their lives. At 18, many are moving away from home, leaving high school, getting jobs, or going to university. This makes it harder to register and get to the polls.

### Why extend voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds for local elections?

- Extending voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds at the local level can increase voter turnout and strengthen our democracy in the long run, as voting is habitual and research shows that age 16 is a better time than 18 to establish the habit of voting.
- The most reliable way for citizens to influence the government is through their votes. Granting 16 and 17 year olds the right to vote will ensure that politicians listen to their voices and address their concerns.
- It can drive demand for better civic education in schools. The combination of a lower voting age and stronger civic education can create a virtuous cycle that dramatically boosts civic engagement.

### Where has it been done? What campaigns are underway?

#### Previous successes:

- Takoma Park, Hyattsville, Greenbelt, and Riverdale Park, Maryland all use a 16 year old voting age for local elections. The impacts have been universally positive. Berkeley, California has approved of 16 year old voting for school board elections.
- Many countries in Europe and South America use a 16 year old voting age on various levels, including Scotland, Germany, and Austria. Research on countries that have lowered the voting age has shown that the change has led to increased overall voter turnout.

#### Areas with great potential:

- Maryland gives a unique degree of authority to city governments, which can implement a lower voting age locally through a city council vote. There is great opportunity to support youth-led work to lower the voting age in additional Maryland cities.
- California cities can lower their local voting ages through charter amendments approved via referendums.
- Massachusetts youth are pushing for a state bill that would allow cities to lower the local voting age, just like cities in Maryland can. Several cities have expressed a desire to do so if given the authority.
- In the USA, there is opportunity to elevate the issue in public discourse, building on momentum from a proposal to lower the federal voting age that earned support from 126 members of the US congress in 2019.
- Young people have adult responsibilities but are denied the same rights. People under 18 are contributing and active members of society. Millions are employed<sup>8</sup> and volunteer in their communities<sup>9</sup>. Many people under 18 also have “adult” responsibilities – such as being the primary caregiver<sup>10</sup> for an ailing family member, running a business<sup>11</sup>, and making substantial financial contributions<sup>12</sup> to their households.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat03.htm>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/05\\_1130\\_LSA\\_YHA\\_SI\\_factsheet.pdf](http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/05_1130_LSA_YHA_SI_factsheet.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.aacy.org/images/PressRelease/AAP-News-Caregiving.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <http://fortune.com/2016/09/15/18-entrepreneurs-under-18-teen-business/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/2000189-Dropping-Out-and-Clocking-In.pdf>

- They are also capable of incredible intelligence and accomplishment. People under age 18 have the ability to win a Nobel Prize<sup>13</sup>, reach the summit of Mount Everest<sup>14</sup>, conduct cancer research<sup>15</sup>, become published authors<sup>16</sup>, teach a graduate-level course<sup>17</sup> in nuclear physics, run their own schools<sup>18</sup>, work for NASA<sup>19</sup>, and risk their lives<sup>20</sup> to save others. If young people are capable of such a variety of amazing feats, certainly they have the capacity to vote for the candidate that best represents their interests.
- Young people are expected to follow the law but have no say in making it. People under 18 are expected to follow adult laws and experience adult consequences if they don't do so.
- Taxes. Young people are also expected to follow the law regarding taxes. This is taxation without representation.
- Lowering the voting age will improve the lives of youth. Young people have a right to be heard and to have their interests taken seriously, particularly as there are certain issues, such as environmental degradation, public education policy, long-term government debt, corporal punishment laws, and poverty that impact young people more than anyone else. Younger people may also be better in tune with modern issues around internet privacy and social media use. But since young people are underrepresented in politics, the issues affecting them are underrepresented as well. Lowering the voting age will also help to increase the civic engagement of young people.
- Knowledge and experience are not criteria for voting eligibility. Even though young people can be as politically informed as older people, there is no requirement that either group have any political knowledge at all. In fact, whenever tests have been used to register voters, it has always been about preventing certain groups of people from having political power rather than making sure the electorate is as informed as possible.
- There are no wrong votes. In a democracy, we don't deny people the vote because we think they might vote badly. Even if we feel they are completely ignorant of the issues, woefully misguided about the economy, who get their political ideas from biased media, vote for candidates based on their personality, and are completely naive about the world.

If young people can cast a ballot when they are 16, still in secondary school and residing in their hometowns, there is an opportunity to instill voting as a civic habit. Lowering the voting age can also strengthen the call for civic education. When Austria lowered its voting age to 16, it pursued numerous reforms to engage its youngest generations, including elevating the importance of civic education in schools. The city of Vienna announced<sup>21</sup> that it will spend €1 million on youth participation and the civic education of young people starting at the kindergarten level. At a time when schools are looking to reinvest in efforts focused on teaching young people about government, lowering the voting age to 16 can incentivize schools to engage students in real conversations about governing and politics.

Finally, lowering the voting age gives young people a real stake in the process. As parts of the world begin to emerge from the coronavirus pandemic, it is evident that it has had a deep impact on young people. A recent study<sup>22</sup> surveyed over 10,000 young people from around the world and found that 75% of them called the future frightening, with 83% blaming governments for failing to take care of the planet. These alarming statistics demonstrate a societal opportunity to ensure that young people are at the table

## THE RECOMMENDATION

The Surrey Board of Trade recommends that federal, provincial and municipal governments reduce the voting age to 16 for all elections.

<sup>13</sup> <http://nypost.com/2014/12/10/malala-yousafzai-is-youngest-person-to-win-nobel-peace-prize/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.historyandheadlines.com/10-major-accomplishments-young-people/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/jack-andraka-the-teen-prodigy-of-pancreatic-cancer-135925809/?all>

<sup>16</sup> <https://teenscanwritetoo.wordpress.com/2012/10/06/teen-author-bookshelf-list-of-published-teen-authors/>

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/04/teen-physicist\\_n\\_1402887.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/04/teen-physicist_n_1402887.html)

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.sudval.com/05\\_onepersononevote.html#01](http://www.sudval.com/05_onepersononevote.html#01)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/2-degrees-flies-planes-author-works-at-nasa-his-age-17/ar-BBmHYb4?li=AAa0dzB&ocid=mailsignout>

<sup>20</sup> <http://theweek.com/articles/468498/9-heroic-teens-incredible-acts-bravery-updated>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.wien.gv.at/english/politics/international/newsletter/03-2021-children-youth-parliament.html>

<sup>22</sup> [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3918955](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3918955)

## **ADDITIONAL SOURCES**

<https://dogwoodbc.ca/lower-bc-voting-age/>

<https://vote16usa.org/resources/>

[http://www.kaspermhansen.eu/Work/JEPOP\\_Bhatti&Hansen\\_2012\\_young.pdf](http://www.kaspermhansen.eu/Work/JEPOP_Bhatti&Hansen_2012_young.pdf)

<https://circle.tufts.edu/2022-election-center>

<https://theconversation.com/why-lowering-the-voting-age-in-canada-is-such-a-good-idea-180108>

<https://www.gmfus.org/news/voting-16-exploring-city-led-movement-lower-voting-age>

<https://www.eagleonline.com/blog/2014/10/10-reasons-to-vote?source=google.com>