
PRIORITY 1: LOWER SAN FRANCISCO'S LEGAL VOTING AGE TO SIXTEEN YEARS OF AGE

Urging the Mayor and San Francisco Board of Supervisors to invest in voter turnout and the civic and political development of young people by supporting a charter amendment lowering San Francisco's legal voting age to sixteen

BACKGROUND

Robust voter participation is at the core of a healthy democracy. However, the United States enjoys a far lower voter turnout rates than other established democracies, only 60% during presidential elections and 40% during midterm elections, as compared to 80% in Austria, Sweden, and Italy and 90% in Australia, Belgium, and Chile.¹ The 2014 elections showed the lowest voter turnout since World War II with the lowest numbers of all amongst voters under age 30. San Francisco is no exception to these trends. Our exciting November 2014 ballot won turnout from only 53% of registered voters. San Francisco's November 2013 ballot saw participation from less than 30% of registered voters.²

Democratic participation and political enfranchisement strengthen our democracy. Indeed, voters demonstrated their commitment to the ideals of democratic representation and participation when they voted to create the San Francisco Youth Commission over nineteen

years ago. Since that time, the San Francisco Youth Commission has advised the City on the unmet needs of youth. We are currently witnessing an ongoing diminishment of the share of our City's population made up of youth and families. At the same time, we are staring down problems that were not of young people's making, but which we will be required to solve – from climate issues like water scarcity, to economic threats, like the rising costs of college tuition and housing. It is the Youth Commission's firm contention that we need all hands on deck to face these challenges – that means we need young people to begin developing their civic leadership and participation now – not later.

In January 2015, the San Francisco Youth Commission passed a resolution urging for the extension of voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds in municipal and school district elections. The 2015 resolution followed upon previous resolutions adopted in 2005 by both the San Francisco Youth Commission³ and the San

¹ Fair Vote, The Center for Voting and Democracy, "Voter Turnout," Retrieved from: <http://www.fairvote.org/research-and-analysis/voter-turnout/>.

² San Francisco Department of Elections, "Historical Voter Turnout," Retrieved from <http://www.sfgov2.org/index.aspx?page=1670>.

³ San Francisco Youth Commission Resolution 0405 – AL013. Resolution Urging the San Francisco Board of Supervisors to Recommend to State Legislators That They Allow Local Choice, For Which City or County Could Permit Persons 16 years of Age or Older to Vote In City or County Elections adopted June 6, 2005. Retrieved from <http://www.sfbos.org/modules/showdocument.aspx?documentid=51216>

Francisco Board of Supervisors⁴ supporting the expansion of suffrage to citizens of 16 years and older in city and county elections. The Youth Commission's 2015 resolution was passed after months of research on how extending voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds will boost our democracy and increase voter turnout over the long term.

Extending voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds is an important investment in their civic and political development. Extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds will mean more people can cast their first vote in a community where they have roots, are enrolled in school, where their parents are voters, and where they may be more interested in voting than those who are just two years older.

Research shows that voting is habitual, and that once a young person casts their first vote, they will continue voting.⁵ Additionally, the earlier someone starts voting, the more likely they are to be a lifelong voter.⁶ Many young people encounter major transitions at age 18, which can make it a challenging year to establish new voting habits. As a result, voter turnout among eligible voters under 30 is lower than any other age group. By contrast, when given the chance to vote, 16 and 17 year

olds register and turn out at greater rates than older voters. This has been confirmed in other countries that allow teens to vote (Norway Germany, Argentina, the United Kingdom, Argentina, Brazil, and Austria) as well as in U.S. cities that have extended voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds like Takoma Park, Maryland and the Chicago 2014 primaries.⁷

16 and 17 year olds are absolutely capable of understanding politics. Research shows that 16-year-olds' political knowledge is about the same as 21-year-olds' and quite close to the average for all adults.⁸ Neurologically, 16 and 17 year olds have developed the ability to logically analyze information and make responsible and informed voting choices. Research consistently indicates 16-17 year-olds make voting decisions based on reasoned consideration of their own and larger interests in a fashion similar to older voters.⁹ The high school classroom is the perfect place to engage and inform young people about the local municipal issues that impact their lives. Expanding the vote to 16 and 17 year olds will be an opportunity to promote an even deeper engagement with the civics curriculum required in our local schools.

We also know that 16 and 17 year olds are capable of forming independent ideas. In the Scottish independence referendum, 44% of

⁴ Board of Supervisor File No. 051215 – Urging State Legislators to Permit Persons 16 Years of Age or Older to Vote in City and County Elections, Passed on July 21, 2005. Retrieved from <https://sfgov.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=2583879&GUID=7B2703EE-19B3-4EE2-8775-94A4BEB38779>.

⁵ Eric Plutzer, "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth," *The American Political Science Review* 96/1 (March 2002), pp. 41-56.

⁶ Bhatti, Yosef, and Kasper Hansen. "Leaving the Nest and the Social Act of Voting: Turnout among First-Time Voters." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 22, no. 4 (2012).

⁷ Rick Pearson, "17-year-olds voted at higher rate than parents in primary," *Chicago Tribune*, May 17, 2014; And: J.B. Wogan, "Takoma Park sees high turnout among teens after election reform," *Governing Magazine*, Nov. 7, 2013

⁸ Daniel Hart and Robert Atkins, "American Sixteen- and Seventeen-Year-Olds are Ready to Vote," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 63 (January 2011), pp. 201-221.

⁹ *Ibid.*

teens voted differently than their parents.¹⁰ If 16 and 17 year olds are given the right to vote, families will engage in dialogue that will lead to a more informed and engaged electorate overall. In fact, evidence suggests there is a “trickle up” effect from youth civic participation. When 16 and 17 year olds engage in civics, conversations about politics and civic life are brought home, with a positive effect on voter turnout for parents and family members of all ages. This “trickle up” also extends to the roommates and peers of those same young voters after they reach age 18.¹¹

Age sixteen holds a special significance in our society. Upon turning 16, young people can drive, work without limitations on hours, pay taxes, take classes on government in school, and are frequently subject to adult criminal charges. Despite the civic responsibilities that accrue at age 16, 16 and 17 year olds are not able to vote. Given the current age demographics in San Francisco where the average age of the electorate has risen from 44.2 in 1980 to 45.8 and is projected to 47.6 by 2025, expanding the electorate is an essential step in counterbalancing this aging and ensure the interests of younger generations are protected. Many families have left San Francisco due to the increase in home prices and inability to afford the cost of living in the city. Between 2000 and 2013, San Francisco lost about 8,000 school age youth and now has the lowest percentage of kids of any major U.S.

¹⁰ The Electoral Commission Lothian Chambers, 59–63 George IV Bridge, Edinburgh EH1 1RN. (2014). The 2014 Scottish Independence Voting Guide

¹¹ Michael McDevitt and Spiro Kiouisis, “Experiments in Political Socialization: Kids Voting USA as a Model for Civic Education Reform,” August 2006.

city.¹² The young people impacted by these trends are best positioned to identify solutions, and their political enfranchisement is a vital step toward combating family flight.

The city has seen fit to make investments in the leadership and civic engagement of young people through DCYF’s Youth Leadership and Organizing programs, the Youth Empowerment Fund, and the city’s annual Youth Advocacy Day, among other initiatives. Thousands of SFUSD high school students have cast votes in mock elections and ballot measures through the Youth Vote program, gaining exposure to the electoral process and civic norms and practices. In October 2014, 100 young people voluntarily attended a Young Voters Forum designed to educate youth on the various issues on the November ballot. A majority of the attendees at the Young Voters Forum were under 18, yet they came to reflect on how the ballot initiatives might impact their lives and those of their peers and family. The non-partisan event was put on by the San Francisco Youth Commission, TAYSF, San Francisco Youth Warriors, Youth Leadership Institute, Peer Resources, the Student Advisory Council, and Coleman Advocates. Staff from the San Francisco Department of Elections was on hand at the Young Voters Forum to register new voters and recruit young people to work the polls on Election Day.

These and many other efforts by engaged local youth leaders have been very fruitful, with the city benefiting from several policy and

¹² Heather Knight, “Families’ exodus leaves S.F. whiter, less diverse,” The San Francisco Chronicle, June 10, 2013. Accessed December 12, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Families-exodus-leaves-S-F-whiter-less-diverse-3393637.php>

legislative campaigns initiated and led by young people all around the city, including most recently an ordinance amending the health code and establishing limitations for the granting of new tobacco sales permits¹³, which was finally passed by the Board of Supervisors on December 9, 2014.

Numerous countries – Austria, Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Norway and the United Kingdom – have extended the right to vote to 16 year olds in national, state, and local elections or are considering doing so. 16 and 17 year old voting has begun in two Maryland cities and the Lowell, Massachusetts city council is petitioning the state legislature to allow them to lower the city’s voting age. In February of this year, Senator Kevin Mullin introduced a state constitutional amendment, co-authored by Senator Mark Leno, that would allow 17 year olds to vote in primary elections if they will turn 18 before the date of the general election. Senator Mullin stated the constitutional amendment “would increase political engagement and voter turnout, potentially increasing the likelihood of the individual to continue voting for years to come.”

There is a national conversation building about the political enfranchisement of young people, particularly in response to some state’s

¹³ San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Ordinance No. 259-14, Ordinance amending the Health Code by adding density, proximity, and sales establishment limitations on the granting of new tobacco sales permits, and renumbering all sections in Article 19H; amending the Business and Tax Regulations Code by increasing the annual license and application fees; and making environmental finding, adopted by the Board of Supervisors on December 9, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.sfbos.org/ftp/uploadedfiles/bdsupvrs/ordinances14/o0259-14.pdf>.

enactment of laws designed to severely limit communities’ of color and young people’s voting rights. San Francisco has an opportunity to build on its reputation of innovation and commitment to participatory democracy by being the first major city to extend voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds.

UPDATES

On March 17, 2014, Supervisor Avalos, along with his co-sponsors Supervisors Kim, Campos, and Mar, introduced a charter amendment allowing citizens of 16 years of age and older to register and vote in municipal and school district elections held in the City and County of San Francisco.

On March 16, 2015 dozens of young people came out to a rally in support of the legislation. Since its introduction, the legislation has been the source of national news including the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, and Bloomberg News. Teachers, school administrators, parent groups, elected officials, and young people have all reached out to express their support.

Discussions with the Director of the Department of Elections (DOE) have confirmed that DOE is prepared to register 16 and 17 year old voters and prepare a special ballot with the department’s current staff allocations. The estimated cost associated with each new voter is approximately \$8.50 per election. A 2/5 estimate of the 2010 census figure on the number of 15-19 year olds in San Francisco amounts to approximately 13,000 16 and 17 year olds in the city and county of San Francisco. We do not yet have estimates of how many of these young people are citizens or how many would register to vote, if given the

chance. However, initial cost projections provided by the Department of Elections indicate that preparing ballots for 5,000 new voters would cost \$42,278,24 per election. Assuming a nearly 100% turnout rate, 10,000 ballots would cost \$84,556.48 per election – indeed, a small price to pay for a big investment in our democracy.

Youth commissioners have begun discussions with SFUSD administration and members of the Board of Education about how the school district might be able to assist with voter registration and residency verification efforts, as well as how the civics and social studies curricula in SFUSD classrooms can promote the informed and responsible exercise of voting rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Youth Commission urges the Mayor and the Board of Supervisors to put to voters the question of whether to lower San Francisco’s voting age to age 16 by supporting the charter amendment lowering the City’s voting age to 16 years.

Moreover, youth commissioners urge members of the Board of Supervisors and Mayor Lee to engage with young people active in this effort, and to familiarize themselves with the growing body of research that shows the ethical basis and practical utility of extending voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds in order to strengthen our democracy.

Finally, the Youth Commission urges the Mayor and the Board of Supervisors to urge San Francisco’s elected state representatives – State Senator Mark Leno, Assembly members Philip Ting and David Chiu – to prepare

legislation that would provide for a state constitutional referendum to reduce the voting age to sixteen for all state elections.