DC ACTION

Policy Brief

Vote 16: The Case for Expanding the Vote to Younger Voters

Key Facts:

- Roughly 10,350 residents would gain the right to vote
- DC would become the first state in the country to extend voting rights to residents ages 16 and 17
- Vote 16 builds on recent efforts to make our democracy more inclusive, including creating Fair Election–a public financing of elections program–and extending the right to vote to people who are currently incarcerated and to non-citizen residents.

What is Vote 16?

Vote 16 would expand voting rights to all eligible residents ages 16 and 17 in the District of Columbia. This legislation was introduced in 2018 as the "Youth Vote Amendment Act" (B22-0778).[1]

The legislation would also allow residents aged 16 and 17 to serve as polling place workers, carry nominating petitions, sign and collect signatures that candidates need to qualify for the ballot, and lower the age to preregister to vote, as long as the registrant would be 16 by the general election.

All public and private schools would be required to provide students aged 16 with voter registration materials, including applications or written information about how to register online. When the legislation last came up, the District's Chief Financial Officer stated that funds are sufficient to implement Vote 16.[2] Expanding the vote has a minimum to negligible fiscal impact and is well worth the investment.

Why is Vote 16 important?

Building on the history of the fight to expand and protect the franchise against efforts to restrict it, Vote 16 is grounded in the belief that our democracy is stronger and more effective when it is inclusive. From the women's suffrage movement to the civil rights movement and campaigns today to defend the right to vote, young people have

consistently participated in and helped lead these efforts, including playing a pivotal role in passing the 26th amendment in 1971, which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18.

Young people are ready to vote. They regularly make their voice heard in our democracy, through activism, protest, and direct advocacy before lawmakers, such as testifying at hearings and lobbying policy makers on important issues. In DC, young people run for office, and formally participate in government, such as serving on the State Board of Education as student representatives, helping to inform education policy in the District. What young people lack is not interest and passion in government, but the right to vote.

In fact, young people have already demonstrated a strong interest in voting. The District allows minors when they turn 16 to "pre-register" to vote, that is, to file their voter registration paperwork with the Board of Elections before they turn 18, so they can be added to the voter registration rolls by the time they are of age. They may even vote in a primary if they will be 18 by the following general election. As of the time of this writing, there are 1,666 young people who are pre-registered to vote, or roughly 16% of the eligible minors.[3]

Expanding the right to vote to the age of 16 also aligns this right with other rights and responsibilities young people gain at this time, such as to "be employed and pay taxes, consent to certain medical procedures, receive service of process in legal matters, and file a civil protection order."[4] Young people share the same concerns as other residents, from affordable housing, to their families' economic security, and oftentimes have to assume burdens such as caring for or supporting their families.

It's clear that young people are mature and responsible enough to vote. Passing Vote 16 would simply recognize and honor that young people have a major stake in the decisions that our elected officials make, and deserve to have a say at the ballot box for who should represent them.

Who would gain the right to vote?

According to the most recent Kids Count data, there are roughly 10,350[5] residents between the ages of 16 and 17 in the District; roughly 5,150 who are 16 and 5,200 who are 17. Virtually all of these young people would gain the right to vote if this legislation were to pass because, unlike in other jurisdictions, DC has passed laws to give nearly all residents who are of voting age the right to vote, even returning citizens, people who are currently incarcerated, and non-citizen residents.

The overwhelming majority of eligible new voters would be people of color. Looking at the age cohort of the young people who would soon gain the right to vote if the legislation were passed, more than four fifths of residents between the ages of 12 and 17 are people of color. Specifically, 60% are Black, 16% are Hispanic, and 2% are Asian; 18% are white.[6]

What efforts have been made to expand voting rights to young people?

Support for expanding voting rights to 16 year olds has been building for decades. Since 2003, at least 21 states, including the District of Columbia,[7] have introduced legislation to lower the voting age, with a dozen in the last five years alone (though some would have only applied to state or local elections, such as school boards). There have been numerous municipal campaigns across the country too. Maryland has made the most progress towards expanding voting rights to young people. Vote 16 has already been implemented in Takoma Park (2013), Hyattsville (2015), Greenbelt (2017) and Riverdale Park (2018).

Internationally, at least 16 countries, including Brazil, Germany, and Sudan, have lowered the voting age to 16[8], with others[9] poised to do so in the near future.

What has the District done to advance Vote 16?

In 2018, then-chair of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety, Charles Allen, along with councilmembers Anita Bonds, Vincent Gray, David Grosso, Brianne Nadeau, Robert White and Trayon White, introduced the "Youth Vote Amendment Act." The Judiciary Committee held a public hearing on the bill later that year.

Young people, supported by the Black Swan Academy, led a broad coalition of supporters that organized a public campaign to try to pass the legislation. More than 70 witnesses signed up to testify for the hearing, nearly all of them in support of it. The bill was passed out of committee, but was ultimately tabled during a session of the Committee of the Whole[10]. Legislation has not yet been introduced this council period, but Vote 16 the case for it remains strong.

Passing Vote 16 would also build on recent efforts to make our democracy more inclusive, such as expanding automatic voter registration to make it easier for people to register and update their voter registration information, creating one of the most robust public financing of elections systems in the country through our Fair Elections program, passing a referendum with super majority support in favor of making the District a state, making permanent mail-in voting so it is easier for people to cast their ballot, and passing legislation to give voting rights to non-citizen residents.

How would Vote 16 help voter participation?

The District of Columbia has one of the highest voter registration rates in the country. Of the roughly 544,215 residents who are eligible to vote, 518,845 are registered, or roughly 95%. Despite these impressive numbers, voter participation and turnout remains low. For example just 40.76% of all registered voters cast a ballot in the 2022 general election, and 32.26% in that primary. These numbers are fairly consistent overtime when compared to comparable election cycles.

Because voting is a habit, and voting even once increases the likelihood a person will vote in future elections, expanding the franchise to people who are 16 and 17 would help increase turnout by helping voters develop the habit earlier. In fact, studies have already shown that in places like neighboring Takoma Park, 16 and 17 year olds vote at a higher rate than their older peers.

Recommendations

We urge the DC Council to again take up the issue of expanding voting rights to residents aged 16 and 17 by introducing and passing legislation modeled off of the "Youth Vote Amendment Act" proposed in 2018. We also encourage the council to improve the proposal by:

- Amending the Fair Elections Act to allow newly eligible voters to participate in the program
- Expand automatic voter registration to cover additional points of contact for young people specifically, such as service providers who work with youth experiencing homelessness and Department of Parks and Recreation programs that serve eligible youth

As we explore this issue further, we expect to expand upon our initial set of recommendations.

Endnotes:

[1] https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B22-0778

[2]https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/40028/Committee_Report/B22-0778-CommitteeReport1.pdf?Id=62538, page 194

[3] Information request submitted by DC Action to the DC Board of Elections (June 2023)

[4]https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/40028/Committee_Report/B22-0778-CommitteeReport1.pdf

[5]https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/100-child-population-by-single-age?loc=10&loct=3#detailed/3/any/false/2048,574,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868/42,43,44,45,46,47,48,49,50,51,52,53,54,55,56,57,58,59,60,61/418

[6]https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/8446-child-population-by-race-and-ethnicity-and-age-group?loc=10&loct=3#detailed/3/any/false/2048,574,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868/68,69,67,12,70,66,71,13|62,63,30/17077,17078

[7] The states include California, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kentuky, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Texas, Virgina, Washington, and Wisconsin.

[8] https://vote16usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/white-paper-5.14.20.pdf

[9] https://vote16.substack.com/p/the-path-forward-for-make-it-16-new

[10] https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B22-0778