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Silencing the Future: The U.S. Voting Age

BY [ETHAN MASUCOL](#) on **OCTOBER 24, 2018** • (1)

With midterm elections approaching, U.S. campuses are full of activists calling for students to vote. This push embraces the youth's duty and privilege to vote and shows the country's supposed value of this part of the citizenry. However, despite this support, those who have yet to reach college seem to be brushed aside. Until citizens reach the age of 18, they have no true legal authority since they can't vote. If they feel passionate about a certain issue, perhaps they'll post an inconsequential post on social media, or they'll be another nameless face in the crowd of a march or protest. With the inability to vote, they are unable to participate in our country's democratic process.

First and foremost, current policy has lasting effects that will impact younger generations who cannot presently voice their opinions. They would not be single-issue voters; there are a plethora of ongoing issues that will still remain when the children of today grow up.

There is a lack of responsible action toward environmental issues which will most adversely affect the youth of today. The worst effects of climate change and global warming will be felt in the coming decades. Even now, focus on children's health from environmental issues is being stymied, as seen by the [recent ousting](#) of the Environmental Protection Agency's children's health director.

The [national debt](#) is growing, and without correction, children today will be faced with unimaginable fiscal burdens when they become adults. The projected [federal debt increase](#) and [population increase](#) in the U.S. estimate that each person will owe around \$96,000 as a share of the debt in a decade. Taxes paid then will be diverted away from possible investments to pay for interest on that debt.

Young citizens who [begin to work](#) pay into Social Security without being able to affect how the fund is managed. They add to a system that could be corrupted and have that burden placed onto them later when they themselves are reliant on it.

Furthermore, most young citizens are going through school and are immediately affected by decisions by the [Department of Education](#), namely in relation to financial aid. If the system is underfunded or mismanaged, they are the first to suffer.

On top of the inaction on certain issues, some legislation actively goes against the interests of children with effects that will have an immediate impact. The most severe instance of this can be seen in the current idea that America's "War on Poverty" [has been won](#). It is claimed that U.S. poverty has been greatly reduced, so we are now able to cut down on social welfare programs.

A large portion of the U.S. population in poverty is [made up of children](#). Cuts to social welfare will directly impact this group. For example, Congress has been considering cuts to the federal food stamps program. [8 percent](#) of spending on children comes from this program alone, since 44 percent of food stamp recipients are children. Other tax expenditures and health programs supporting children under the poverty line are



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subject to cuts as well.

Additionally, it is [reported](#) that the children's share of the budget will drop from 9.4 percent to 6.9 percent over the next decade to account for Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and interest payments. The projected \$1.6 trillion increase in federal spending over the next decade will only have one cent per dollar go to children.

In comparison, per capita federal spending on the elderly has increased by around \$10,000 since 1995, with much spending going toward Social Security and Medicare. Support for the elderly is being favored because that demographic can vote. Spending on child poverty is being cut, despite the fact that the matter has not been resolved. Those who are negatively affected by this — the children living in poverty themselves — are the ones with the greatest drive to vote against it. Since they can't, this trend won't stop.

As demonstrated, the youngest of our citizenry are left out of discussions on issues that most strongly affect them. Shouldn't those affected have a right to express their opinions and be included in the conversation?

Younger citizens are seen to be "adults" in many aspects except for voting rights. At 16, they are legally allowed to drive, work, and give medical consent (such as with vaccinations). At 17, one can [enlist in the military](#) (with parental consent). In some cases, juveniles as young as [15 years old](#) can be tried as adults for certain crimes. All of this can be experienced before being allowed to enter a voting booth.

Much opposition to lowering the voting age points to doubt over whether or not younger voters are educated enough to participate in a meaningful and informed matter which deserves enfranchisement. These reservations have been largely challenged thanks to [recent activism and outcry](#) from younger citizens, especially after [mass school shootings](#) like in Parkland, Florida.

Beyond interest, another opinion is that children are still developing and cannot be trusted or expected to make the complex decisions required for political participation. The argument that voting requires a certain capability of reason is invalidated by the fact that adults don't have to prove a level of reasoning to vote. No I.Q. tests or other measures are conducted when registering as a voter. The [only requirements](#) are simply citizenship, age, and a few others like meeting registration deadlines and state requirements.

At 18, people are worrying about the transition into college and adult life. Voting is added last to a growing list of new responsibilities and considerations. If anything, the current voting age [diminishes the importance of voting](#) for the rest of one's life. It's an afterthought; the timing seems to make many voters sacrifice or forget that it is a duty and privilege.

Lowering the age to a time when people are growing accustomed to real world experiences but not overwhelmed by them, say at age 16 when one is able to legally drive, introduces voting at a more meaningful period. Voting would be added *along* with other major adult responsibilities — not as an afterthought at the end of other duties. Civic engagement would be more encouraged by easier introduction into one's life. High schools would even have the chance to add civic engagement [into their curricula](#), as some schools do with driving.

Lowering the voting age for greater youth representation isn't a new concept in democracies across the world. Austria, Scotland, and around a dozen other countries already allow 16-year-olds to vote in national elections. They have demonstrated that younger voters have the interest and power to affect mass changes, such as forming a new government after a coalition collapse in [Austria](#), and participating in [Scotland's](#) referendum for independence. The U.S. has also lowered its voting age in the past. During the 1960's, draftees serving in the Vietnam War protested being too young to select leaders to oversee the conflict. The period also saw widespread student activism. In response, the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, which lowered the age from 21 to 18, was ratified in 1971. The need for a similar change can be applicable today.

Opposition to outright lowering the voting age has led to the development of different voting systems to involve youth participation. [Demeny voting](#) seems to have been the most attractive. Paul Demeny, who developed the idea from discussions in 1920s France and Germany, agrees that children "should not be left

disenfranchised for some 18 years.” In this system, parents/guardians vote on a child’s behalf casting a proxy vote worth half a vote. In theory this would allow some representation of younger voters. Japan and Austria have considered implementing it to address aging populations disproportionately supporting certain pro-elderly stances. However, the concern that guardians could abuse this system by increasing their own voting capacities has kept the method from being used.

Some argue that issues affecting children should be addressed by voting on said issues, not by changing the voting demographic to include those affected. This view worries that, while young voters can be passionate, they do not have the experience or political knowledge to make informed decisions. Moreover, voting is seen to be awarded with other duties of citizenship, like military service, which can only be practiced at a certain older age.

In contradiction to this view, there have been few who have effectively lobbied on behalf of children. The [Children’s Defense Fund](#), a nonprofit for children’s advocacy and research, is one of the few groups who have considered children’s interests. Without votes from those for whom such groups advocate, there is little ensured support. As an example of this, despite initial success on gun reform and education advocacy closer to the group’s establishment in 1973, the CDF has only been able to contribute [nominal support](#) to legislation supporting younger citizens in recent years. Interest groups who lobby like this one, many of which focus on [welfare](#), can only be successful if those who can currently vote support them. They serve an underrepresented group, so only those who are currently represented can empower them through votes to accomplish their goals.

As evidenced by the continuation and exacerbation of said issues affecting children, it’s obvious that something needs to change. Letting those in power and those who traditionally have had the vote deliberate over and address these issues is not working. It would be more meaningful and representative to let those who are being affected have a say in the matter, and it would also most likely be more effective in facilitating change. The younger citizens of our country live here and are affected by the passage or blockage of policy. That alone gives them the right to cast a ballot.

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owenloki

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