

Should the Voting Age Be 16?

Curriculum links: Current events, social studies, civics, American history, critical thinking

Briefing: Since 1971, the voting age for national elections in the U.S. has been 18. The voting age was lowered that year, from 21 to 18, after young people protested that they should have the right to vote at 18, since they could be drafted into the military at that age to serve in the Vietnam War. Since then, there has been little debate about lowering the voting age further. But this year—given the strong support Barack Obama has received from young people, the fact that the U.S. is at war again, and the growing sense that young people today are “ready” to vote earlier than in the past—some have raised the issue again, urging the government to lower the voting age to 16. Countries such as Austria, Brazil, Cuba, and Nicaragua recently have lowered their voting ages to 16. But critics of such a move in the U.S. argue that 16-year-olds, in general, are not mature or informed enough to have the vote and probably wouldn’t go to the polls anyway. Indeed, only 47% of 18-to-24-year-olds voted in the 2004 Presidential election—the lowest percentage of any age group—and the percentage of all voters aged 18 to 24 dropped from 14% in 1972 to 9% in 2004. Other critics say 16-year-olds would not be sound voters because they lack historical perspective on important issues and don’t have any comparable civic responsibilities that give them a stake in their communities. Supporters of the change, however, insist that not only are 16-year-olds competent enough to vote, but also that their presence in the electorate would force candidates to pay more attention to issues that are important to young people, such as health care, education, and the environment. Besides, they say, today’s teens are more aware of key issues, in part because of increased access to technology. “Yesterday’s 18-year-olds are today’s 16-year-olds,” said Leon Botstein, president of Bard College. “We have overrated the childlike aspects of adolescence.” Still, even Botstein has conceded that if the voting age were lowered to 16 tomorrow, few newly enfranchised voters would come to the polls in November.

Classroom Debates

Should the voting age be lowered to 16? Are most 16-year-olds mature or informed enough to vote for President? Do you agree that “yesterday’s 18-year-olds are today’s 16-year-olds”? Explain. Why do you think so few young voters have taken part in recent elections? Is their lack of participation reason enough not to lower the voting age further? If you could vote in November, who would you vote for?

Newspaper activities: One argument for lowering the voting age is that it would force candidates to pay more attention to the issues that matter most to teens. Scan the paper for articles about the issues considered central in this year’s Presidential election. Are these the issues that matter most to you? If you could vote, what other issues would you urge the candidates to address? How could the media call attention to these issues?

Resources: Books: Ronnie Lankford’s *Should the Voting Age Be Lowered?* (Greenhaven, 2007), Larry Sabato’s *A More Perfect Constitution: Why the Constitution Must Be Revised* (Walker & Co., 2008), and Linda Monk’s *The Words We Live By* (Hyperion, 2003). Websites: Learn more from the National Youth Rights Association, *Scholastic News*, and *FindLaw*.