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For Our Future: Why Suffrage Must be Extended to Disenfranchised Youth

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Introduction

Robust democracies require the willful, informed participation and advocacy of their member citizens, without which they dissolve into rubber stamps for powerful and monied interests. An accurate representation of the whole, informed voting population is required for a democracy to truly make decisions aligned with the will of the people, and for far too long a particular segment of that population has not shown up to cast their ballots in proportion to their older counterparts. Young people, particularly those aged 18-24, consistently fail to make their voices heard at the polls, with the 2020 presidential election marking the first time since 1968 that the turnout rate for this age group crossed 50%¹. Clearly, systemic issues plague our democracy when, on average, more than half of young adults choose not to exercise their right to vote, to make their voice heard in determining the leadership and policies of a country and society under which they will spend many years living and participating.

While many cynically relent that this age group simply demonstrates a decreased interest and stake in political participation, others recognize that there are systemic barriers to expanding voter engagement among young people. These barriers are wide-ranging, spanning from a lack of civic education on how to vote and what each candidate stands for, to intentionally inaccessible voter registration procedures and voter ID legislation, to a busy, newly-independent schedule making voting impractical for this age group². Each of these barriers can and should be overcome, and a robust policy change is necessary to instill the kind of habitual civic participation and engagement necessary to sustain a healthy democracy.

¹ • [Voter turnout in U.S. presidential elections by age 1964-2016 | Statista](#)

² https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2903669

It is my view that these barriers could be brought down and habits of healthy engagement could be instilled through the extension of voting rights to 16- and 17-year-old citizens of the United States. A first step for me in understanding this phenomenon is understanding the views of young people on the subject. To this end, the questions guiding this project are as follows: what attitudes do young people and individuals within the public education system at Morrison High School have concerning lowering the voting age to 16-years-old in local, state, and national elections? How confident are they that it would increase civic engagement among the next generation and encourage willful, informed participation in our democracy? Do they demonstrate the necessary prerequisites to implement this change?

These are the necessary research questions that must be answered if public social studies education is to achieve its stated aim of fostering educated, civically-engaged, justice-oriented citizens who actively participate within our democracy to create a more equitable and just society. As such, the destination of this case study will be Morrison High School, a demographically diverse school whose characteristics will be explored in greater depth later in this paper, within which I will conduct several focus group and one-on-one interviews. While this project may not answer far-reaching generalities, it is an important case study in understanding popular opinion to first diagnose what would be the affected population's abilities, attitudes, and affability towards the enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year-olds so that strategies to develop a groundswell of grassroots support might be formulated and stress-tested.

Review of Literature

Before embarking on an ambitious case study like this one, it is important to understand the guiding research up to this point, not only in support and in opposition to 16- and 17-year-old

suffrage, but also an impartial history of the extension of voting rights by age. I will explore the following categories of background literature related to this topic in order: (1) history of the extension of voting rights by age, (2) political maturity of 16- and 17-year-olds, (3) vulnerabilities of 16- and 17-year-olds, (4) political competency and knowledge of 16- and 17-year-olds, (5) 16- and 17-year-olds as political stakeholders, and (6) civic engagement among youth and 16-year-old voting in practice.

History of the Extension of Voting Rights by Age

Historically, the most recent movement to extend voting rights by age to 18-year-olds from the previous age limit of 21-years-old gained serious momentum during the explosion of anti-Vietnam war sentiment during the late 1960s. Slogans like “Old Enough to Fight, Old Enough to Vote” penetrated popular vernacular³, as thousands of young men were being drafted to go to war for their country in Southeast Asia without any voice in the policies of the government shipping them off to fight in their war. However, this was not a simple or easy path to suffrage by any means. Activists on either side of the political aisle had been urging Congress to lower the voting age to 18 ever since Franklin Roosevelt lowered the conscription age to 18 in 1942 as the United States entered World War II.⁴ Presidents since the 1940s quietly voiced their support for the change, but it was not a politically expedient position to openly advocate for—it was not until grassroots groups of students and activists across the country revved up their efforts at the municipal and state levels during the politically turbulent 1960s, setting important examples as successful case studies to make a more influential argument on the national stage, that wider change occurred. Between World War II and the passage of the 26th amendment, grassroots activist groups successfully lobbied to lower the statewide voting age to 18-years-old

³ [Why We Should Lower the Voting Age to 16 \(nextcity.org\)](http://nextcity.org)

⁴ [16-Year-Olds Want a Vote. Fifty Years Ago, So Did 18-Year-Olds. - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](http://nytimes.com)

in the states of Kentucky, Georgia, and New Jersey. In summary, the most recent movement to lower the voting age did not happen in a day, and it did not happen as a result of top-down benevolence—it happened because of the hard work of grassroots activists willing a wave of popular support on the local and state level, whose momentum could not be overlooked or ignored once its success was demonstrated and its popularity revealed. And so, my project is one such analogous effort in agitating and mobilizing grassroots support in the natural next step of enfranchising 16- and 17-year olds.

Yet, no honest advocacy for the advancement of equity, justice, and representation can occur without a good-faith examination of the opposing side. First, let us perform a diagnostic on the popular view of 16-year-old enfranchisement. Currently, the extension of voting rights to 16- and 17-year olds is not widely popular. Data from a recent 2019 Hill-HarrisX poll⁵ presents some interesting findings: 75% of registered voters oppose lowering the voting age to 17, and 84% of registered voters oppose lowering the voting age to 16. Republicans were more likely to oppose lowering the voting age than Democrats: 88% of Republicans oppose the 17-year-old vote and 89% oppose the 16-year-old vote, whereas 65% of Democrats oppose the 17-year-old vote and 78% oppose the 16-year-old vote. Additionally, in March of 2021, an amendment introduced by Rep. Ayanna Pressley to lower the federal voting age to 16-years-old failed to pass Congress, with a final vote of 126 ayes to 305 noes.⁶ These numbers represent stiff roadblocks to progress on this issue, but hide important realities and reveal valuable insights.

First, according to the US Census Bureau⁷, only 66.7% of the voting-age US population was registered to vote in the 2020 election, and so the Hill-HarrisX survey is only collecting data

⁵ [Poll: Americans overwhelmingly reject lowering voting age to 16 | TheHill](#)

⁶ [Final Vote Results for Roll Call 111 \(house.gov\)](#)

⁷ <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-585.html>

from $\frac{2}{3}$ of the voting-eligible population. Second, it is reasonable to believe that of the non-registered voting-eligible population, many would support the extension of voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds, as only 55.8% of individuals aged 18-24 were registered to vote in 2020, and this age group is the most amenable to extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds according to the Hill-HarrisX poll. In short, the information collected may not accurately reflect the true extent of opposition or support for 16-year-old voting, when voter registration is staggeringly low within the United States due to a variety of aforementioned factors and lowest for populations favorable to the change. Third and finally, the roll call vote in the House of Representatives on the extension of voting rights to 16-year-olds demonstrated that those who opposed the amendment were almost uniformly Representatives who perform poorly with the youth vote. Every Republican voted against the amendment, and many moderate Democrats voted against it as well, with the progressive wing of the Democratic party backing the measure accompanied by some notable key figures' support. According to a 2018 Pew Research poll, Millennial voters (born 1981-1996) favor the Democratic party by 27 points, with 59% voicing support for the Democratic party and only 32% supporting the Republican party⁸. Yet, this does not exempt established Democrat politicians from challenges securing the youth vote. Another study from 2018 conducted by Tufts University relayed that one third of individuals aged 18-24 identified as independents, and they are generally much more likely to support a Progressive primary challenger to a moderate Democratic incumbent⁹. Established moderate Democrat incumbents have increasingly lost out in recent years to Progressive challengers due to this increased youth support. In summary, the current diagnosis and coverage of the 16-year-old

⁸ [1. Trends in party affiliation among demographic groups | Pew Research Center](#)

⁹ [Young People's Ambivalent Relationship with Political Parties | CIRCLE \(tufts.edu\)](#)

voting movement reflect unrepresentative data and reporting, and trends in younger generations indicate a coming change.

Political Maturity of 16- and 17-year-olds

Still, it is paramount to honestly present and engage with the substantive claims of the opposition to be able to truly advocate for a change: one must holistically examine both sides of this issue before coming to a conclusion. As such, let's examine in turn the main arguments against the enfranchisement of 16-year-olds, first impartially presenting them and then responding with the arguments in favor. Opponents of the 16-year-old vote generally purport that 16- and 17-year olds are politically immature and should therefore not be entrusted with the great responsibility of electing the nation's leaders. One researcher, Johannes Bergh, performed a study considering a 2011 Norwegian voting trial in which 16-year-olds were granted the right to vote in several municipalities¹⁰. Bergh attempted to measure the difference between 16-year-old and 18-year-old political maturity using several components: 1) political interest, 2) political efficacy (Bergh operationalizes this as an individual's efficacy in understanding political procedures by the percentage of individuals that either agreed or disagreed with statements reflecting their confidence in exercising their political opinion), 3) attitudinal constraint (Bergh defines this as the proximity between an individual's placement on an abstract "left to right" scale and their results to a series of questions assessing their political attitude or ideology), and 4) attitude-voting consistency. In each of these indicators, Bergh found marginal differences between 16- and 18-year-old voters, with 18-year-olds scoring slightly higher. It is notable that Bergh's study only followed a few initial trial elections in a few municipalities, and even then

¹⁰ [Does voting rights affect the political maturity of 16- and 17-year-olds? Findings from the 2011 Norwegian voting-age trial - ScienceDirect](#)

differences were only marginal, not statistically significant, between these age groups, with differences between older ages likely presenting the same marginal variances.

Another core argument in opposition to enfranchising 16-year-olds is a fear of authority figures and insidiously targeted political marketing exercising undue and manipulative influence to gain new 16- and 17-year-old votes. Opponents argue that, as most 16- and 17-year-olds are dependents of parents or legal guardians, an extension of voting rights to this population would effectively extend an additional vote per of-age child to parents and legal guardians. Notably, as researcher Joshua Douglas reminds us¹¹, this same argument was applied approximately a century ago during the women's suffrage movement as the Nineteenth Amendment was up for ratification in 1920. Ironically, at the time, researchers opposed to women's enfranchisement, listed many of the same arguments that opponents of 16-year-old suffrage list today. The National Association Opposed to Women's Suffrage¹² published misleading research, similar to today's oppositional arguments, claiming that most women demonstrated poor political interest and/or efficacy, that women would merely grant their husband an extra vote or make their husband's vote, which was deemed more important or sensible (similar to contemporaries' beliefs that the political opinions of individuals aged 18 years and older are more important or sensible than 16- and 17-year olds) void through an opposing vote, and that states with high populations of women would end up electing poor leaders, as they believed women were not politically mature. It is depressingly revealing that the same propagandized marketing that stalled movements for civic equality a century ago still hold water to many misled individuals today.

Vulnerabilities of 16- and 17-year-olds

¹¹ [Microsoft Word - Douglas_Publication Version.docx \(ssrn.com\)](#)

¹² ['Vote No on Women's Suffrage': Bizarre Reasons For Not Letting Women Vote - The Atlantic](#)

Other opponents fearing undue manipulative influence cite the perils and downfalls of the information age via social media, targeted advertisements, and false and unreliable online news. Some academics like Katharine Silbaugh of Boston University¹³ tell horror stories about how teenagers fall down what is known as the “alt-right pipeline” online, consuming dishonest online media sources that indoctrinate them to believe bigoted and inaccurate ideas from religious discrimination to various shades of misogyny, to violently practicing firearm ownership. Silbaugh follows that 16- and 17-year-olds are uniquely susceptible to these hateful ideas online, and so if the right to vote were extended to them, they would be increasingly targeted and their votes would be ripe for the taking of any interested, manipulative party. This line of reasoning is flawed for various reasons. One, teenagers are already widely being targeted and falling victim to these hateful or manipulative online sources, and so to claim that the enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year olds would open up this possibility is self-defeating—it is a variable independent of a potential voting age change. Two, many active, registered adult voters today fall victim to these online sources of misinformation, spreading inaccurate and bigoted talking points, and yet the veracity of their voting status is never questioned—because history has shown us that attempting to administer tests to determine voter’s intelligence and/or political knowledge results in systemic discrimination to disadvantage particular populations from exercising their vote. Third, extending suffrage to 16- and 17-year-olds would inevitably be accompanied by enhanced civic education to provide impartial presentations of candidates’ views and the issues, providing a sensible avenue for civic education with the infrastructure to accomplish it already in place (public social studies education). In short, extending suffrage to this population would counteract the very issue opponents claim it would bring about.

¹³ [Microsoft Word - SILBAUGH \(bu.edu\)](#)

A final argument opponents of 16-year-old suffrage make is that lowering the federal voting age would inevitably lead to a lowering of the age of majority, or the legal age of adulthood. The aforementioned Katharine Silbaugh draws from leading oppositional literature and from data collected by the National Conference of State Legislatures¹⁴ to assert that there is a historical precedent for the lowering of the voting age resulting in the lowering of the legal age of adulthood. After the 26th amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, 47 US states have adopted 18 as the legal “age of majority”, or the age at which an individual is no longer considered a minor and is endowed with adult rights and responsibilities. This age is significant for various reasons Silbaugh points out: she says it encompasses which age groups are protected from potential adult exploitation through the administration of the juvenile justice system, the foster care system, child support payments, protection from premature housing and financial responsibilities, and other similar protections. Other opponents of the 16-year-old vote share these concerns and add that ages of license to be permitted to perform other rights or responsibilities (such as driving or working) do not imply the political maturity to exercise the right to vote, and that many of these licenses are merely “lifestyle choices”¹⁵. Apart from the glaring trivialization of the proposed change, this line of reasoning is completely relegated to the slippery slope logical fallacy. Opponents argue that one igniting incident will inevitably lead to the lowering of the age of legal adulthood, without any opposition or pushback, inevitably leading to the removal of protections for 16- and 17-year-olds, and inevitably leading to their demise. It is easy to see how this argument reflects a lapse in logical reasoning, as sociologists and policymakers ubiquitously agree on the roles, responsibilities, and protections that 16- and

¹⁴ [Termination of Child Support \(ncsl.org\)](https://www.ncsl.org/terminations-of-child-support)

¹⁵ [The case for lowering the voting age is less persuasive now than at any point in the last 50 years : Democratic Audit](#)

17-year-olds within the current normative and institutional structure of our society deserve: local, state, and federal governments, as well as hundreds of private organizations administer protections for 16- and 17-year-old juveniles that would not immediately dissolve due to a mere change in voting age.

Political Competency and Knowledge of 16- and 17-year-olds

Having completed an overview of the opposition's claims and reasoning, we may now examine the literature which provides an overwhelming wealth of evidence in support of enfranchising the younger population. First, wide-reaching, peer-reviewed research contradicts opponents claims of this age group's political immaturity, and strongly asserts that 16- and 17-year-olds are, by and large, politically competent and, where their competencies are lacking, can quickly and effectively be brought up to standard by existing educational infrastructure. In 2020, researchers Dieter Stiers, Marc Hooghe, and Silke Goubin¹⁶ undertook a study of the city of Ghent, Belgium in its mock election allowing 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote to examine whether these individuals are capable of casting ideologically-congruent votes—that is, votes for candidates that align most closely with their political ideologies. 16- and 17-year olds were asked a series of issue questions to place them along a left to right continuum, and the candidates in Ghent's election were placed alongside the same continuum by the researchers. The study found no significant difference between 16- and 17-year-olds' abilities to cast an ideologically congruent vote and their parents': this corroborates Bergh's study mentioned earlier, whose results demonstrate that any differences in young people's political maturity or knowledge are negligible.

¹⁶ [Are 16-year-olds able to cast a congruent vote? Evidence from a voting at 16 initiative in the city of Ghent \(Belgium\) | Elsevier Enhanced Reader](#)

Still, some may relent that even if students can match candidates to political views, this ability to pair like terms does not necessarily mean that 16- and 17-year-olds truly have an accurate understanding of those political views and implications on broader society. In response, researchers Daniel Hart and Robert Atkins¹⁷ conducted national surveys representative of adolescents aged 14 to 18, as well as the entire adult citizen population, in 2011 to determine various competencies in 1) civic knowledge, 2) tolerance, 3) political skill, 4) political efficacy, and 5) political interest and compare the results to search for meaningful differences between age groups. The structure of this study bears resemblance to Bergh's, but it is much more generalizable, being a national survey collected in the United States compared to gathering data from a few initial voting trials in Norway. Hart and Atkins found through their survey items that each of these competencies rapidly increased from age 14 to 16, and that, once individuals reach age 16, their competencies remain relatively stagnant between 16 and an individual's early 20s, with another slight increase occurring around age 25 that levels off for the rest of adulthood. In short, this research demonstrates, in clear terms, not only that 16- and 17-year-olds are just as politically mature as the legal voting population, but that this age makes sense as the lowest reasonable age limit to extend voting rights.

As an addendum to the conversation on political maturity and knowledge, some researchers and evidence suggest that 16- and 17-year-olds might actually be in a position to possess much more detailed and wider-spanning civic knowledge compared to the population over the age of 18. Researcher Tommy Peto of the University of Oxford¹⁸ draws from the National Household Education survey conducted in 2018 to come to the conclusion that American adults generally have a very poor degree of political and civic knowledge, Some

¹⁷ [American Sixteen- and Seventeen-Year-Olds Are Ready to Vote \(sagepub.com\)](#)

¹⁸ [Why the voting age should be lowered to 16 \(sagepub.com\)](#)

statistics of note uncovered through this national survey reveal that only 56% of American adults know which branch of government determines the constitutionality of laws, that only 64% knew which party held a majority in the House of Representatives, and, shockingly, only 51% knew whether the Republicans or Democrats were more conservative at the national level. Meanwhile, 16- and 17-year-old voters, who demonstrate comparable levels of political maturity, have universal access to tuition-free public K-12 education, whose existing infrastructure could effectively support robust civics education. K-12 students in every state are required to take government and civics courses before graduating high school, and the integration of strong, practical material teaching students how to vote, the positions of various candidates, and the salient contemporary issues situated within proper historical context would truly fulfill the stated aim of social studies education: to prepare the next generation of informed and engaged citizens. Peto reminds us of the successful implementation of such civic courses in the country of Austria, where the voting age is 16-years-old, citing its impact through its hosting of mock elections and equal, impartial coverage of political candidates. Insofar as the US' case, civics education could incorporate voter registration, which has incessantly remained a roadblock to civic participation.

Other valuable insights from the Hart and Atkins' study demonstrate that these politically competent, yet disenfranchised, 16- and 17-year-olds hold markedly different political opinions than their older counterparts, meaning that a group of approximately 12 million Americans' political preferences are being blatantly ignored. The pair of researchers' drew data from the American National Election Studies to demonstrate that young people aged 17 to 24 have markedly divergent opinions compared to the rest of the voting-eligible population regarding federal spending on Social Security, public K-12 schools, and financial aid for college students. The most racially and ethnically diverse generation the United States has ever seen, Generation

Z, is coming of age into a country where they have no say in issues that directly affect them in both the immediate and long term, such as climate change, racial and economic inequality, gun violence, student debt, and the potentiality of tuition-free public university. Young people are increasingly aware and educated as the first natives of the information age, and yet are alienated from electing representatives to make change to structural inequities and injustices, as their political viewpoints stray further from their older counterparts. According to a 2018 Gallup poll¹⁹, more than half of young Americans aged 18-29 viewed socialism positively alongside a 12% decline in just 2 years of favorable views on capitalism. Meanwhile, older age groups all hover around 60% holding a positive view of capitalism, with the 50 and up age group (the most politically active voters) comprising twice as many individuals viewing capitalism positively than socialism. It is safe to say that young Americans, Americans who are politically competent citizens with access to universal civic education, have political views that are diametrically opposed to those whose political capital runs the country, and yet they have no participatory avenue to elect representatives to make the changes that they will have to live with.

16- and 17-year-olds as Political Stakeholders

More than just politically competent individuals aware of the effects that current policy will have on their lives, 16- and 17-year-olds have serious stakes in the political game, stakes which this country was founded over. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics and Pew Research Center²⁰, 22.3% of 16- and 17-year-olds were employed in the summer of 2019, with approximately 12.4 million of the United States' 328 million strong population within this age group²¹. Effectively, this means that approximately 2.7 million employed United States citizens

¹⁹ [Democrats More Positive About Socialism Than Capitalism \(gallup.com\)](https://www.gallup.com)

²⁰ [During COVID-19, teen summer jobs were at lowest since Great Recession | Pew Research Center](https://www.pewresearch.org)

²¹ [Child population by age group | KIDS COUNT Data Center](https://www.kidscount.org)

are currently denied the right to vote: a margin of individuals that could sway not only national-scale presidential elections, but also local and state races. Not only are their voices being suppressed, but, as the revolution that founded the United States might remind us, taxation without representation is tyranny. Consider the following thought experiment, which exact data is not readily available for: the federal minimum wage is \$7.25, a wage which most teenage workers receive while working part time alongside their academic responsibilities. Considering the average teenager works part-time (20 hours a week, 145 hours a month, 7,540 hours a year), with knowledge that many work considerably more and many considerably less (hence the application of a steady mean), 16- and 17-year-old workers across the United States earn approximately 94 billion dollars a year as a collective group. Even generously placing all of these workers in the lowest federal income tax bracket (which many exceed) of 10% for incomes up to \$9,875, the United States' government brings in, at least, 9.4 billion dollars in tax revenue from this group of working, educated, politically competent American citizens, and yet denies them the right to vote. In a nation where democracy is supposedly held to the highest value, and where citizens' voices are intended to be heard and valued, it is peculiar, to say the least, that such a large portion of the population is stripped of their most basic civic right despite funding the state itself.

Civic Engagement Among Youth and 16-year-old Voting in Practice

Ironically, our government tells us that exercising one's civic duty by voting is of the utmost importance to sustain our democracy, and yet virtually no meaningful effort is made to encourage young people to vote when they are first extended the franchise, resulting in piteously low turnout rates. Since 1980, the turnout rate of the age group of 18 to 29-year-olds, already a

wide margin of young people, has only surpassed 50% twice.²² According to researchers Eva Zeglovits and Julain Aichholzer from the University of Vienna²³, the multitudinous new responsibilities that are heaped upon young people are to blame for this absence at the polls. 18-year-olds, and a growing number of individuals in their early and mid-twenties, are confronting a series of decisions that will influence the course of their life: choosing and financing an educational future, applying for and settling into a job and workplace, discovering long-term romantic partners, moving out of their parents' or guardians' home and living independently for the first time, oftentimes in an entirely new town or city, building new social networks and friends, and even starting families and raising newborn children. In short, this age group is already being bombarded with a laundry list of essential, life-altering duties and responsibilities, and to meekly suggest that they vote, when voter registration in the United States being painfully lengthy and complicated, is simply insufficient to drive mass-scale voter turnout. Related to this, lowering the voting age to 16-years-old would ease many of the difficulties imposed by the unnecessarily long and arduous voter registration process, bogged down by discriminatory voter ID laws and the location of many precincts being out of access of many black and brown communities: instead, public high schools could register students to vote within their classrooms to ensure that representative democracy is truly representative.

Zeglovits and Aichholzer offer compelling alternatives from their research in Austria, an OECD nation in Europe whose voting age has been set at 16-years-old in local, regional, and national elections since 2007, granting us over 10 years of data to analyze in an industrialized nation. Their research studying turnout in Vienna and Krems found that 16- and 17-year-old

²² [Voting Rates by Age \(census.gov\)](https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2018/tables/2018-voting-rates-by-age.html)

²³ [Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18? Evidence for the First-Time Voting Boost Among 16 \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00141801.2019.1644444)

first-time voters turned out at significantly higher rates than 18 to 20-year-old first-time voters, supporting the idea that lowering the voting age increases turnout among first-time voters, instilling the practice of voting as habitual and standard. In 2014, 64% of first-time 16- and 17-year-olds in Vienna turned out to vote, whereas only 56% of first-time 18- to 20-year-old voters turned out. Beyond Austria, in the five cities in the United States in which 16- and 17-year-olds have been extended the right to vote in local elections, they turnout in significantly higher rates than the overall population, with 44% of 16- and 17-year-olds in Takoma Park, Maryland voting in 2013 compared to 10% of the total population, and 45% of 16- and 17-year-olds voting in 2015 compared to 21% overall, according to James Anderson, Professor at Lehman College in New York. All of this data is to say that lowering the voting age clearly and demonstrably results in increased voter turnout, with the public education system serving as the infrastructure in place to register and orient voters to the franchise, and with this introduction to voting helping to instill habits of civic participation which individuals aged 18 into their mid-twenties remaining too preoccupied with a variety of essential, demanding conditions of living to establish a new habit and ensure that representative democracy remains representative. With a wide variety of South American countries as well as Scotland and Wales recognizing these factors and extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds in various levels of elections, the United States ought to keep pace with progress and ensure its citizens' voices are heard.

Methodology

Returning to the research questions of this project, the following section will address the methods by which I endeavor to answer them (what attitudes do young people and individuals within the public education system at Morrison High School have concerning lowering the

voting age to 16-years-old in local, state, and national elections? How confident are they that it would increase civic engagement among the next generation and encourage willful, informed participation in our democracy? Do they demonstrate the necessary prerequisites to implement this change?) As a case study, this project aims to capture the general atmosphere surrounding the proposition of 16-year-old voting to more successfully implement strategies to foster popular support for the idea, and selecting an urban school on the east side of Toledo, Ohio to recruit subjects for the study was the most logistically possible and sensible option. Morrison High School exhibits a great deal of ethnic diversity, with roughly 50% of the school population being white, roughly 25% being black, and roughly 25% being Hispanic. Most students are classified as living at an economic disadvantage, with many holding jobs after school not just to earn some disposable income, but to support their families. Toledo sits on the Maumee River, and serves as a port city, with its economic opportunities and successes stagnating and declining in recent decades, as manufacturing jobs move overseas and poverty, and its byproducts, takes hold.

With this context of Toledo and Morrison High School established, we might better understand how this study fits into the national dialogue as a case study for stress-testing efficacious strategies for support of the 16-year-old vote. Turning to the true methodology of the project, the accompanying product to this written work is an edited video essay compiling interviews from several participant populations. I am interviewing several focus groups of students, aged 16 to 18, in a group interview and discussion-based setting, and I am also interviewing a number of teachers in an individual, one-on-one setting. To recruit the subjects, I introduce the study to several social studies classes within Morrison High School, describing briefly its purpose, procedure, risks, and benefits, and leaving informed assent and parental consent forms for students to take and return at the front of the classroom if they are interested in

participating. For teachers, I ask and present them with a form describing the same information I verbally present to the students, also alongside an informed consent form. Assent and consent forms allow participants the option to have their face blurred or voice distorted in order to preserve their confidentiality. After I completed the recruitment process, I was left with 3 social studies teachers and 2 student focus groups to interview. Using pseudonyms, I will describe each of the teachers in turn. Mr. B teaches American Government to a variety of grade levels, from the remedial track to CCP and AP classes. He has two Master's Degrees and lives in an affluent suburb of Toledo. Ms. O teaches American History, Sociology, and Psychology to a variety of grade levels, and at a variety of tracks, ranging from elective classes to Honors and CCP classes. She has one Master's Degree and is working on completing her second; she lives within the city of Toledo. Mr. C teaches American Government and World History to Freshman and Sophomores, and the students he teaches often struggle with behavioral and academic issues. He lives within the city of Toledo. My student focus groups are comprised of students from diverse backgrounds, and I took care to ensure they are representative of Morrison High School in terms of academic achievement, socioeconomic status, race, and gender. For the focus groups, I meet with 3-5 students in a quiet classroom either when they have a study hall or after school, and for the teachers, I meet individually with them during their planning periods. I begin by reminding participants of the current qualifications required to vote in the United States (being a US citizen, being 18-years-old, being registered to vote) and then start the interviews, asking the following interview questions and allowing time for responses:

Student Interview Questions

- Do you think tax-paying citizens of the United States should be able to vote in local, state, and federal elections?
 - Do you believe individuals should be subject to paying taxes without the ability to vote on representatives who determine tax policy?

- What is the purpose of a modern social studies education?
 - Should social studies education be focused on the memorization and recitation of facts, figures, and dates, and contained to the hypothetical and theoretical, or should it encourage and enable students to become informed, civically-engaged, justice-oriented citizens?
- Do you feel confident that you and other students in or around your age group are capable of making informed, rational decisions when forming their political beliefs?
 - If not, would it change your mind that 16-year-olds demonstrate the same capacities for cold cognition as adults and that studies show they do not merely replicate their parents' political beliefs?
- Do you think 16 and 17 year olds should be allowed to vote in local, state, and federal elections in the United States?
 - If so, why? If not, why?
- Do you feel confident that you and other students in or around your age could vote for candidates whose political beliefs and attitudes match their own?
 - What do each of the two major political parties generally believe about a) climate change, b) student debt, c) gun policy, d) school choice/funding of public schools?
- Do you think that being introduced to voting at age 16 rather than age 18 would increase civic participation in youth?

Teacher Interview Questions

All of the above, with the addition of the below:

- Do you think there would be unintentional negative consequences of lowering the voting age to 16 years old?
 - Some individuals argue this will lower the age of majority, or the legal age of adulthood, and discontinue many protections extended to 16- and 17-year olds, though this has not happened in countries that have made this change; do you think it would happen differently in the United States?
- Do you think the public education system is capable of adequately preparing students to responsibly exercise their civic duty to vote at the age of 16?

Data Analysis

After sufficient responses and discussions are held within each approximately 30 minute interview, I edited and compiled the clips into the accompanying video essay, which is contextualized by established research and relevant data, and succeeded by informed analysis

and conclusions based on my findings. More particularly, I combed through footage of each interview recording and took notes on the main conclusions and supporting evidence that each respondent used in their testimony. After I had produced these notes, I spliced together video and audio clips from each of the interviews to compile a larger video essay representative of the group's views. The length of each of the clips was determined by my discretion, as I cut out details which respondents rephrased or repeated multiple times, or those details which did not directly contribute to their conclusions. Following each interview question and response from all of the respondents, I interspersed my own commentary within the video essay, in which I provided research-backed context to the conversations they were having, dispelling common misconceptions and apprehensions as well as providing empirical evidence for well-meaning hypotheses. My finished product bore strong resemblance to an audio-visual translation of this paper.

Results

Following the series of focus group and one-on-one interviews, the results of this study have provided valuable insights into what issues and perspectives should be accounted for and prioritized in establishing grassroots support for lowering the federal voting age. Attitudes towards lowering the voting age to 16-years-old were heterogeneous, but somewhat predictable based on several characteristics. Generally, the focus groups of students were more open-minded, conversational, and willing to consider a variety of alternative perspectives before coming to a conclusion. They were much more willing to reconsider their perspective based on supporting questions that reference existing literature on the subject, and this general flexibility is likely due to their progress in their own political socialization. Student focus groups were

much more likely than teachers to view the prospect of 16-year-old voting favorably, and cited their firsthand experience with their peer groups seeking to influence positive change in their society with no franchise to do so.

On the other hand, the teachers I interviewed on a one-on-one basis were generally much more ideologically inflexible and confident; they were willing to entertain dialogue, but less likely to validate alternative perspectives on the issue. Among the teachers I interviewed, those who taught Freshman students, remedial classes, and students struggling with behavioral or academic issues were far more likely to hold a negative view towards 16-year-olds voting, citing personal anecdotes as evidence for their lack of motivation, civic knowledge, and susceptibility to political manipulation and propaganda. The teacher I interviewed who taught a variety of mixed-grade level electives and honors classes demonstrated far greater support for the 16-year-old vote. In turn, I will examine the answers with which each focus group and teacher replied to my research questions.

Do you think tax-paying citizens of the United States should be allowed to vote in local, state, and federal elections?

Mr. B felt that tax-paying citizens should be allowed to vote, but added the caveat that some students aged 16- and 17-years old do not pay any taxes due to their low income.

Ms. O unequivocally supported universal suffrage for taxpayers, but also mentioned that it should not be a requirement to pay taxes to be able to vote.

Mr. C affirmed that tax-paying citizens should be allowed to vote, with his only requirement being that they have properly registered to do so.

Student Focus Group 1 believed that everyone who pays taxes should be able to vote, and provided the rationale that, since the government takes a portion of your income, you should have some voice in determining the individuals who make public policy decisions.

Student Focus Group 2 reiterated the attitudes of the first student focus group, with one student sharing their personal experience paying hundreds of dollars in taxes and feeling disgruntled due to the fact that they could not influence political outcomes through a vote.

What is the purpose of a modern social studies education?

Mr. B related that his mission in teaching government classes is to provide students with a broad overview of the functions of government and political processes in the United States.

Ms. O put forth her thesis that social studies education should be about how students can apply the knowledge and skills they learn to the everyday world rather than simply memorizing and regurgitating information to pass a quiz or test.

Mr. C provided an in-depth breakdown of his views on the purpose of teaching and learning various social studies. He related that World Studies aids students' understanding of how power is concentrated, and that American History aids students in developing their identity and place within the United States itself, and how they might influence positive change in their society.

Student Focus Group 1 felt that the lower-order thinking skills of memorization and acquisition of knowledge are important, but that they should be covered in elementary grades, leaving high school students the opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills they have learned to their communities.

Student Focus Group 2 echoed many of the ideas heard in other interviews, relating that the purpose of a social studies education is to learn from history so as not to repeat its mistakes, to be aware of social ills that need to be corrected, and to be cognizant of political actors aiming to take advantage of the ignorant or unaware.

Do you feel confident that you and other students in or around your age group are capable of making informed, rational decisions when forming their political beliefs?

Mr. B, after some deliberation during which he debated the potentiality of political candidates issuing targeted, dishonest messaging towards these new voters, decided that 16- and 17-year-olds are ultimately capable of deriving informed, rational political beliefs.

Ms. O agreed with her colleague, noting that, particularly many of the students in the Toledo Metropolitan Area already grapple with adult responsibilities of childcare and working to support their families, and that they need to be prepared to make rational decisions in all facets of their lives.

Mr. C argued that a number of 16- and 17-year-olds are capable of developing informed, rational decisions regarding their political beliefs, but added the caveat that students who have taken American Government classes are far more likely to have a more holistic understanding of political parties' perspectives.

Student Focus Group 1 noted that some 16- and 17-year-olds would make rational, informed decisions while forming their political beliefs, but that others might be more susceptible to dishonest or malicious influence. Still, they were careful to mention that 16- and 17-year-olds would be more than capable with the proper background instruction, and that many voting-eligible adults do not make rational decisions, but are still allowed the franchise.

Student Focus Group 2 echoed the same sentiments that the first student focus group did, relating that while there is a portion of the 16- and 17-year-old population that might not be politically mature, most if not all of these individuals have the capacity to make “grown-up decisions” and often do on a daily basis- in short, they felt the prospective new voters could make rational decisions forming their beliefs.

Do you think 16 and 17 year olds should be allowed to vote in local, state, and federal elections in the United States?

Mr. B, related that, based on his initial gut feeling, that he thinks 16- and 17-year-olds should not be allowed to vote; he feels that politicians would target this group with aggressive political messaging and attempt to influence them with empty promises.

Ms. O argued that 16- and 17-year-olds should be allowed to vote, and that to deny them this right is unethical considering that many of them pay taxes to fund the government, that many of them assume adult responsibilities, and that their future is being decided without their input.

Mr. C kept a familiar tone, reiterating that he felt that only 17-year-olds should be able to vote, and that, in his view, 16-year-olds did not have enough exposure to American history and politics in order to effectively participate in our democracy.

Student Focus Group 1 adopted a conciliatory approach, with group members, by and large, agreeing that 16-year-olds should be allowed to vote in local elections, 17-year-olds should be allowed to vote in state elections, and age 18 would grant universal voting rights. They felt that this scaffolding approach would accomplish similar benefits of universal voting rights for 16-year-olds while ensuring that their voice is heard on issues with which they are most familiar.

Student Focus Group 2 argued that 16-year-olds should have the right to vote, stating that it was unfair and unrepresentative for their tax dollars to be collected and appropriated without their consent. They also mentioned that 16- and 17-year-olds are rational, informed citizens who have markedly different political perspectives than their elders, discounting the representativeness of our democracy.

Do you feel confident that you and other students in or around your age could vote for candidates whose political beliefs and attitudes match their own?

Mr. B, after much thought and deliberation, professed that students could very likely match their vote with the candidate whose political beliefs and attitudes most closely match their own; he only felt that political candidates might, again, target these individuals with demagoguery and false promises, though he admits that many adults succumb to similar campaign tactics.

Ms. O felt strongly that students could match candidates to their own political beliefs, and she suggested that the introduction of the 16-year-old vote might encourage candidates from a variety of marginalized backgrounds (whether they be gender, racial, or ideological identities) that might inspire students to achieve highly.

Mr. C again reiterated a familiar tone that students who have taken American government courses would be much more likely to vote for a candidate whose political views match their own.

Student Focus Group 1 related their feelings that 16- and 17-year-olds were relatively capable of voting for candidates whose views match their own, although they did not feel assured as other supporters.

Student Focus Group 2 voiced strong support for the idea that 16- and 17-year-olds could cast a congruent vote, noting that there will always be outliers, but that, by and large, most individuals in this age group are perfectly capable of engaging in thoughtful discussion and research to cast a vote for a candidate whose views matches their own.

As a follow up to this question, I asked both student focus groups to relate what each of the major political parties in the United States believed about a variety of issues that might be especially pertinent to their age group. Students identified Democrats' and Republicans' stances on the following issues:

Climate Change

Student Focus Group 1 related that Democrats put more effort into combatting climate change, giving the example of Democrats being more willing to regulate the activities of fossil fuel industries. One student also identified that a Republican withdrew the US from the Paris Climate Accords.

Student Focus Group 2 stated that many Republicans do not believe climate change is caused by human activity, and that Democrats affirm the scientific consensus that climate change is having identifiable effects on our planet.

Student Debt

Student Focus Group 1 were evidently not entirely informed on the issue, but ended up giving split opinions. One student incorrectly indicated that alleviating student debt is of more importance to Republicans, while another correctly identified that the current House of Representatives has been making efforts to relieve student debt burdens, but this was the extent

of his knowledge. However, the group was ready and willing to acknowledge that they were not fully informed, and would like to seek out answers.

Student Focus Group 2 correctly identified that Democrats seek to lower student debt while Republicans feel that the federal government should not interfere with these outstanding loans.

Gun Policy

Student Focus Group 1 related that both parties have their own solutions to gun-related issues. They identified that Democrats are more likely to favor strict gun control, while Republicans favor widespread gun ownership. Still, this group inaccurately hyperbolized Democrats' desire to universally revoke gun ownership or "take away guns" entirely.

Student Focus Group 2 identified that many Republicans are content with the lack of strict gun control legislation while Democrats prefer stricter gun laws. This group was careful to mention that the Democrats are not attempting to "take away your 2nd Amendment", but instead to implement a more strenuous to better screen prospective buyers.

School Choice and Funding of Public Schools

Student Focus Group 1 was uninformed on the issue, and incorrectly guessed that Democrats might have wished to lower funding for public schools in the area. Again, the students were very willing to recognize their lack of expertise and acknowledge that they need to see more information before making an informed decision.

Student Focus Group 2 made a partially correct observation: they identified that Democrats want to increase funding to public schools, while Republicans do not wish to change the education system, as they feel it is "fine the way it is".

Do you think that being introduced to voting at age 16 rather than age 18 would increase civic participation in youth?

Mr. B posited that the change would likely increase civic participation among some 16- and 17-year-olds, but that the effect might be largely dependent on the temperament of the individual student, resulting in a negligible effect in his view.

Ms. O agreed strongly that 16-year-old voting would enable students to see the true, authentic value of their social studies education, allowing them to translate their education into action.

Mr. C was ambivalent about the potential effects, noting that he was unsure about what might happen and could not make a strong prediction either way.

Student Focus Group 1 felt, for a variety of reasons, that the change would increase civic participation: one student cited that efforts for civic education would result in increased engagement, while others noted that 16- and 17-year-olds would see a direct connection between their social studies curriculum and civic involvement in their communities.

Student Focus Group 2 responded strongly that many individuals within this age group already are civically engaged, leading protests and distributing petitions for change, and so this change would inevitably result in an increase in similar activity. They related to me that Generation Z is intent on seeing positive change happen, and so extending more tools for them to achieve change would increase civic engagement.

The following questions were only administered to teachers:

Do you think there would be unintentional negative consequences of lowering the voting age to 16 years old?

Mr. B repeated his perspective that politicians might attempt to unfairly target and influence 16- and 17-year-olds, and that some teachers might also attempt to influence their students to vote a certain way.

Ms. O only foresaw a potential for 16- and 17-year-old students to become a bit less willing to follow the instructions or guidance of their teachers, considering that they have been extended equal rights and responsibilities; they could view teachers as their equals rather than as authority figures.

Mr. C predicted that negative consequences would exist, but that he was not confident to predict exactly what those consequences would be. He related that human progress has always come with unexpected setbacks, citing historical advances of coal as an energy source and the wasteful nature of recreational space flight. He shared Mr. B's worry that teachers might potentially attempt to influence 16- and 17-year-olds to vote alongside them.

Do you think the public education system is capable of adequately preparing students to responsibly exercise their civic duty to vote at the age of 16?

Mr. B reiterated his view that it would not be the place of the public education system to do so: he felt that teachers might inject their bias into this instruction, and that this change could result in a slew of legal battles.

Ms. O strongly felt that the public education system was incredibly capable of preparing prospective voters to exercise their new civic duty; she cited the realities that, for many students, they see their teachers more often than they see their own families, and that education must continue to grow to serve a relevant, authentic purpose in preparing the next generation of civically-minded citizens.

Mr. C was a bit ambivalent about whether teachers could adequately prepare 16- and 17-year-olds for the franchise: he mentioned that he feels confident that teachers could take time in

American History classes to explore the issues before election time came around, but reiterated the familiar insecurity that teachers might not remain objective in presenting the candidates or issues on the ballot.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

In digesting this information, several essential truths have been revealed that cast important insights into how support for the 16-year-old vote might be mobilized within the Toledo Metropolitan Area. Beginning with the obstacles that need to be overcome, most of these can be summarized by the categorizations of uncertain student efficacy and self-image as well as teacher suspicion towards ulterior motives which might penetrate a new political system.

In general, students responded that those individuals within their age group might be far less knowledgeable about civic and political issues as compared to adults, and that some of them hold less stakes in the outcome of various elections. Students voiced their concerns that many of them are highly malleable and may be easily influenced by peers or parental figures. Much of these inhibitions fall directly in line with the mainstream literature against the 16-year-old vote, and so effective strategies need to be developed to communicate and instill corrections to these common misconceptions.

Firstly, grassroots campaigns led by students need to emerge that present the main talking points in simple, easy-to-digest terms. Multiple surveys representative of the American general public show that 16- and 17-year-olds hold comparable levels of civic and political knowledge, according to Tommy Peto's findings from the National Household Education survey conducted in 2018, and the only difference when it comes to civic education between 16- and 17-year-olds

and the adult population is that 16- and 17-year-olds are enrolled in compulsory civic education courses. Therefore, this inhibition students exhibit regarding this bloc of voters being uninformed is largely a result of a lack of effective communication and messaging, and could be efficiently resolved by mobilizing the tools of social media to spread the message. Similar answers exist to the other airs of ambivalence students present: information needs to be properly conveyed that students do hold enormous stake in the course of political events, as the policies that lawmakers enact today affect their short- and long-term future: 16- and 17-year-olds are being thrust into a world of mounting student debt, gun violence in schools, and the unforgiving, ravenous effects of climate change that will define their lives; they are massive stakeholders in the future of this nation and to deny this point merely because they might not be in the market to purchase a house or are stashing a percentage of their check into a 401k does not mean that they do not have real stakes in political issues. Similarly, claims that 16- and 17-year-olds are far more likely to cast votes for reasons inconsistent with their political attitudes and philosophy have been disproven by researchers like Johannes Bergh and trials in Norway and Belgium, which demonstrated that not only are 16- and 17-year-olds as politically mature as 18-year-olds, but that they are just as capable as the adult population at casting an ideologically-congruent vote. While this research can be pondered and sifted through in the realm of academia, it is relevant to bring up in light of the results of the interviews, because all of the student inhibitions that were discussed fell directly within the camp of an established misconception. For future practice and for any effort at municipal or state reform to gain headwinds, the general population needs to receive this background information in a digestible, succinct manner, perhaps through short educational videos similar to the one produced alongside this project.

Moving from the focus group interviews to the one-on-one educator interviews, it appears that while adults share many of the same concerns that students exhibit, their typical concerns are more related to bad actors and systemic issues presenting undue and unethical influence on these new voters. Teachers voiced concerns that politicians would engage in demagoguery and dishonest campaign tactics, and that it is not the job of the public education system to effectively combat these potential issues, as individual teachers might allow their personal political bias to seep into their instruction. These issues might be properly addressed through effective messaging targeted at older populations who might be more disenchanting and cynical about how institutions chew up and spit out the most vulnerable among us. Most notably, adults should be introduced to the wildly successful case of Austria, in which 16-year-olds vote in all levels of elections. Civics courses and mock elections are held within the education system and have effectively presented an impartial tutorial on how to effectively engage in civic participation in a democracy. In the end, educators already inject their personal bias into their instruction of social studies topics such as history and government. Even in the choice of curriculum, educators reveal to students what is important and relevant to study and what isn't: biases will always exist in social studies education. What is important is that social studies instruction does not begin and end in the classroom: the lessons learned from history, government, economics, and geography need to be applied by students in the communities around them, and the easiest method by which they could take informed action is by extending them the right to vote. Advertising this change to educators in this way, as a method by which to engage students in the classroom, to allow them to see the real-world relevance of their content and participate in class activities would inevitably onboard this important stakeholder.

In short, the next steps in this process are those of communication: how do proponents of the 16-year-old vote clearly and convincingly communicate their argument to the general public? It is my view that the easiest method by which to accomplish this is through grassroots social media campaigns in which short, catchy infographics and educational videos transmit the main arguments for the 16-year-old vote and dispel common misconceptions. Hitting on the merits of increasing civic participation among youth, of ensuring no taxation occurs without representation, and of giving a voice to the voiceless who will live through policy decisions being made now will help to convert many non-believers. On the same note, citing research that proves 16- and 17-year-olds' political maturity, ability to cast a congruent vote, and comparable levels of civic knowledge to adults (who often fall victim to harmful conspiracy theories and subsequently engage in violent political organizing, like the January 6th insurrection). When presented with the reality of the situation, backed up with evidence and research, individuals are much more likely to be amenable to this change: achieving the 16-year-old vote is a matter of framing, communication, and changing the narrative. Valid, meaningful rationale for extending suffrage already exists, the difficulty is mobilizing and communicating the necessity for change.

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