



Testimony of  
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On behalf of the  
**National Youth Rights Association**  
<http://www.YouthRights.org>

on

Bill 22-0778  
**The Youth Vote Amendment Act of 2018**

Before the Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety of the Council of the District of  
Columbia

June 27, 2018

The right to vote is one of the most fundamental rights we have as Americans. Indeed, it is the very reason that our nation exists. When we declared our independence, we declared that government must be based upon the consent of the governed. It is a concept that had been discussed for decades by the Enlightenment thinkers, but it took someone to go first. The United States was the first republic of the modern age and since 1776 most countries in the world have followed our lead.

Yet despite fighting a revolution for the principle that all men were created equal, the right to vote that underpinned our society was very limited. Only white, male, property owners over the age of 21 were permitted to vote. Most of the people in this country were still left out of our democracy. More struggle was needed.

Indeed, in 1776 John Adams, who would later be our second president, had this to say about expanding the right to vote to those without property:

“it is dangerous to [...] alter the qualifications of voters. There will be no end of it. New claims will arise. Women will demand a vote. Lads from 12 to 21 will think their rights not enough attended to, and every man, who has not a farthing, will demand an equal voice...”<sup>1</sup>

John Adams was afraid of it, but he provided a handy blue print for the movement to expand suffrage.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner, ed., *The Founders' Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1:394-96 Accessed June 26, 2018.  
<http://www.vindicatingthefounders.com/library/adams-to-sullivan.html>

Kentucky, a new state in 1792, became the first state to allow non-property-owning men to vote. After they went first, other states followed over the next 64 years and by 1856 all white men were permitted to vote in all states. We declared that we finally had universal suffrage.

But we didn't.

After more struggle, and a bloody civil war, the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified in 1870, and non-white men (at least on paper), were allowed to vote. Once again, we declared ourselves to have universal suffrage.

But it still wasn't universal.

After yet another struggle, Wyoming Territory became the first place in the United States to allow women to vote in 1869. 53 years later and the rest of the nation followed suit, ratifying the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1922. Once more, we declared the United States to have universal suffrage.

But we still didn't.

Millions of Americans were still denied the right to vote. Poll taxes and literacy tests stripped away the right to vote from black Americans and the voting age of 21 still denied young people their equal right to vote. The struggle continued.

The campaign to lower the voting age to 18 saw its first victory during World War II when Georgia lowered its age. Other states followed and 28 years later, the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified granting the right to vote to all Americans 18 and older.

The next campaign, our current campaign, is the campaign to lower the voting age to 16. Like all the other movements that have come before us, and all the movements that will come after, the struggle to expand voting rights takes time. Decades of time.

The National Youth Rights Association was founded in 1998 and from our very beginning lowering the voting age was a top priority. Over the years, our young members have worked on campaigns and bills in dozens of states. Massachusetts, Florida, Iowa, Texas, California, Minnesota, New York and many, many more. We have petitioned, we have lobbied, we have testified, we have protested. Each unsuccessful campaign planted a seed that grew over time to build the movement.<sup>2</sup>

In 2003, for example, student members of NYRA's DC chapter began a petition campaign to lower the voting age in Takoma Park, Maryland to 16. We failed to gather enough signatures to put it on the ballot, but it generated buzz around town and some individuals who signed the petition would, 10 years later, find themselves on the city council. A seed was planted.

NYRA-DC testified before the DC City Council in 2010. And then, in 2015, NYRA member Michelle Blackwell lobbied councilmembers David Grosso and Charles Allen who soon

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<sup>2</sup>The Movement to Lower the Voting Age. Accessed June 26, 2018.  
<https://www.youthrights.org/issues/voting-age/history-of-the-movement/>

introduced the Youth Vote Amendment Act of 2015. It stalled in committee, but a seed was planted.

The first of such seeds blossomed in 2013 when Takoma Park, Maryland became the first city in US history to lower its voting age to 16 for local elections. Inspired by the actions of Takoma Park, several Maryland towns have followed their lead and lowered their voting ages for local elections.

Each of these towns, however, are all very small. And none of them have lowered their voting ages for state or federal elections. DC is different. DC is a world class city. Our nation's capitol. DC has almost 40 times the population of Takoma Park, if passed this bill will enfranchise more 16 and 17-year-olds than all the voting population of Hyattsville. And, crucially, in addition to allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote for local elections, if passed DC will be the first place in the nation where they can vote for president.

DC has the chance to be like Kentucky who first enfranchised non-property holding men, or Wyoming who first extended suffrage to women. Setting an example for the rest of the nation to follow. It may take decades more before all 16-year-olds are able to vote, but it will happen. And DC will be remembered in the history books as the first major city to do it. DC will show the John Adams' of today once again that there is nothing dangerous about extending the right to vote, indeed it is precisely what makes us American.