



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

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At the National Youth Rights Association, we believe that voting is a fundamental human right. While there are now statistics showing that 16-year-olds are capable of voting, we have been advocating for a lower voting age for twenty years- because we think it's unjust, undemocratic and discriminatory to deny anyone the right to vote.

Youth are affected by public policy just as much as anyone else, which is why we've supported a lower voting age even before youth were proven to be great voters. Youth are expected to follow the law but have no say in making it. Teenagers can be tried as adults and sent to adult prisons. Youth are also most affected by education policy, poverty¹, and issues that affect their future such as environmental degradation, long-term government debt, and social security.

But we live in a society where power is exclusively in the hands of adults. We assume that individuals over the age of 18 are capable of deliberation and reason and will make sound decisions at the ballot box. As we saw in the election two years ago that is not always the case. The trouble is that however intelligent or competent or informed a person is, they are indelibly influenced by their own experiences and environment. Their own needs, their own wants, their own surroundings. No matter how intelligent a 60-year-old white Harvard professor is, he can't know the experiences of an immigrant mother crossing the border, or a poor working-class man in Ohio, or a black teenager in DC. That doesn't make him selfish or uncompassionate, he probably cares about helping those others, but unless he truly walks in their shoes he won't really know their life or their needs.

¹ Jason, Breslow M. 2012. "By the Numbers: Childhood Poverty in the U.S." *PBS*. November 20. Accessed November 27, 2017. www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/by-the-numbers-childhood-poverty-in-the-u-s/

Those of us in the District of Columbia don't like having voters in other states decide our future or assume they know what is best for us. No matter how well meaning they may be. Young people are no different. A 16-year-old in DC may not have the advanced degrees of some university professor, they may not be an expert on public policy, but they are an expert on their own life.

It was just this principle that led a local NYRA activist, Michelle Blackwell, to first introduce the issue of lowering the voting age to councilmembers David Grosso and Charles Allen in 2015. That summer concerns about crime resulted in town halls for DC residents to discuss the violence happening on their streets. She attended one and was shocked at the way teenagers were treated. They were patronized, they were ignored, they were given the very clear message, whether spoken or not, that only the views of adults were worth hearing. Even though young people were the ones being victimized by the crime and seeing this issue first hand, their experiences were ignored. She worked with NYRA and decided that only lowering the voting age would get young people taken seriously. She is right.

It is fundamentally unfair to expect women's interests be represented by men, for DC's interests to be represented by Montana, or for teenager's interests to be represented by adults. This is the heart of democracy and the heart of America. Our nation is founded on the principle that for the government to be just, it must derive its power from the consent of the governed. Young people are certainly governed, overly so we would argue, but if they cannot vote they cannot consent and the adult-run government that rules over them is thus unjust.

We know that young people will turn out to vote if given the chance. We know that studies show young people have the mental capacity to make sound decisions while voting. We know that the Voting Rights Act of 1965 states that anyone with a sixth-grade education possesses sufficient literacy, comprehension and intelligence to vote. But fundamentally, the only important fact is that teens are human beings, not property. To deny their right to vote, to deny them control over their lives, to deny them a voice in matters that affect them, is to discriminate against them solely on the basis of their age.

Ageism is as irrational and harmful as sexism and racism, and we should not stand for it. Since America has been founded, we have seen the inalienable rights we all deserve slowly expanded to more and more people. The ongoing fights for civil rights, womens' rights and LGBTQIA+ rights are not fights we should still be having, but they are fights we will continue having until we win. Likewise, the fight for a lower voting age isn't a fight we should be having. It shouldn't be the norm for a democratic country to refuse representation to 70 million of its citizens. But it is the norm, and it's time to start fighting.

Thank you.