

Democracy is identified as one of four components of the internal architecture of the Canadian Constitution according to the Supreme Court's 1998 ruling regarding Quebec separation. Naturally, the citizen's right to vote is a fundamental part of any democracy. The question of who has the right to vote and who does not has obviously been, and continues to be, an important one. In democracies, suffrage has evolved over the years to become more and more inclusive and recently, a new debate has sprung up about extending suffrage further. The issue that is currently at hand is the lowering of the voting age from eighteen to sixteen years of age. In this paper, I will argue that Canada should not lower the voting age to sixteen. This is because individuals in the sixteen and seventeen year old bracket, and youth in general, display lower levels of political attentiveness and engagement. Furthermore, there is no indication that lowering the voting age will increase voter turnout on election day, one of the principal arguments in favour of lowering the voting age. It is worth noting that this debate extends beyond the Canadian political sphere into other modern Western style democracies. As a part of my argument, I will discuss information and statistics from other countries such as Australia and Austria who have seen a similar debate in their own political discourse.

Paul Howe, the author of *The Electoral Participation of Young Canadians*, describes political attentiveness as a combination of "political interest, attention to politics in the media and political knowledge".¹ He argues that today's youth are significantly less attentive and aware than citizens from older age brackets. Martin Wattenberg, author of "Where Have All the Voters Gone?" also indicates that young voters are "less informed about politics than previous generations."² Howe suggests that this reduction in attentiveness is connected to decreasing

¹ Paul Howe, "The Electoral Participation of Young Canadians." in *Working Paper Series on Electoral Participation and Outreach Practices* (Elections Canada, 2007), 15.

² Martin P. Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 102.

voter turnout among the youngest voters.³ With regards to voter turnout, in his article, Howe differentiates between habitual non-voters, who consistently do not exercise their right to vote, and intermittent non-voters, who vote sometimes but not always.⁴ In an effort to examine the change in voter turnout, Howe provides data collected about voting behavior from the 1972 and 1974 federal elections, along with the most recent provincial election held. He then compares that data with equivalent data from the 2000 and 2004 federal elections and the most recent provincial election. He then compares voter turnout by age category for both of these sets of elections. The data clearly shows that, for those voters under the age of 30, there was a significant increase in the number of people who failed to vote in any of the three elections being considered.⁵ In fact, for the earlier set of elections, the data shows that zero percent of those in the ‘under 30’ age category participating in the study missed all three elections in question.⁶ On the other hand, for the later set of elections, almost a third (32.4%) of participants in the same ‘under 30’ age category missed either one or all of the elections in question, with the split between them being about equal.⁷

This being the case, I believe it would be a logical assumption that younger voters would continue this trend. There is strong evidence to support this as well. Of those classified as habitual non-voters by Howe, thirty two percent of them either “did not know whom to vote for or what the issues were” or they “had no interest in the election”.⁸ This being the case, I find it

³ Howe, “The Electoral Participation of Young Canadians,” 15.

⁴ Howe, “The Electoral Participation of Young Canadians,” 10.

⁵ Howe, “The Electoral Participation of Young Canadians,” 11.

⁶ Howe, “The Electoral Participation of Young Canadians,” 11.

⁷ Howe, “The Electoral Participation of Young Canadians,” 11.

⁸ Howe, “The Electoral Participation of Young Canadians,” 12-13.

likely that younger voters, who, as discussed earlier, already show less political attentiveness and interest, will not go to the polls on election day.

The argument has been made by those in favor of lowering the voting age that the youth of today is, in fact, increasingly active in politics but in new, unconventional ways. For example, social media has increased political awareness and even political participation of the youngest part of the electorate. Even those who are not yet part of the electorate can partake in political activity through these innovative platforms. This fact is undisputable. It can be argued that this increased awareness of and engagement with politics at a younger age than previous generations might lead to more youth casting a ballot on election day once they reach suitable age. However, the notion that this increase in political awareness has led to an increase in political maturity is, in my opinion, doubtful.

Ian McAllister is the author of *The politics of lowering the voting age in Australia: Evaluating the evidence*. In his examination of the voting age debate in Australia, one of the factors he includes in his measurement of political maturity is political knowledge. The measurement of political knowledge that McAllister uses is a survey in which respondents had to answer “six factual questions concerning the Australian political system”.⁹ The results of the survey, which has been conducted since 1996, show that the Australian electorate’s political knowledge has remained more or less stagnant and that there is no indication that the youth are any more knowledgeable about politics.¹⁰ In accordance with McAllister’s methods, the Australian youth are no more politically mature than previous generations were. Therefore, it would be a mistake to suggest that 16 and 17 year-olds are prepared for the responsibility of

⁹ Ian McAllister, “The politics of lowering the voting age in Australia: Evaluating the evidence,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 1 (2014): 79.

¹⁰ McAllister, “The politics of lowering the voting age in Australia,” 79-80.

voting. Furthermore, if young people are not knowledgeable in matters of politics, I believe they are unlikely to go to the polls. This is demonstrated by the responses provided by habitual non-voters in the survey previously discussed and examined by Howe. These responses were that they were unaware of the issues or simply had no interest in the election.¹¹

Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, most Western democracies lowered the voting age from 21 to 18.¹² The central argument behind this change was the equity between voting and military service or marriage. It is important to note that this comes in the aftermath of the Second World War and during the Vietnam War and the Cold War. There would have undoubtedly been a keen awareness of the sacrifices made by soldiers for their country thus earning their right to vote. After all, it seems logical that if your country considers you old enough to ask you to go to war, you are old enough to partake in the democratic process. One of the important arguments in favor of lowering the voting age to 16 is the that youth today are more mature and independent than in previous generations. This may be because of the increase in tertiary education in the developed world.¹³ While it is certainly true that there are more young people getting more advanced education the theory that today's youth are more mature or independent is highly doubtful. In fact, there is strong evidence to suggest exactly the opposite. According to a 2011 Statistics Canada census, the number of young Canadians, between the ages of 20 and 29, living with their parents, has steadily increased since 1981.¹⁴ In fact, in 2011, the percentage of young adults aged 20 to 24 living with their parents was 59.3%, while 25.2% of young adults aged 25 to 29 live with their parents.¹⁵ For comparison, in 1981, those percentages

¹¹ Howe, "The Electoral Participation of Young Canadians," 12-13.

¹² McAllister, "The politics of lowering the voting age in Australia," 68.

¹³ McAllister, "The politics of lowering the voting age in Australia," 77.

¹⁴ "Living arrangements of young adults aged 20 to 29," Statistics Canada, accessed November 13, 2019, https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-312-x/98-312-x2011003_3-eng.cfm

¹⁵ "Living arrangements of young adults aged 20 to 29."

were at 41.5% and 11.3%.¹⁶ Some of the reasons listed in the report for these young adults to still be living with their parents are financial and difficulty finding employment.¹⁷ This being the case, it hardly seems reasonable to suggest that young adults in Canada are more mature, politically or otherwise.

It is a common argument among those in favor of lowering the voting age that it will allow for the youngest voters to develop the habit of voting early and that this habit will persist throughout their lives, thus raising elector turnout on election day.¹⁸ This is a logical argument and raising voter turnout is something most people agree is advantageous, if not absolutely necessary. In Austria, the voting age has already been lowered to sixteen and there is some data that can provide an insight into the effect of lowering the voting age on political interest. For example, according to an article by Eva Zeglovits and Martina Zandonella examined the change in the levels political interest of young Austrian before and after the voting age was lowered to 16. The results of this study are very interesting because the trends observed in Austria may be used in an attempt to predict the possible outcome of a similar change in Canada and other countries considering lowering the voting age. Zeglovits and Zandonella found that the lowering of the voting age “encourages the development of political interest at an earlier age”.¹⁹ As I have previously discussed, interest is a very important factor in determining whether a potential voter will actually cast a ballot or not. An increase in interest would suggest that young electors are more likely to vote.

¹⁶ “Living arrangements of young adults aged 20 to 29.”

¹⁷ “Living arrangements of young adults aged 20 to 29.”

¹⁸ McAllister, “The politics of lowering the voting age in Australia,” 74.

¹⁹ Eva Zeglovits and Martina Zandonella, “Political interest of adolescents before and after lowering the voting age: the case of Austria,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 16, no. 8 (2013): 1098.

However, according to the responses to a survey taken in 2008 following the lowering of the voting age, 61.7% of Austrians aged 16 and 17 were either “Fairly interested” or “Very interested”.²⁰ All other respondents answered either “Not very interested” or “Not at all interested” or didn’t know.²¹ The statistic of particular interest is the 61.7% of new voters who expressed some interest in politics. In Canadian federal elections, voter turnout, at its lowest, was approximately 60%.²² If there is in fact a correlation between political interest and voter turnout and if we assume similar numbers would be collected in Canada, this would seem to suggest that young citizens between the ages of 16 and 17 are no more likely to vote than the average Canadian. Furthermore, this data is no guarantee that that the level of interest in politics created by granting the right to vote to these young citizens actually translates to these individuals casting ballots on election day.

When discussing lowering the voting age, it is important to consider the teenage voter’s ability to make an accurate decision. This is especially true if we consider the previously mentioned lack of political knowledge and interest. This is most accurately measured once a country has already lowered the voting age and been through an election. In order to perform this difficult task, Markus Wagner, David Johann, Sylvia Kritzingler, authors of “Voting at 16: Turnout and the quality of vote choice”, examine the similarity between a voter’s ideological and that of the party they voted for, based on a graded left-right political scale.²³ This response is then compared with data from a survey of the general public in which they were asked to place the Austrian political parties on the same scale. In their study, Wagner, Johann and Kritzingler

²⁰ Zeglovits and Zandonella, “Political interest of adolescents before and after lowering the voting age,” 1094.

²¹ Zeglovits and Zandonella, “Political interest of adolescents before and after lowering the voting age,” 1094.

²² Nick Ruderman, “Parties, Elections, and Voting”.

²³ Markus Wagner, David Johann, and Sylvia Kritzingler. “Voting at 16: Turnout and the quality of vote choice.” *Electoral Studies* 31, (June 2012): 379.

report that their results show “no significant differences between the different groups of voters”.²⁴ This seems to indicate that young Austrians are capable of making choices with a similar level of accuracy as their older counterparts and that they have a similar understanding of the political orientation of their countries parties. It is difficult to know for sure if this would translate in a Canadian context, but this is encouraging for those who support lowering the voting age to 16.

Overall, there has been a decrease in political interest, leading to a decrease in voter turnout among the youngest segment of Canadian voters. I believe it is likely that prospective young voters will continue this trend, meaning that lowering the voting age would not achieve the intended goal of raising voter turnout. In Australia, the youngest voters in society are no more knowledgeable about politics and the political system than the older citizens. The argument that 16 and 17 year-olds today are more mature than in generations passed is, I believe false. A census of Canadian young adults has shown that there has been an increase of those between the ages of 20 and 29 living with their parents. This is obviously not a sign of increasing maturity. It is possible that lowering the voting age would allow younger voters to develop the habit of voting thus increasing voter turnout in future elections, however evidence suggests that that would require an interest in politics which is simply not found in Canadian youth. Lastly, Austrian data suggests that newly enfranchised 16 and 17 year-old voters are making decisions with similar precision to their older counter counterparts. While I do not believe Canada should lower the voting age to 16, this data at least seems to suggest that teenage voters are capable of correctly identifying the party which represents their views, which is encouraging.

²⁴ Wagner, Johann, and Kritzingner. “Voting at 16,” 379.

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