

Support is growing for lowering the voting age from 18 to 16

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Rhea Boyd, 18, of Thomas Jefferson High School in Denver, Colorado, registers to vote online April 6, 2010. Some leaders believe the right to vote should be extended to 16- and 17-year-olds as well. Photo by: Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post via Getty Images

A Washington, D.C., lawmaker wants to lower the voting age. In April 2018, D.C. Councilman Charles Allen proposed allowing 16-year-olds to vote in elections. Right now, people have to be 18 or older to vote.

Allen thinks there is support for his idea. Some places have already lowered the voting age, and others are thinking about it.

Across the country, teenagers are getting more involved in politics. For example, many teenagers are protesting and talking to lawmakers about passing tougher gun laws. They are responding to the Parkland, Florida, high school shooting. Now, more people think the teenagers should have the right to vote.

Michael Morley explained that states have the power to decide who gets to vote in local elections. Morley is an expert in laws related to the Constitution.

What Supporters Say

Allen thinks 16-year-olds should have a say in making laws. Some laws, like the ones about education, affect their lives. Getting people to vote early also makes it more likely that they will keep voting. Student activists have also shown that many teenagers have thought through and have positions on problems. Allen thinks they may know more than many adults. Many 16-year-olds also pay taxes because they have jobs. Allen then thinks they should be able to vote.

Allen has introduced his bill at a time when students and teenagers have become more politically engaged. They are taking part in protests and in government.

FairVote fights for equal voting rights across the country. They support Allen's bill. "Sixteen- and 17-year-olds are affected by the same policies or even policies in a different way than older voters are," said Dave O'Brien. He is a law expert at FairVote. "It seems only right that they should have some sort of input into it," he added.

What Critics Say

Some critics say 16-year-olds are not grown up enough to vote.

Morley, for example, thinks that 18-year-olds have more adult responsibilities than 16-year-olds. In most cases, 16-year-olds are still required by law to go to school and most still depend on their parents.

Allen does not think legal adulthood is important. He still thinks 16-year-olds have a stake in election outcomes.

"There are a lot of 16- and 17-year-olds who also walk around every day with adult responsibilities," Allen said. "When you think about what those responsibilities are, why shouldn't they have a voice in helping shape that?"

Why It Matters

Historically, political parties have struggled to get 18- to 24-year-olds to show up on Election Day. However, Allen thinks young people are now more involved. For example, in Takoma Park, Maryland, 16-year-olds can vote. FairVote studied the 2013 election in Takoma Park. They found that 17 percent of 16- and 17-year-old voters voted, double the 8.5 percent of 18-year-olds.

Neither Allen nor O'Brien sees the issue as favoring one political party over another. Morley, though, is not as convinced. Data shows that younger people tend to vote for Democrats and not Republicans. Lowering the voting age, then, could influence some elections.

What's Next?

Brandon Klugman helps spread the message of Vote16USA. They are a group that is trying to lower the voting age. Klugman said many states are trying to get more young people to vote. Currently, 13 states and D.C. allow voters to sign up at age 16. A new law in California will register 16- and 17-year-olds to vote when they get a driver's license.

New York, Virginia and Minnesota are also considering lowering the voting age.

Allen's bill still needs to be approved by a committee. Then, it will move on to the city council to be voted on. Mayor Muriel Bowser will have to approve it to make it a law. LaToya Foster, who works for Bowser's office, said the mayor will support the bill.

By 2020, Allen hopes 16- and 17-year-olds will be able to vote.