

Extending voting rights to 16-17s in Canada

Sept 23, 2024

Bill S-201, the Vote16 Act, would change the minimum voting age to 16 in federal elections and referenda in Canada.

This research brief aims to provide an overview of the evidence behind this proposed change, including from cognitive science, political science and young people's experiences.

Background:

Across the world, 17 countries have a voting age of 16 in elections for at least one level of government. These countries are Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Malta, Nicaragua, Scotland, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States, and Wales. The three Crown Dependencies of the Isle of Man, Jersey, and Guernsey also have a minimum voting age of 16.

In Canada, the voting age is currently 18 across all jurisdictions. During Prince Edward Island's referendum on electoral reform in 2016, [the province allowed 16- and 17-year-olds the right to participate](#). They voted at a higher rate of turnout compared to those aged 18 to 44.

In 2021, Senator Marilou McPhedran's bill S-209 [reached committee stage](#) with majority support from senators. However, the 2021 federal election reset all legislative progress.

Senator McPhedran's latest instance of voting age legislation, bill S-201, is identical to the previous bill. According to Senator McPhedran:

The consequences of government action affect this cohort of young citizens who are mature enough to form an informed opinion but are prevented from being able to exercise their democratic right to vote.

Electoral Competence of 16- and 17-Year-Olds:

16- and 17-year-old Canadians are sufficiently mature, informed and ready to exercise the right to vote.

A consensus is growing in the neuroscientific and social science literature that 16-year-olds have the cognitive capacities required for voting. Research by scientists including

Dr. Laurence Steinberg, a world leading expert in adolescence, has found that the key cognitive capacity required for voting, the ability to make decisions in unhurried and non-impulsive contexts, [reaches maturity by 16](#).

Further research from [Austria](#), [Belgium](#), and [Germany](#), three countries that have lowered the voting age, shows that 16- and 17-year-olds also match adults in the quality of their vote choice. This research demonstrates that 16-year-olds make their voting decisions as effectively and as competently as adults.

In Scotland, an analysis revealed that 16- and 17-year-olds do not merely adopt the voting prescriptions of their parents. Along with having sought out comparatively [more sources of information](#) than their non-enfranchised peers in the rest of the UK, more than 40% of Scottish 16-17s voted differently from their parents during the country's independence referendum.

Canadian scholars have found that 16-17s are not less politically developed than adults, and, depending on the aspect being looked at, they are [more knowledgeable or as knowledgeable as adults](#). Compared to 18-20s, they know as much about political institutions, the campaign promises, and the candidates.

[Research by Elections Canada](#) has found that 16- and 17-year-olds are just as interested, if not more, in participating in various forms of political activity, including both voting and non-electoral civic activities.

International Experiences:

Before the younger people were allowed to vote for the first time during Scotland's pilot, public support for letting 16-17s vote hung around 35%. After the election, when the views about youth as political actors had evolved, [public support increased to 60%](#) and the Scottish Parliament voted unanimously to make the change permanent and extended to all Scottish elections.

The Northwest Territories' chief electoral officer has recently [recommended](#) that the territory extend the voting age to 16.

In jurisdictions where the voting age has been lowered to 16, the voting rate for 16- and 17-year-olds is higher than older first-time voters between the ages of 18-24. This may be partly due to still being at home, and being able to have conversations with parents, teachers, and peers more easily than when one is away or navigating the first challenges of adulthood. By allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to participate fully in the electoral process, it is demystified, removing a barrier to future participation in elections.

There is a positive, lasting effect on turnout from lowering the voting age. Social science research confirms that the "habit of voting" develops in a citizen's first one or two elections, meaning that a boost in youth voter turnout [will continue into the long term](#), as citizens continue voting over the course of their lives.

State of Youth Report:

In 2020/2021, the government of Canada commissioned 90 youth consultation sessions hosted by youth-serving organizations, youth facilitators and/or adult allies. These sessions heard from a diverse cohort of young people on the six priority areas established in Canada's Youth Policy.

1. Truth and reconciliation
2. Environment and climate action
3. Health and wellness
4. Leadership and impact
5. Employment
6. Innovation, skills and learning

Nearly 1,000 youth from all over Canada contributed their experiences, perspectives, insights and expertise. This work culminated in Canada's first-ever [State of Youth Report](#), which included a set of recommendations brought forward by youth under each of these priority areas. In the words of the report:

[Y]outh want to be more involved across governments and have more opportunities to grow as leaders and sustain leadership opportunities. Furthermore, youth want to participate in the decisions that affect them and want those in the government and others to acknowledge and recognize their agency and autonomy.

One of the five recommendations under the "Leadership and impact" area was for the government to

"Urgently prioritize lowering the voting age for youth from 18 to 16."

A 2020 Elections Canada survey found that 50% of 16- and 17-year-olds actively [support their right to vote](#), and an additional 21% would not be opposed to it.

For more information contact Jason and Jerry Song
Emails: jasonsong226@gmail.com and jerrysong226@gmail.com
Phone Numbers: 778 681 5226 and 778 798 7226

This page intentionally left blank

This page intentionally left blank

Victoria City Council

H. NEW BUSINESS

H.2 Resolution: Youth Voting in Local Government Elections

Committee received a report dated January 30, 2019, from Councillors Isitt and Loveday regarding advocacy for youth voting in local government elections.

Moved By Councillor Isitt

Seconded By Councillor Alto

THAT Council endorse the following resolution for consideration at the 2019 annual conventions of the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities and the Union of BC Municipalities, and directs staff to forward this resolution to member local governments requesting favourable consideration and resolutions of support:

Resolution: Youth Voting in Local Government Elections

WHEREAS youth have a strong interest in the future of local communities;

AND WHEREAS empowering young people to participate in democratic processes fosters ongoing and active civic participation;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Province of British Columbia revise the voting age for local government elections to 16 years of age.

FOR (7): Mayor Helps, Councillor Alto, Councillor Collins, Councillor Dubow, Councillor Isitt, Councillor Potts, and Councillor Thornton-Joe

OPPOSED (1): Councillor Young

CARRIED (7 to 1)



THE CORPORATION OF THE CITY OF VERNON

3400 - 30TH STREET VERNON, BRITISH COLUMBIA V1T 5E6

TELEPHONE (250) 545-1361 FAX (250) 545-4048

File: 0410-01

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

September 8, 2021

Honourable John Horgan
Premier of British Columbia
Box 9041, STN PROV GOVT
Victoria, BC V8W 9E1

Honourable Josie Osborne
Minister of Municipal Affairs
Room 310 – Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

Dear Premier Horgan and Minister Osborne:

Council, at their Regular meeting held on August 16, 2021, passed the following resolution:

"THAT Vernon City Council endorses lowering the municipal election voting age from eighteen (18) to sixteen (16);

AND FURTHER, that Council authorize the Mayor to write a letter to the Premier and the Minister of Municipal Affairs informing them of their endorsement.

CARRIED"

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Victor I. Cumming
Mayor

copy: City of Vernon Council



The Corporation of the District of Saanich | Mayor's Office

770 Vernon Avenue Victoria BC V8X 2W7 | T 250-475-5510 | F 250-475-5440 | www.saanich.ca

VIA EMAIL: MAH.Minister@gov.bc.ca

December 13, 2021

The Honourable Josie Osborne, M.L.A.
Minister of Municipal Affairs
PO Box 9056 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, BC V8W 9E2

Dear Minister Osborne,

Re: VOTE 16 BC CAMPAIGN

On December 6, 2021, Saanich Council considered a Report to Council and resolved as follows:

"That Council:

- *Formally endorse the Vote16BC campaign to lower the voting age to 16 in British Columbia; and*
- *Request the Mayor to write a letter to the Premier and the Minister of Municipal Affairs informing them of this endorsement, and request them to lower the voting age to 16 in British Columbia."*

Thank you for your consideration of this matter. A copy of the report and an excerpt of the draft meeting minutes are attached for further information. The endorsed minutes will soon be available on our website here: <https://www.saanich.ca/EN/main/local-government/mayor-council/schedule-agendas-minutes.html>.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'F. Haynes'.

Fred Haynes
Mayor

Enclosures

cc: Saanich Council

Notice of Motion

Monday, November 22, 2021

From: Councillor Taylor

1. THAT Saanich Council formally endorse the Vote16BC campaign to lower the voting age to 16 in British Columbia.
2. THAT Council requests the Mayor to write a letter to the Premier and the Minister of Municipal Affairs informing them of this endorsement, and requesting them to lower the voting age to 16 in BC.

This motion will be considered at the December 6, 2021 Council Meeting.

1410-04
Report -
Council

VOTE16BC CAMPAIGN

Notice of Motion from Councillor Taylor from the November 22, 2021 Council meeting recommending that Council:

- Formally endorse the Vote16BC campaign to lower the voting age to 16 in British Columbia; and
- Request the Mayor to write a letter to the Premier and the Minister of Municipal Affairs informing them of this endorsement and requesting them to lower the voting age to 16.

MOVED by Councillor Taylor and Seconded by Councillor Mersereau: “That Council:

- **Formally endorse the Vote16BC campaign to lower the voting age to 16 in British Columbia; and**
- **Request the Mayor to write a letter to the Premier and the Minister of Municipal Affairs informing them of this endorsement and requesting them to lower the voting age to 16.”**

 Councillor Brownoff exited the meeting at 9:26 p.m.

Council discussion ensued with the following comments:

- At 16 years of age, Canadians can drive a car, move out, get a job, pay taxes, join the military, get married or go to university but do not have the right to vote.
- Teenagers are leading the major social and political movements across the country.
- Age should not be the benchmark on whether or not you can cast a ballot.
- 18 years old is an arbitrary number; not the standard for maturity or logic.
- Lowering the voting age could increase voter turnout.
- Evidence shows that the earlier someone starts voting, the more likely that they are to vote as a habit throughout their life.
- Decisions made by Council are generally long term decisions, particularly those around climate change, local area planning and housing needs; these decisions disproportionately influence younger individuals who do not currently have a say in those outcomes.

**The Motion was then Put and CARRIED
with Councillor Brownoff Absent for the VOTE**



MAYOR KENNEDY STEWART

October 25, 2021

Premier John Horgan
Office of the Premier
PO Box 9041 STN PROV GOVT
Victoria, BC
V8W 9E1

Honourable Josie Osborne
Minister of Municipal Affairs
PO Box 9056 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, BC V8W 9E2

Re: Lowering the voting age to 16 in British Columbia

Dear Premier Horgan and Minister Osborne,

I'm writing to share the City of Vancouver's endorsement of the Vote16BC Campaign to empower youth to participate in the democratic process. This letter is prompted by a June 23, 2021 motion adopted by Vancouver City Council, and attached as an appendix.

Across BC, the campaign to lower the voting age to 16 for municipal and provincial elections has been endorsed by at least 20 non-profits, unions, and labour councils, including BC Teachers' Federation, BCGEU, and Sustainabiliteens. In 2019, the Union of BC Municipalities endorsed a resolution calling on the Province to revise the minimum voting age in municipal elections to 16 years old. Several jurisdictions worldwide, including Austria, Argentina, and Scotland, have already lowered the voting age to 16.

Moreover, studies show that the earlier people vote, they become more likely to vote again and throughout their life. They also indicate that younger voters create a "trickle up" effect, where parents and other adults in their lives are more likely to vote when youth do.

Council and I are aware that as Premier, you have expressed an openness to the idea of lowering the voting age. Moreover, the BC NDP passed a resolution to lower the voting age to 16 at convention.

I remain hopeful that your government will chose to make this a priority as the province emerges from the pandemic into a healthy economic recovery, and we stand ready to provide assistance on this matter should you need.

Sincerely,



Kennedy Stewart
Mayor, City of Vancouver

Appendix:

MOTION - Endorsing the Vote16BC Campaign to Lower the Voting Age to 16 across British Columbia

On June 23, 2021, Vancouver City Council unanimously approved the following motion:

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED

- A. THAT Vancouver City Council formally endorses the Vote16BC campaign to lower the voting age to 16 in British Columbia.
- B. THAT Council requests the Mayor to write a letter to the Premier and the Minister of Municipal Affairs informing them of this endorsement.