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Work of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

**Brief by the Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française
(FJCF)**

**Lowering the Voting Age to 16: A Priority for
Improving the Electoral System**

Ottawa, September 8, 2016

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About the Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française (FJCF)

The Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française is a national organization established in 1974 that is managed by and for young people and made up of 11 youth association members from nine provinces and two territories. It contributes to the socio-cultural and identity development of young French-speaking Canadians between the ages of 14 and 25 through activities, pan-Canadian events and youth employment programs.

FJCF recommendations

- 1. That section 3 of the *Canada Elections Act*, which states that every person who is 18 years of age or older is qualified as an elector, be amended to make 16 the minimum age to be qualified as an elector.**
- 2. That the Government of Canada collaborate with its provincial and territorial partners to institute measures to develop civic education for young secondary school students in order to provide a framework for their first voting experience in a federal election.**

FJCF position

Section 3 of the *Canada Elections Act* states that every person who is a Canadian citizen and is 18 years of age or older on polling day is qualified as an elector. The FJCF believes that the minimum age to be qualified as an elector should be set at 16 in order to be fairer to young people and to make the federal political structure more representative of Canadian society, and because there are no reasonable grounds for the current legislation.

Contrary to some preconceived ideas that circulate, it can be said a person who is at least 16 years old is just as able to vote as an older person. Although some people reproach young people for being immature, not knowing anything about politics and being easily influenced, it is necessary, first, to remind these critics of the danger of making generalizations and, second, to reiterate that these characteristics are far from being unique to some young people, and that in truth, they may be attributed to individuals in all age groups. These types of personal attributes should never be used to discriminate against young people or against anyone in an electoral process. The ability to make informed decisions and to exercise this ability during an election period is never a sure thing, regardless of the voter's age.

For example, if most Canadian legislatures recognize that a person who is 16 years old is able to drive a vehicle, it is recognized nationwide that a person who is 16 can learn and obey the rules of the road and assess potentially hazardous driving situations. The FJCF therefore concludes from this that a person with these abilities who is 16 years old is also able to vote. The FJCF is also unaware of any credible evidence to the effect that young people who are 16 or 17 are unable to vote because of their age.

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The FJCF has already heard—and rejects—the argument that the integrity of the electoral system would be compromised if young people aged 16 or 17 were allowed to vote. It believes instead that depriving this segment of the population of the right to vote compromises the integrity of the electoral system. In fact, setting the voting age at 18 is based on an arbitrary ideology and has no rational basis, which is contrary to the principles of a state based on the rule of law, such as Canada. Prohibiting the right to vote is a serious breach of the rights and freedoms of Canadians, and there must be a rationale for such a prohibition. No persuasive argument has been put forward to explain such a breach of the rights of young people aged 16 or 17 in 2016.

In the FJCF's opinion, the issue of determining why young people should be allowed to vote at 16 is archaic. Instead the question should be: Why is Canada taking so long to make 16 the minimum age to be eligible to vote? Political partisanship aside, the FJCF finds it difficult to explain why Canada lags behind on this issue, unlike other nations, such as Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Ecuador and Nicaragua, which are leaders in recognizing that people over the age of 16 have a right to vote. The Committee should ask itself what the purpose is and who the beneficiaries are of denying the vote to young people aged 16 or 17.

Although the FJCF has been given a mandate by its members to defend the right to vote at 16, it would like to point out that it is not the only player with respect to this issue, which concerns all of society. For example, the Fédération des jeunes francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick (FJFNB) has been a pioneer for several years in advocating for changes to the minimum voting age. In 2004, Liberal MP Mark Holland put forward a private member's bill in the House of Commons to lower the voting age to 16. In 2014, David Coon, leader of the Green Party in New Brunswick, introduced a similar bill. In January of this year, federal New Democrat MP Don Davies followed suit by tabling in the House of Commons Bill C-213 to lower the voting age in federal elections to 16. In the past, the topic has been discussed by Liberal Party supporters in Newfoundland and Labrador and by the Parti Québécois. Other recognized institutions, such as the Institut du Nouveau-Monde and Samara Canada, have stated on a regular basis that they are in favour of lowering the voting age to 16.

The interests of young people are poorly represented at the federal level, and recognizing the right to vote at the age of 16 is an easy measure to implement. As a result, the representation of young people would be increased immediately by the very fact they would be able to express their preferences in elections. It would thus be in the interest of politicians and the political parties to take the concerns of young people into account because of their voting power. To give an example of this poor representation in Parliament, a House of Commons report in 2015 stated that only 7 federal MPs were between the ages of 20 and 29, and 100 MPs were 60 or older.

A healthy democracy is based on the active participation of the country's citizens in political life. The earlier we get them to participate in decisions that concern them, the sooner all Canadians can benefit from their contribution. At 16, most young people are still in school and living at home, and they have an educational and parental framework that fosters the transmission of the knowledge needed to vote.

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It is necessary to take advantage of this unique combination of circumstances to develop a long-term commitment to active citizen participation. Voting is a right that must be maintained, and the earlier it is acquired in a person's development, the longer it will be exercised over time. Moreover, it is easier to reach young people in school to make them aware of their civic responsibilities than it is once they scatter in all directions after graduation.

The FJCF believes it is urgent that the legitimacy of involving young people aged 16 and 17 in politics be finally recognized and that they be encouraged to take their rightful place. How can we be surprised at the low participation of young people in general elections, when the existing electoral system continues to exclude them? It is time to reverse the trend.

Notwithstanding recognition of the right to vote at the age of 16, the Government of Canada should take the opportunity to collaborate with its provincial and territorial partners to implement measures to develop civic education for young secondary school students in order to provide them with a framework for their first voting experience. The FJCF cannot overstate the need to give young people a solid basis in the fundamentals of democracy and the electoral system to enable them to understand the importance of citizen participation and how to form political opinions based on facts. Civic education learning tools of this kind could easily be incorporated into the many educational and family resources available to young people.

Voting for the first time with one's peers before leaving the family nest is a significant symbolic act that can help to empower young people and raise their awareness of their ability to change things. Let us give this opportunity to young people aged 16 and 17. Everyone will benefit.

In light of all the reasons listed above, the FJCF believes that the Committee should study voting as a priority with a view to recommending that persons who are 16 years old be qualified as electors. This recommendation is consistent in every respect with the Committee's objective to promote the five principles identified in its study into electoral reform: effectiveness and legitimacy, participation, accessibility and inclusion, integrity and, lastly, local representation. The FJCF is always available to the Committee to address any concerns it may have.

CONTACT

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