

The Vote at Age 16

Brief presented by the Fédération des jeunes francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick in collaboration with Zachary Robichaud

Presented to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

October 7, 2016

FFFNB

Fédération des jeunes francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick

Table of Contents

Summary.....	3
The First Vote, a Habit for Life	4
The First Vote	4
Voting is a Habit	4
The Problem with a Voting Age of 18	5
Voting Obstacles	5
Mobility	5
Socialization.....	5
Interesting Scientific Evidence	6
The Worst Age to Start Voting	6
The Advantages of Voting at 16.....	7
Developing the Voting Habit	7
Public School	7
Interest in Politics.....	7
Maturity: Scientific and Other Considerations	8
Development of the Frontal Cortex.....	8
Conclusive Studies	8
Various Rights at Age 16.....	8
The Vote at 16 Elsewhere in the World	9
The Austrian Model	9
References.....	10

Summary

In May 2014, at its general annual meeting, the members of the Fédération des jeunes francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick voted to have its spokesperson organization “pressure the government to reduce the voting age to 16 and that there be mandatory education at the high school level on the electoral process.”

Although the voting age is not being directly examined by the Special Committee on Electoral Reform, the purpose of this brief is to demonstrate that reducing the voting age to 16 would be an effective means of improving the five major principles listed in the Committee's mandate, i.e. *effectiveness and legitimacy, engagement, accessibility and inclusion, integrity and local representation.*

The First Vote, a Habit for Life

The First Vote

Voting for the first time is often seen as the most difficult vote to make given all the difficulties associated with one's first involvement in the electoral process. For instance, first-time voters must make sure to be registered on the voters' list, find their polling station, and more significantly, they need to inform themselves on the platforms of all the parties represented in their riding. For all these reasons, one's first vote is considered as the one that comes at the highest "cost".

Although this high cost is inevitable with one's first vote, we will see later how being able to vote at 16 or 18 can have a positive or negative impact on the number of young people who go out and vote.

Voting is a Habit

Like many other things, it would appear that the action of voting is associated with the creation of habits (Dinas, 2012). In fact, once a person has voted once, he/she will be more likely to vote a second time (Zeglovits & Aichholzew, 2014). Conversely, if someone has never voted, it is very difficult to get him or her to do it. It is therefore essential to promote the conditions surrounding one's first voting experience because this will determine the likelihood of continued voting in the future.

A study conducted on young Americans in 2004 proved this statistic in an interesting manner. A person who voted in 2000 at the age of 18 had a 5% higher likelihood of voting in the 2004 election than someone a few weeks younger who was not able to vote in 2000 (Meredith, 2009).

The Problem with a Voting Age of 18

The electoral system is currently problematic due to the fact that there is a very low participation rate. Since voting is a habit and the first vote is the hardest one, some argue that having the voting age set at 18 is the reason the participation rate is so low (Franklin, 2004). In fact, when the voting age is set at 18, specific problems arise resulting in the voting habit developing only much later in life, sometimes not at all.

Voting Obstacles

Having the minimum voting age at 18 means that, on average, people will have their first voting experience at around age 20. Unfortunately, this is an age where the “costs” of voting are excessively high due to the situation in which these young people find themselves. They often must get informed by themselves regarding the platforms of the parties, make sure that they are on the voters' list and navigate a system with which they are not familiar, all the while dealing with specific obstacles such as mobility and socialization.

Mobility

If there is one thing that characterizes most young people between the ages of 18 and 22, it is that they are *mobile*, meaning that they have just left their family home and are in school or taking their first steps in the labour market. Hence, it is more difficult for them to take the necessary steps to vote for the first time.

By lowering the voting age to 16, the obstacles caused by mobility are minimized since 16-year-olds are for the most part still living at home and in public school. At that point in their lives, they have probably lived in the same area for a long time and are therefore more likely to know the political issues specific to their region.

The *school situation* is particularly important. By being in public school, they can learn how to get the necessary information to make an informed choice for their first vote.

Socialization

Several theorists agree in characterizing voting as a “social act” (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012). When the time comes to make the decision to vote or not, people are influenced by their social environment. If they are in a social context where the vast majority of their peers vote, they will be more likely to do the same.

Once again, by lowering the voting age to 16, young people are placed in a situation where they are more likely to vote since they are still living with their parents, who are usually more likely to vote. Young people would therefore be positively influenced in their choice to go vote since they would still be in public school, where voting would be seen in a positive light, and encouraged by their immediate surroundings.

Interesting Scientific Evidence

Studies have shown that, contrary to what is believed, 18-year-olds are not the ones who vote the least. People between the ages of 20 and 25 are the ones who vote the least. A study on voter participation in local elections in Denmark, by age segment, revealed a trend in the form of roller coaster, meaning that young people aged 18 and 19 are much more likely to vote, followed by a drop that only recovers around the end of a person's 20s.” (Bhatii & Hansen, 2012).

1. Since the author took into account instances in which these young people were no longer living at home, this confirms the hypothesis whereby young people become more mobile and vote less starting at age 20 (the median age when people currently start voting). This means that by keeping the voting age at 18, we are losing nearly half of this segment with their first chance to vote. By lowering the age to 16, it could be presupposed that young people between the ages of 16 and 20 would vote in larger numbers when they get their first opportunity to vote, which would encourage the likelihood of them voting later and throughout their lives.

A study on young people under 25 in Austria after the voting age was lowered revealed that young people aged 16 and 17 voted more than those aged 18 to 25 in two local elections in 2010 and 2012. In fact, the older the young person was, the less likely he or she was to cast his or her first vote. As for the participation rate of young people aged 16 and 17, it resembled the average of all ages combined (Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014). This study therefore supports the theory that young people aged 16 and 17 find it easier to vote than their peers who are just a few years older. Since the first vote is so crucial to creating the habit, it is therefore important to encourage it as much as possible.

The Worst Age to Start Voting

For all these reasons, political experts have qualified the age of 18 as the “worst age to begin voting” (Franklin, 2004). In fact, there are several disadvantages with a voting age that starts at 18, meaning that some will only get their first chance to vote at 22, an age that, according to studies, does not promote the likelihood of participating in the electoral system. Luckily, these problems can be remedied when the voting age is dropped to 16.

The Advantages of Voting at 16

Developing the Voting Habit

As mentioned earlier, voting is a habit that is developed in people. The moment an individual has voted once, there is more of a likelihood that he or she will continue to vote. The younger an individual is, the easier it is to convince him or her to vote for the first time. First of all, he or she is not mobile, meaning that the “cost” of starting to vote is not as high. Secondly, he or she is still in a family environment where his or her immediate entourage has more likelihood of voting. Lastly, he or she is in public school, meaning that he or she can be educated in taking his or her first steps in the electoral process.

Public School

It cannot be said enough, what characterizes young people at age 16 is that they are still in public school, meaning that they are still in an institution where their first experience in the electoral system can be guided. This would go a long way in reducing the cost of casting one’s first vote as mentioned above. Furthermore, this would make it possible to educate citizens on how to navigate the electoral system effectively. Allowing young people to vote at age 16 would therefore be a long-term investment in a society that is more politically literate.

Interest in Politics

Having young people able to vote at age 16 would be a positive change that would have an impact on the interest that young people aged 16 and 17 would have in politics and current events. In fact, according to a study conducted in Austria before and after the voting age was lowered to 16, young people aged 16 and 17 who said they were “somewhat” or “greatly” interested in politics went from 32.1% in 2004 to 61.7% in 2008 (Zeglovits & Zandonella, 2008). The result was a *twofold increase* in the number of young people who were interested in politics in their community after the voting age was lowered to 16.

Using the same logic, we argue that lowering the voting age to 16 would promote the sense of belonging young people have in their community and their province. Greater inclusion of young people at an earlier age could help counter the exodus of young people currently seen in several provinces!

Maturity: Scientific and Other Considerations

Some are against lowering the voting age to 16, arguing that teenagers do not have the necessary maturity to make such an important decision at that age. There are, however, theories and experiments that refute these allegations on several fronts.

Development of the Frontal Cortex

Although it is true that the brains of young people are still developing, the part that forms at the end of the adolescent period is the frontal cortex. This is the part responsible for impulsive decision-making and risk-taking (Reeves & Nadesan, 2010). Voting, however, is a thought-out action where the choice is not made under pressure at the last minute. This suggests that 16-year-olds have the same capabilities as their 18-year-old counterparts and are capable of being part of such a process (Heart & Atkins, 2011).

Conclusive Studies

In order to test the hypothesis that young people are not mature enough at age 16 to make an informed political choice, researchers wanted to study the capacity of young people aged 16 and 17 to make an informed choice that properly reflects their ideological position. To do this, they once again took the example of Austria, since young people there already have the right to vote and are therefore responsible for getting informed on the issues. The results were conclusive. Looking at factors such as interest and knowledge of politics, there was nothing to show that young people aged 16 and 17 were less capable than older adults in making informed choices (Wagner, Johann & Kritzinger, 2012).

Various Rights at Age 16

The age of 16 is not selected at random. It is a key age when one is given several rights and assumes many responsibilities. In fact, a 16-year-old can drive a vehicle, get a job without his or her parent's authorization, pay income taxes, join the army or be emancipated.

These spheres of society are all governed by laws and regulations that young people must follow, but they are not allowed to be involved in the process of choosing those who legislate on these issues.

It is therefore logical to extend the right to vote to 16-year-olds, just like the other rights and responsibilities bestowed on young people at that age.

The Vote at 16 Elsewhere in the World

The idea of lowering the voting age to 16 is not new and people are talking about it more and more. Several countries are currently discussing it or have already adopted measures in this direction, whether at the regional or national level. More significantly, Austria lowered the voting age to 16 at all levels, including the European Union, in 2007. Young people aged 16 and 17 were allowed to vote in the independence referendum of 2014.

This ideology is present around the world, not only in the countries mentioned above, but also in places like Brazil, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Argentina as well as certain German states (Länder).

The Austrian Model

The Austrian model is interesting because the voting age was lowered to 16 in 2007. As can be seen throughout this document, conclusive studies have been conducted since then and show that for this country, the measures have been positive.

The example is particularly relevant for us because Austria has implemented a series of measures for young Austrians, namely an awareness campaign for civic education in schools.¹

If Canada were to follow Austria's example, we feel that we could gain the same positive impacts in terms of increased voter participation rates, as well as an increased interest in politics and current events.²

¹ Eva ZEGLOVITS & Julian AICHHOLZER; "Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18? Evidence for the First-Time Voting Boost Among 16- to 25-Year-Olds in Austria", in *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 24(3), 2014, pp. 351-361

² Eva ZEGLOVITS & Julian AICHHOLZER; "Political interest of adolescents before and after lowering the voting age: the case of Austria", in *Journal of Youth Studies*, 16(8), 2013, pp. 1084-1104

References

- Johannes BERGH; “Does voting rights affect the political maturity of 16- and 17-year-olds? Findings from the 2011 Norwegian voting-age trial”, in *Electoral Studies*, 32, 2013, pp. 90-100
- Yosef BHATTI & Kasper M. HANSEN; “Leaving the Nest and the Social Act of Voting: Turnout Among First-Time Voters”, in *Journal of Elections, Public Opinions and Parties*, 22(4), 2012, pp. 380-406
- Yosef BHATTI & Kasper M. HANSEN, Hanna WASS; “The relationship between age and turnout: A roller-coaster ride” in *Electoral Studies* 31 (2012), pp. 588-593
- Tak Wing CHAN & Matthew CLAYTON; “Should the Voting Age be Lowered to Sixteen? Normative and Empirical Considerations, in *Political Studies*, 54, 2006, pp. 533-558
- Philip COWLEY & David DENVER; “Votes at 16? The case against” in *Representation*, 41(1), 2004, pp. 57-62
- Elia DINAS; “The Formation of Voting Habits”, in *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 22(4), 2012, pp. 431-456
- Daniel HART & Robert ATKINS; “American Sixteen- and Seventeen-Year-Olds Are Ready to Vote”, in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 633, January 2011, pp. 201-222
- Alex FOLKES; “The case for votes at 16” in *Representation*, 41(1), 2004, pp. 52-56
- Mark N. FRANKLIN, *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies Since 1945*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2004
- Marc MEREDITH; “Persistence in political participation” in *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 4(3), 2009, pp. 187-209
- Eric PLUTZER; “Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources and Growth in Young Adulthood” in *American Political Science Review*, 96(1), March 2002, pp. 41-56
- Richard REEVES & Thishani NADESAN; “Votes at 16” in *The New Frontier, Demos* 3, April 2010, pp. 2-33
- Markus WAGNER, David JOHANN, Sylvia KRITZINGER; “Voting at 16: Turnout and the quality of vote choice” in *Electoral Studies* 31 (2012), pp. 372-383
- Eva ZEGLOVITS; “Voting at 16? Youth suffrage is up for debate”, in *European View*, 12, 2013, pp. 249-254

Eva ZEGLOVITS & Julian AICHHOLZER; “Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18? Evidence for the First-Time Voting Boost Among 16- to 25-Year-Olds in Austria”, in *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 24(3), 2014, pp. 351-361

Eva ZEGLOVITS & Martina ZANDONELLA; “Political interest in adolescents before and after lowering the voting age: the case of Austria”, in *Journal of Youth Studies*, 16(8), 2013, pp. 1084-1104.