

Why We Should Lower the Voting Age to 16

By Laurence Steinbert – *The New York Times* – March 2, 2018

The young people who have come forward to call for gun control in the wake of the mass shooting at their high school in Parkland, Fla., are challenging the tiresome stereotype of American kids as indolent narcissists whose brains have been addled by smartphones. They offer an inspiring example of thoughtful, eloquent protest.

Unfortunately, when it comes to electing lawmakers whose decisions about gun control and other issues affect their lives, these high schoolers lack any real power. This needs to change: The federal voting age in the United States should be lowered from 18 to 16.

Skeptics will no doubt raise questions about the competence of 16-year-olds to make informed choices in the voting booth. Aren't young people notoriously impulsive and hotheaded, their brains not fully developed enough to make good judgments?

Yes and no. When considering the intellectual capacity of teenagers, it is important to distinguish between what psychologists call "cold" and "hot" cognition.

Cold cognitive abilities are those we use when we are in a calm situation, when we are by ourselves and have time to deliberate and when the most important skill is the ability to reason logically with facts. Voting is a good example of this sort of situation

Studies of cold cognition have shown that the skills necessary to make informed decisions [are firmly in place by 16](#). By that age, adolescents can gather and process information, weigh pros and cons, reason logically with facts and take time before making a decision. Teenagers may sometimes make bad choices, but statistically speaking, they do not make them any more often than adults do.

Hot cognitive abilities are those we rely on to make good decisions when we are emotionally aroused, in groups or in a hurry. If you are making a decision when angry or exhausted, the most critical skill is self-regulation, which enables you to control your emotions, withstand pressure from others, resist temptation and check your impulses. Unlike cold cognitive abilities, self-regulation does not mature until about age 22, research has shown. (This is a good reason to raise the minimum age for purchasing firearms from 18 to 21 or older, as some have proposed.)

This psychological evidence is backed up by neuroscientific findings. Neuroimaging studies show that brain systems necessary for cold cognition are mature by mid-adolescence, whereas those that govern self-regulation are not fully developed until a person's early 20s.

If the voting age were lowered, would that necessitate changing other laws to bring them into alignment? Of course not. We use a wide variety of chronological ages to draw lines between minors and adults when it comes to smoking, driving, viewing violent or sexually explicit movies, being eligible for the death penalty and drinking alcohol. Although the specific ages used for these purposes often lack a good rationale, there is no reason lowering the voting age would require lowering, say, the drinking age, any more than allowing people to drive at 16 should permit them to drink or smoke at that age as well.

In addition to the scientific case for lowering the voting age, there is also a civic argument. Consider the dozen or so countries like Argentina, Austria, Brazil and Nicaragua that allow people to vote at 16 in national, state or local elections. In such countries, voter turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds is significantly higher than it is among older young adults.

This is true in parts of the United States as well. In Takoma Park, Md., a city that permits 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local elections, that age group is twice as likely to vote than are 18-year-olds.

Why is higher turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds so important? Because there is evidence that people who don't vote the first time

they are eligible are less likely to vote regularly in the future. Considering that people between 18 and 24 have the lowest voter turnout of any age group in the United States (a country that has one of the lowest rates of voter turnout in the developed world), allowing people to begin voting at an age at which they are more likely to vote might increase future turnout at all ages.

The last time the United States lowered the federal voting age was in 1971, when it went from 21 to 18. In that instance, the main motivating force was outrage over the fact that 18-year-olds could be sent to fight in Vietnam but could not vote.

The proposal to lower the voting age to 16 is motivated by today's outrage that those most vulnerable to school shootings have no say in how such atrocities are best prevented. Let's give those young people more than just their voices to make a change.