Ten years ago, the city of Takoma Park, Maryland, voted to lower the voting age to 16 in its municipal elections. With the help of a 17-year-old campaign manager hired by the Mayor, the turnout among teen voters was 54 percent (21 percent for other voters). This high turnout persisted in the 2022 municipal election with an astronomical 69 percent of these young voters. Four other cities in Maryland have passed Vote16 ordinances. In Vermont, state lawmakers overrode the Governor’s veto of Vote16 in the city of Brattleboro, and this legislation also allows 16 and 17-year-olds to run for local office.

Exploring different perspectives about Vote16 can provide a forum for staff to think out loud and reckon with their implicit biases. In this 15-minute exercise, discuss the merits or myths and see if a consensus emerges. Share discussion highlights with all participants. Notice that the list of statements – both pros and cons – is intentionally mixed up to help provoke spontaneous reactions and jump start your discussion.
This “Eye Opening Exchange” can demonstrate how people’s views evolve, especially after sharing opinions and exploring points of view. Using this issue may elicit reactions that expose negative stereotypes and also may reveal more enlightened views about minors.

**Eye Opening Exchange**

*Break into pairs or small groups. Each person reads an argument in favor of #Vote16 and one against, and others vote “yea” or “nay.” Discuss why and share insights with the whole group during the debrief.*

- Teens will vote for whatever candidate seems cool and popular.
- Age 18 is a year of transition whereas younger voters still live in their home communities.
- Teens will vote for the same candidates as their parents.
- The so-called “teenage brain” means judgment is impaired and impulsive.
- Many 16-year-olds work and pay taxes on their income, usually can drive and in many states, are tried in adult courts.
- Teens are uninformed about the local issues debated at city hall and the board of education.
- Youths can represent their parents who cannot vote because they are undocumented or incarcerated.
- Students spend 1,080 hours a year in the classroom and should be able to vote for school board candidates.
- Teens lack the logical reasoning abilities to make informed decisions about candidates.
- Young people will feel recognized as full and equal citizens.
- Vote 16 will cause local politicians to listen to these younger voters and address their concerns.
- Voting at 16 can lead to a lifetime habit of civic participation.

It is not unusual for teens who have internalized many of these unfavorable attitudes to express opposition to their peers voting. Some adults may believe that teens do not have the maturity to sort out complex issues while other colleagues might view extending voting rights – at least in municipal elections and school boards – as one important step toward strengthening our democracy.

After people have traced what influences their attitudes, discuss how certain points of view extend to their beliefs about infusing those under age 18 into the organization.

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