

Good afternoon, esteemed Senators, and thank you so much for having me here in the Oregon Senate Rules committee. My name is Kate Voltz and I am a junior at Crescent Valley High School in Corvallis, Oregon. I am also a co-captain of my Speech and Debate team, the editor of my school's paper, the National Honor Society president at my school, and one of two student representatives for my school to the Corvallis School Board. Whether in rhetoric and argument, journalism, service, or government, I see students every day who have opinions about what our future should look like—and I am one of them. However, teenagers today feel unheard and are disenfranchised at the most basic level, a status quo that is unacceptable for a multitude of reasons.

Let's start there. I recently conducted a survey of dozens of my peers (which, if anything, are skewed toward political involvement, as evidenced by my extracurriculars) about their opinions and needs in terms of political involvement, as part of a campaign I'm putting together to get more youth involved in government and politics. Of the respondents, 48.3% cited the fact that, "adults don't/won't listen to young people" as one of their greatest barriers to getting involved in politics and government. I don't believe that's necessarily true—if I did, I probably wouldn't be here. And that's the thing. The people who believe that *aren't* here. Legislators, representatives, board members; they won't hear from the people who don't feel included in the system, which is clearly a very considerable portion of the population.

This is not an isolated trend. Our current Secretary of Transportation, Pete Buttigieg, describes in his book *Trust* that trust in our society and, importantly, in our government, is declining. Pew Research shows that 18-29 year olds today have the least personal trust of any age group, which is proven (again by Pew Research) to be intrinsically linked to trust in key leadership groups, including elected officials and even public school principals. Americans are, by and large, losing trust in government overall, a trend that doesn't show signs of stopping and may well be justified. Importantly, trusting our government is key to being able to use it to make change and make laws that are best for us. And even *more* importantly, that starts young. Losing trust in the political system starts *very* young.

Again, I'll turn to my recent survey. 31.5% of the people I surveyed (ages 14-23) said "maybe" or outright "no" to the statement, "Do you feel like getting involved in politics and voting makes a difference." That's almost a third. And again, if anything, that is skewed toward people *more* likely to believe that statement, not less. These are young people who are already disillusioned with the system, in part because they do not feel like they've been allowed to be part of it.

All the arguments against this bill use the fact that people's brains aren't fully developed until the age of about 25. Were this true, then 18-year-olds should also not be able to vote, nor, in fact, should 21-year-olds, which was the age of voting before 18. It was lowered because, in fact, if the government is going to send 18-year-olds to war, then said 18-year-olds should have a voice in who sends them there. It was not about age, nor has it *ever* been. It is about the principles of democracy itself and who gets to choose the people who control huge aspects of our lives. It's also said that because this affects bonds, only taxpayers should vote on it. As many of my peers and friends will happily tell you, just because we don't pay property tax doesn't mean we don't pay taxes; many of us have jobs and have learned exactly the value of taxes very well already. We also care about the kinds of opportunities we're given, what classes we can take, how well we're prepared for college and our jobs, and our future in general, something the school board has a great deal of power over.

Students in public schools deserve as much of a voice as any adult in the leadership of the organization that controls at least thirty hours of every school week for 13 years of our lives. We have a *lot* of skin in this game. And what's worse, many students aren't even aware of the power of the school board because they've never been given the opportunity to encounter it and have some agency in their

education. To deny them this vote is to deny them—deny *us*—a voice in our own education. We're merely asking for a say in our own lives and schooling.

I represent my school, along with my co-representative, at our school board, and other schools in our district have representatives too. Some of them are elected. I was not; rather, I am appointed by my school's student council. In a sense, all of us are, thus, chosen by the voice of the students. But we can't vote in board votes; we aren't full-fledged board members. We have to trust that our board will listen to us. While we trust in that, at least in Corvallis, it still is clearly not the most democratic process. And this is in Corvallis, where this representative position even *exists* in the first place, which is not true in many, many other districts around Oregon.

Students deserve this vote. That, on moral grounds, is in my opinion the most compelling reason of all to vote for this rule change. But beyond that, it builds back some of the trust in government and voting that, as I mentioned, is eroding—especially in young people. Young people who vote when they're 16 learn that their votes matter. It builds faith in the system which is desperately needed among teenagers today. When people turn 18, they are experiencing huge shifts in their lives that often focus them away from voting and create complications that further disengage them. Youth voter turnout is notoriously low, and even though it rose this year, it's still not good. It's still not enough. Allowing youth to start voting younger will build in them the habit of voting and lead to habitual and committed voters for life, as well as showing them the power of civic engagement in real life and allowing them to hold the leaders of their schools accountable.

Additionally, with Oregon's "Motor Voter" and preregistration laws that allow anyone older than 16 to pre-register to vote, the infrastructure to implement this is far from unfeasible. Allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote for school board members is a crucial step toward building trust in teenagers, engaging them in politics and hearing their voices when they can best learn that, and ultimately making our schools and our state more democratic as a whole. Thank you, senators, for your time, and I'd be happy to answer any questions you have.