

As a former student school board representative, a now-college student who spent twelve years in Oregon's public schools, a student of public policy, and a proud Oregonian and voter, I believe strongly in the promise of HB 3206. I supported it as a student school board representative when it was SB 776, and I support its passage now. Such a bill will improve student civic engagement, create schools that work for everyone, and ultimately bring Oregon's government and schools closer to the people they are meant to serve.

When I surveyed students (ages 14-23) around me in 2021 to better understand why so many were disconnected from politics, the results were jarring. 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, and 31.5% of them said "maybe" or outright "no" to the statement, "Do you feel like getting involved in politics and voting makes a difference?" The young people that government officials hear from are among those who do believe that civic engagement matters. But the fact is that many both don't and will never be shown otherwise.

The current voting age of 18 comes at a critical time for students—and also a time of upheaval. Many are moving out of their parent's houses to their college or workforce locations, which may be out of state, and most are trying to deal with the transition to adulthood. On top of these, they are expected to navigate a voting system they have never been exposed to before. While Oregon's voting system is far more accessible than many states, it is just one more thing young people must navigate. Being allowed to vote in at least one election before they undergo such radical shifts in their life would set them up to better understand how voting works *and*, more importantly, what an impact it can have, before they are forced to take on that responsibility without much support.

Schools and school boards are, ostensibly, meant to serve their students—ideally, serving their students is also what parents and the community want schools to do, too. That is their aim. Why, then, is it so threatening to have those very students involved in deciding what their own schools do, especially those who are already trusted to drive, work forty-plus hours a week, and give medical consent? Students of this age, certainly 17-year-olds, are already being asked to make choices about their education, like whether and where they go to college, that will have lifelong ramifications for them and their families. They are capable of weighing the importance of various priorities in education; they already do. But in the only schools they will ever be legally required to attend, they have no voice in what happens.

It is not a radical idea to change the voting age. Other countries have done it before, including the United States. It was the controversy surrounding the Vietnam War that forced America to reckon with the fact that it was forcing young people to die for a cause they never even got to vote on, leading to lowering the voting age from 21 to 18. Surely the same chorus raised alarm bells about how 18- to 20-year-olds were irresponsible, untrustworthy, and incapable of reasoned

logic. And yet, this country did not fall apart at the seams when a new generation of young people was trusted at the ballot box—and at *all* ballot boxes, not simply school district elections. Why? Because young people are more reasoned, invested, and intelligent than many want to give us credit for.

The fact is that voting is a “cold cognition” decision, rather than a “hot” one; it is not made in moments of extreme stress, emotion, and pressure, but rather with time to deliberate, gather information, and make a logical choice. This ability develops earlier and on a different track than “hot” cognition, divorcing it from the accusations of immaturity thrown at students who simply want a say in their own education. Oregon students are paying taxes, driving on public roads, attending public schools, and feeling the impact every day of policy they have no say in making—most of all, the policy that governs the only place they are legally required to be.

Most 16- and 17-year-olds are already pre-registered to vote through Oregon’s Motor Voter auto-registration laws and this system works very well for transitioning to registration at the age of 18. It would be seamless to make this happen, and not only that, it would make their transition to voting at 18 even *more* seamless. Showing young people that adults *can* be made to hear their very real concerns, giving them a voice in their own education, and building lifelong voters is nothing if not the right thing to do. I hope that the Oregon House and Senate will make that right choice.