

Submitter:

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On Behalf Of:

Committee:

House Committee On Rules

Measure, Appointment or Topic:

HB3012

#### Testimony on Allowing 16- and 17-Year-Olds to Vote in Oregon

My name is Dr Barbara J Kahl DVM, and I am in opposition of allowing children to vote. I am providing a reasoned perspective, both pros and cons, on the proposal to lower the voting age in Oregon to include 16- and 17-year-olds. While the idea has some merits worth considering, I believe the drawbacks—rooted in developmental, practical, and societal factors—make this change unwise at this time.

There are a few compelling arguments in favor of this proposal. First, 16- and 17-year-olds are often directly affected by government decisions—think education policies, climate change initiatives, or even local curfews. Giving them a voice could empower them to shape the world they'll inherit, fostering a sense of civic responsibility early on. Studies show that habits formed young tend to stick; if teens vote at 16, they might become lifelong participants in democracy, potentially boosting Oregon's voter turnout over time. Additionally, many of these teens are already contributing to society—working jobs, paying taxes, or advocating for causes. In that sense, voting could be seen as a fair extension of their existing stakes in the system.

However, the downsides are substantial and, in my view, tip the scales against this change. The primary concern is mental and emotional maturity. At 16 and 17, most teenagers are still developing cognitive processes. Imagine a child who can't decide if a friend is being mean or not, as is seen at this age, is tasked with voting. The critical thinking skills needed to evaluate complex political issues is not developed. Neuroscience backs this up—parts of the brain responsible for impulse control and long-term decision-making, like the prefrontal cortex, aren't fully developed until the mid-20s. This isn't about intelligence; it's about life experience and the ability to weigh trade-offs in a system as messy as democracy. A 16-year-old might care deeply about climate change, for example, but lack the perspective to balance it against economic or infrastructural realities.

Practically speaking, there's also the risk of exploitation. Teenagers are more impressionable, making them prime targets for manipulation by campaigns, social media influencers, or even parents and teachers. Oregon's elections could become less about informed choice and more about who's best at swaying young, inexperienced voters with flashy ads or peer pressure. And while some teens are politically engaged, many are understandably focused on school, sports, or social lives—priorities that don't always leave room for researching candidates or ballot measures. Turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds is already low; expecting 16-year-olds to show up in droves might be overly optimistic, and to what end?

Finally, there's a fairness question. At 16, teens can't sign contracts, serve on juries, or buy alcohol because we recognize they're not fully ready for adult responsibilities. Voting isn't just a right—it's a duty that shapes everyone's future. Handing it to those still under parental care, without the full weight of adult accountability, risks diluting its gravity.

While the intent behind lowering the voting age is noble—encouraging youth engagement and amplifying fresh voices—the reality is that 16- and 17-year-olds, as a group, aren't developmentally or practically equipped to take on this responsibility. The potential for increased participation doesn't outweigh the likelihood of uninformed or influenced votes skewing Oregon's elections. Democracy thrives on reasoned judgment, and most teens, through no fault of their own, simply aren't there yet. I urge you to keep the voting age at 18, where it better aligns with both maturity and societal norms.

Thank you.

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