

March 2, 2025

Submitter: Laura Wray-Lake
Committee: House Committee on Rules
Measure: Support HB 3012

Chair Bowman, Vice Chair Drazen, Vice Chair Pham and Members of the House Committee on Rules:

As a Professor of Social Welfare at UCLA and expert on youth civic engagement, I am writing to testify in strong support of the Student Voice and Democracy Act, HB 3012, which would allow registered 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local school board elections.

A robust body of evidence demonstrates that 16- and 17-year-olds have the necessary cognitive skills and civic knowledge to vote responsibly. Adolescents are capable of deliberative, reasoned decision making and by age 16, these capacities are equal to those of adults. The brain structures and cognitive functions involved in voting are distinct from structures and functions involved in other kinds of decisions, such as social decisions made with peers. Research documents many ways that adolescents are actively engaged in improving their communities, further proof that adolescents are interested, motivated, and capable of meaningful civic engagement. There has been a nationwide movement to engage youth earlier in the electoral process. Seven municipalities in Maryland, one in Vermont, and one in California allow 16-year-olds to vote in local elections, and Oakland and Berkeley, California and Newark, New Jersey allow 16-year-olds to vote in school board elections, with campaigns growing across cities and states.

Voting during adolescence is a civic learning opportunity. International research has shown that voting at 16 increases youth's civic knowledge, interest, and engagement. At 16 and 17, adolescents are spending most of their time in school, and voting offers students a chance to directly apply the civic knowledge and skills they are learning. Ages 16 and 17 may be a better time developmentally to introduce voting. Many 18-year-olds are graduating from high school, going to college, or getting a job, which is likely why voter turnout is low for young voters. In contrast, 16- and 17-year-old voters are often more connected to school, family, and community, ensuring they know how to register and where to vote. Lowering the voting age can have long term benefits, as research finds that voting is habitual: the earlier in life one votes, the more likely they are to continue voting.

Voting for school board elections gives youth a chance to exercise their voice, which we know is important for youth thriving and wellbeing. Through school board voting, youth can use their personal experiences and knowledge of schools to inform local decision making and contribute to strengthening the quality of schools. Also, when younger voters participate in elections, this civic engagement is more likely to trickle up and influence their friends and families, bringing other voters into the process.

For these reasons, I strongly urge your yes vote to lower the voting age for school board elections. Oregon would have the prestigious distinction of leading the way in offering this civic learning and engagement opportunity to youth statewide. Please feel free to contact me for more information or for copies of my published research on this topic.



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