

ELECTIONS

Too young to vote? NJ teens say they should have a say at 16

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Mahsiah Imes was 15 when frustration with the Jersey City school administration and local politicians inspired him to push for a younger voting age.

Raisa Rubin-Stankiewicz was the same age when she began attending Princeton Board of Education meetings, eager to learn what her father, a new school trustee, would be voting on.

Now 17 and facing a host of critical issues — from climate change to school shootings and beyond — she wonders why younger people shouldn't get a say at the polls as well.

“I know that we may be told that we’re not mature enough or that we don’t know enough about policy,” she said. “But we absolutely deserve a voice and we can get just as informed as any adult out there.”

Almost a half-century after the U.S. lowered the voting age to 18 amid the war in Vietnam, young activists are pushing for the franchise to be expanded yet again — this time as low as 16 years old. While the movement faces constitutional and political obstacles in the Garden State, it's also had some success, from towns in Maryland and California to the U.K., Brazil and Germany.

Imes failed to convince Jersey City's council to ask the state Legislature to lower the voting age. But just the council's willingness to take up the idea was a victory, he said.

“My whole goal was to basically get them thinking,” said Imes, who turns 19 on Monday. “Get them knowing that there are teens that are interested in the political process, that are interested in who holds office, that are interested in who’s making these local decisions.”

Gaining momentum

In 2013, Takoma Park, a suburb of Washington, D.C., became the first city in the U.S. to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds. Two other Maryland cities have since lowered their cutoffs to 16 while Berkeley, California, allows 16-year-olds to vote in school board elections only.

Youth-led campaigns are also underway in cities like San Francisco and Washington, D.C., according to Vote16USA, a nationwide campaign created by the organization Generation Citizen. In San Francisco, a ballot initiative failed by just two percentage points in 2016 while Washington last year considered but put on hold a proposal to give 16-year-olds the vote.

Only one New Jersey municipality, Bridgeton in Cumberland County, has floated the idea of 16-year-old suffrage, said Frank Marshall, an attorney for the New Jersey League of Municipalities.

Whether it would be legally feasible is up for debate. The state constitution sets the voting age at 18 but does not explicitly prohibit younger people from casting ballots.

Dropping the voting age for local elections would still require a constitutional amendment, said Alicia D'Alessandro, a spokeswoman for New Jersey's secretary of state. Still, the state's tradition of home rule might give municipalities some leeway, said the League of Municipalities' Marshall.

"I would say it's more than likely that they would have the authority to control their own elections," he said. "Generally, the authority of the municipal government is going to be construed liberally."

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The U.S. lowered the voting age from 21 years old to 18 in 1971 via the 26th amendment, responding to those who said teens old enough to fight in Vietnam were also old enough to cast a ballot.

The push to expand that right has gained currency as teenagers look to peers like Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old climate activist from Sweden, or the outspoken survivors of the Parkland, Florida, high school shooting.

"The current moment is a moment of opportunity," said Daniel Hart, author of "Renewing Democracy in Young America" and a professor of childhood studies and psychology at

Rutgers University–Camden. “The global climate strike, I think, spoke powerfully. When people see that [Thunberg] is thoughtful and committed, I think it reminds young people that 16-year-olds can really be thoughtful advocates of political positions.”

Advocates say 16-year-olds are mature enough to vote responsibly, and point to studies that show the cognitive skills necessary to make informed decisions are fully formed by that age. Civic knowledge among 16- and 17-year-olds is almost the same as a 21-year-old’s and they are as interested in politics as 20-year-olds, according to Hart's research.

But critics have their doubts.

The criminal justice system makes a clear distinction between juveniles and adults because their emotional and intellectual maturity differ, said John Pitney, a professor of politics at California’s Claremont McKenna College. Life experience also matters, he said.

“It’s not that older people are paragons of political knowledge, but they know something about paying taxes and the kind of items that appear in a pay stub and that’s important for casting an informed vote,” he said.

Politically informed teenagers like Imes are a rarity, said Rich Boggiano, a Jersey City councilman who opposed the teenager’s voting age proposal in 2016.

“They don’t know enough about the political system, and most of them couldn’t care less,” Boggiano said. “When you hit 18, 19, that’s different, they go to college and they start to learn. When you’re still in high school, girls are interested in boys and boys are interested in girls and politics is the furthest thing from their minds.”

Most Americans agree. A poll released in May found 75% of registered voters opposed allowing 17-year-olds to vote and 84% opposed it for 16-year-olds. In March, when a Democrat in the U.S. House proposed a 16-year-old voting amendment to a larger voting-rights bill, only one Republican and half of her own party supported it.

Many Republicans argue that lowering the voting age would stack the electoral deck in favor of Democrats. Younger voters tend to be significantly more liberal than older generations, particularly on social issues, surveys show.

About a dozen countries, including Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Germany and Scotland, let 16-year-olds vote for national, state or local elections. Italy’s ruling parties called for lowering the national voting age in September after young people rallied for action on climate change.

Politicians in the United Kingdom are also discussing whether to extend suffrage to 16-year-olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Proponents say a lower voting age is key to ultimately boosting voter turnout and driving lifelong political engagement. In Takoma Park, 16- and 17-year-old voters cast ballots at double the rate of voters 18 and older, according to an analysis by the group FairVote. Research shows that electoral activity is habitual and that the likelihood of young people voting in their first election decreases as they age.

“If we convert young people into voters as young as possible, they tend to remain voters for life,” said Hart, the Rutgers professor.

New Jersey is gradually lowering the barriers to younger voting. It is one of four states to permit 17-year-olds to preregister to vote and lawmakers are considering a bill, S1218, that would allow people to vote in a primary election if they turn 18 by the following general election. The state Assembly approved the proposed New Voter Empowerment Act last year, but the bill has stalled in the Senate.

Rubin-Stankiewicz said resuscitating the measure should be a priority as the 2020 presidential election approaches.

“We really need to think about which people we’re disempowering and not allowing to vote,” she said.

Svetlana Shkolnikova covers local news and Superior Court in Morris County for NorthJersey.com. For unlimited access to the most important news from criminal trials to local lawsuits and insightful analysis, please subscribe or activate your digital account today.

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