

City Council

(Deferred from October 9 and 10, 2024 - 2024.MM22.6)

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| DM23.1 | ACTION | | | Ward: All |
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Extending Voting Opportunities in City Polls to 16- and 17-Year-Olds - by Councillor Dianne Saxe, seconded by Councillor Lily Cheng

Recommendations

Councillor Dianne Saxe, seconded by Councillor Lily Cheng, recommends that:

1. City Council request the City Clerk to report to City Council on an approach to reducing the minimum age to vote in a neighbourhood poll from 18 to 16, such report to include the necessary changes required to implement the age reduction by the end of the first quarter of 2025.

Summary

In Canada, the minimum voting age is currently 18 across all jurisdictions. Fourteen Canadian municipal councils and school boards [have passed motions](#) in support of extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds, or studying the policy:

1. Pickering City Council, 2004
2. Lethbridge City Council, 2015
3. Edmonton City Council, 2016
4. Edmonton Catholic School Board, 2017
5. Edmonton Public Schools, 2017
6. Calgary City Council, 2018
7. Strathcona County Council, 2018
8. Winnipeg School Division, 2018
9. Victoria City Council, 2019
10. Vancouver City Council, 2021
11. Vernon City Council, 2021
12. Saanich City Council, 2021

13. Whitehorse City Council, 2024

14. Penticton City Council, 2024

Similar motions are currently anticipated in West Vancouver, Kamloops, Surrey, Halton Hills, and Cape Breton.

While beneficial to building public support in communities across the country, these campaigns have been limited by provincial/territorial jurisdiction over municipal election law.

The City of Toronto's polls for changes in a neighbourhood present an opportunity for the City to become the first in Canada to unilaterally allow 16- and 17- year-olds the opportunity to vote. This summary includes an overview of the evidence supporting the extension of voting rights to 16- and 17- year-olds, drawing from cognitive science, political science and young people's experiences.

Electoral Competence of 16- and 17-Year-Olds

Across the world, 17 countries have a voting age of 16 in elections for at least one level of government. These countries are Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Malta, Nicaragua, Scotland, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States, and Wales. The three Crown Dependencies (the Isle of Man, Jersey, and Guernsey) also have a minimum voting age of 16.

As the list of jurisdictions with a minimum voting age of 16 expands, a consensus is growing in the neuroscientific and social science literatures that 16-year-olds are sufficiently mature, informed and ready to exercise the right to vote. Research by scientists including Dr. Laurence Steinberg, a world leading expert in adolescence, has shown that the critical cognitive ability needed for voting—the ability to make decisions in unhurried and non-impulsive contexts—[reaches maturity by 16](#).

Further research from [Austria](#), [Belgium](#), and [Germany](#), three countries that have extended the voting age, shows that 16- and 17-year-olds also match adults in the quality of their vote choice. This research demonstrates that 16-year-olds make their voting decisions as effectively and as competently as adults.

In Scotland, an analysis revealed that 16- and 17-year-olds do not merely adopt the voting prescriptions of their parents. Along with having sought out comparatively [more sources of information](#) than their non-enfranchised peers in the rest of the UK, more than 40 percent of Scottish 16- and 17-year-olds voted differently from their parents during the country's independence referendum.

Canadian scholars have found that 16- and 17-year-olds are not less politically developed than adults, and, depending on the aspect being looked at, they are [more knowledgeable or as knowledgeable as adults](#). Compared to 18- and 20-year-olds, they know as much about political institutions, the campaign promises, and the candidates.

[Research by Elections Canada](#) has found that 16- and 17-year-olds are just as interested, if not more, in participating in various forms of political activity, including voting and non-electoral civic activities.

During Prince Edward Island's referendum on electoral reform in 2016, [the province allowed 16- and 17-year-olds the right to participate](#). During this referendum, 16- and 17-year-olds voted at a higher rate of turnout than those aged 18 to 44.

International Experience

Before they were allowed to vote for the first time during Scotland's 2014 pilot, public support for letting 16- and 17-year-olds vote stood at approximately 35 percent. After the election, when the views about youth as political actors had evolved, [public support increased to 60 percent](#) and the Scottish Parliament voted unanimously to make the change permanent.

The Northwest Territories' chief electoral officer has recently [recommended](#) that the territory extend the voting age to 16.

In jurisdictions where the voting age has been lowered to 16, the voting rate for 16- and 17-year-olds is higher than older first-time voters between the ages of 18-24. This may be partly due to still being at home, and being able to have conversations with parents, teachers, and peers more easily than when one is away or navigating the first challenges of adulthood. By allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to participate fully in the electoral process, it is demystified, removing a barrier to future participation in elections.

There is a positive, lasting effect on turnout from extending the voting age. Social science research confirms that the “habit of voting” develops in a citizen's first one or two elections, meaning that a boost in youth voter turnout [will continue into the long term](#), as citizens continue voting over the course of their lives.

Youth Support

In 2020, the Government of Canada commissioned 90 youth consultation sessions hosted by youth-serving organizations and youth facilitators. These sessions heard from a diverse cohort of young people on the priority areas established in Canada's Youth Policy.

Nearly 1,000 youth from all over Canada contributed their experiences, perspectives, insights and expertise. This work culminated in Canada's first-ever [State of Youth Report](#), which included a set of recommendations brought forward by youth under each of these priority areas. In the words of the report:

[Y]outh want to be more involved across governments and have more opportunities to grow as leaders and sustain leadership opportunities. Furthermore, youth want to participate in the decisions that affect them and want those in the government and others to acknowledge and recognize their agency and autonomy.

One of the five recommendations under the “Leadership and impact” heading was for the government to

“Urgently prioritize lowering the voting age for youth from 18 to 16.”

Supportive youth-led and youth-affiliated organizations includes Apathy is Boring, the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, the Canadian Federation of Students, the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, Children First Canada, For Our Kids Canada, Generation Squeeze, New Majority, Toronto Foundation for Youth Involvement in Politics, UNICEF Canada, Young Canadians Roundtable on Health, Young Politicians of Canada, and Youthful Cities.

In line with growing multi-partisan and grassroots support for this policy, a 2020 Elections Canada survey found that 50 percent of 16- and 17-year-olds actively [support the idea of having the right to vote](#), with an additional 21 percent expressing no opposition to it.

Neighbourhood Polls

The City conducts polls to determine the opinions of property owners, residents and businesses that could be affected by a change in their neighbourhood.

If the result of the poll is positive, the application may proceed through the approval process. Depending upon the type of poll, final approval by City Council may be required. All regulations concerning neighbourhood polls, including the minimum age to participate, are set independently by the City.

Between September 13, 2023, and September 13, 2024, the City of Toronto opened 76 neighbourhood change polls. Forty-six of these polls were opened for Front Yard Parking requests, 20 were opened for Traffic Calming proposals, 9 were opened for Permit Parking proposals, and 1 was opened for a Business Improvement Area. Of these 76 polls, all but 11 received sufficient response rates for an actionable result.

16- and 17-year-olds have an interest in the safety, accessibility, and attractiveness of their communities. Changing the minimum age to participate in City polls from 18 to 16 will allow Toronto to substantively promote and advance the cause of youth voting rights. Two sections of the City of Toronto Municipal Code are relevant to considerations of this change.

§ 190-4. Polling list.

The City Clerk's Office shall compile a polling list including names and corresponding addresses of those listed on the following documents as owners, residents and tenants of property located wholly or partially within the polling area:

A. Current Returned Assessment Roll;

B. Municipal Connect, Toronto Property System (TPS) or any other related geographic information system (GIS) developed using information from Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) and City records; and

C. Affidavit delivered to the City Clerk during the polling period in a form prescribed by the City Clerk and asserting that the affiant is an owner, resident or tenant of property located wholly or partially within the polling area.

§ 190-9. Voting eligibility.

No person shall be eligible to vote in a poll unless the person's name appears on the polling list and the person is 18 years of age or over, and is an owner, resident or tenant of property located wholly or partially within the polling area as of the closing date of the poll.

Background Information

Item DM23.1

(<https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2024/dm/bgrd/backgroundfile-249563.pdf>)