Should youth be allowed to vote?
Making the case for Vote 16 in Canada

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Every citizen of Canada should have the right to vote, according to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Yet, this is not our reality.

Canadian youth below 18 years of age have historically been excluded from the political system, discouraging them from engaging with the civic process and preventing them from having a say in the decisions that will directly impact their future.

Over the past few years, we've seen youth around the world take action and prove their motivation to address the world's most pressing challenges. Greta Thunberg, for example, mobilized millions of youth to fight climate change and hold governments accountable to their environmental policies. She was a teenager at the time. Malala Yousafzai similarly fought for women's education rights after being shot by the Taliban while attending secondary school. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 17. And Gitanjali Rao, a 15-year-old budding scientist, recently coded software to detect and prevent cyber bulling. She was named the New York Time's Kid of the Year in 2020.

Youth know what they're doing.

Dr. Daniel Bierstone, an Ontario-based pediatrician, supports the idea of youth enfranchisement. He looks to youth autonomy on medical decision-making as evidence that they can make competent choices when they really matter.

"By and large there is no age of consent for medical treatment in Canada, which means that an individual under the age of 18 is presumed to be capable of making decisions about his or her own medical care… if youth can make their own healthcare decisions, why should they be deemed incapable of engaging in the voting process?" said Dr. Bierstone.

Although some might argue that youth should not be voting as their decision-making can be skewed by developmental factors such as peer pressure, impulsivity, or normal adolescent risk taking, Dr. Bierstone notes that similar issues exist with adult decision-making as well.

"Many adults vote with all kinds of less-than-altruistic motivations, whereas youth, who have their whole life ahead of them, are often inclined to be principled and concerned about issues that will affect their lives in the long run, such as climate change or other social justice issues," said Dr. Bierstone.

Youth know how to make an impact, rattle the cages of government bureaucracy, and come up with creative solutions to the issues Canada is facing. The past few years of COVID-19 have been challenging for everyone, but how we recover from this pandemic depends on our willingness to engage Canadian youth in the process. Citizens under the age of 18 are directly impacted by political decisions; they are not immune to recessions, housing crises, and wait times in health care. Currently, there are roughly 1,300 kids waiting for pediatric surgeries in Ontario. Across the country, wait times for publicly-funded eating disorder treatment have increased significantly, with many individuals over 18 months to receive care. These are very real issues that affect youth directly and will have long-lasting consequences if left unresolved.

"If youth were able to vote, policy makers would become more accountable to them," stated Dr. Bierstone. He believes that the climate crisis and environmental policies would become priorities if youth were given a chance to vote, noting "it is youth (and their future children and grandchildren) who will be most profoundly affected by climate change." It is no wonder why so many leading environmental activists are youth.

What would youth enfranchisement look like?

Thankfully, Canada has plenty of positive examples to look to when implementing youth enfranchisement. Countries such as Austria and Scotland have a voting age of 16. Studies done in these countries indicate that youth interest in politics and policy *increased* as a result of enfranchisement. Another study proved that voter turnout amongst 16-year-old first-time voters was *higher* than 18-year-old first-time voters. Ultimately, these studies support the idea of lowering the voting age as a way to increase voter education, competency, and turnout.

The idea of lowering the Canadian voting age to 16 was first presented as Bill S-201 by Marilou McPhedron, an Independent Senator in Canada's Upper House. Shortly thereafter, Member of Parliament Taylor Bachrach introduced it as Bill C-201 in the House of Commons. Bill C-201 is scheduled for its second reading on September 22, 2022.

To further demonstrate their interest in lowering Canada's voting age, 13 youth have collectively filed an application to the Ontario Superior Court of Justice to challenge the voting age in Canada. Their actions have been supported by numerous child and youth advocacy groups, including Children First Canada, Justice for Children and Youth, and the David Asper Centre for Constitutional Rights, who believe that a voting age of 18 is unconstitutional and a violation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Young Canadians Roundtable on Health is the latest organization to pledge our support to this initiative.

Young Canadians' advocacy for Vote 16 is just a taste of what is to come. Youth enfranchisement can change the face of politics *for the better.*

The future belongs to those that shape it, so why not let youth have a say?

To learn more about Vote 16, visit the https://vote16.ca/