

# American Sixteen- and Seventeen-Year- Olds Are Ready to Vote

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and  
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American 16- and 17-year-olds ought to be allowed to vote in state and national elections. This claim rests upon a line of argument that begins with an exegesis of legal and philosophical notions of citizenship that identify core qualities of citizenship: membership, concern for rights, and participation in society. Each of these qualities is present in rudimentary form in childhood and adolescence. Analyses of national survey data demonstrate that by 16 years of age—but not before—American adolescents manifest levels of development in each quality of citizenship that are approximately the same as those apparent in young American adults who are allowed to vote. The lack of relevant differences in capacities for citizenship between 16- and 17-year-olds and those legally enfranchised makes current laws arbitrary, denying those younger than age 18 the right to vote. Awarding voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds is important, given the changing age demographics in the country, which have resulted in the growing block of older voters displacing the interests of younger Americans in the political arena. Finally, the authors critically examine claims that adolescents are neither neurologically nor socially mature enough to vote responsibly and conclude that empirical evidence and fairness suggest that 16- and 17-year-olds ought to be awarded the vote.

*Keywords:* civic maturity; voting; adolescence; citizenship; development

Sixteen- and 17-year-olds living in the United States ought to be allowed to vote in local, state, and national elections. This claim rests on a variety of grounds, elaborated in the sections that follow, about the nature of citizenship, the developmental status of 16- and 17-year-olds *as citizens*, and a deepening divide between the political representation of interests of the young and the old. A fair consideration of these issues, we argue, leads to the conclusion that 16- and 17-year-olds meet minimal criteria for full citizenship and can vote responsibly. We also indicate that the developmental evidence suggests that those younger than 16 years of age should be excluded from the electorate.

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In addition, we consider several lines of evidence that might be marshaled against allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote. One of the most popular of these—often prominent in contemporary discussions of adolescents' limitations—is that their brains are too immature to permit responsible, adult-like conduct. There are many problematic elements to such a conclusion, notably that there is virtually no evidence linking neurological maturation in adolescence to the qualities of citizenship (which we outline below). It might also be argued that setting the voting age at 16—while the ages of criminal responsibility, entering into legally binding contracts, and medical-decision making might be set at older ages—contributes to the fragmentation of citizenship. We suggest that not all of these other qualities are actually central to citizenship and that a graduated entry into these responsibilities is consistent with at least some developmental evidence.

## What Is Citizenship?

### *Legal citizenship*

In the United States, citizenship is required for a person to vote in state and federal elections. Citizenship in the United States can be obtained through several means. First, the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States provides citizenship to those born within the United States (excluding children of foreign diplomats). Citizenship in the United States can also be obtained through naturalization, a process through which a permanent resident of the United States can become a citizen following a demonstration of competency in English and a demonstration that he or she “is a person of good moral character, attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States, and well disposed to the good order and happiness of the United States” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 1952b). The naturalization process also requires a demonstration of civic knowledge concerning the political processes of the United States (questions on the test ask for the branches of government, the names of leaders of different institutions, and so on).

While the details of how citizenship is determined in the United States differ from those that define citizenship in other countries, the thrust of citizenship laws in most countries relates to classical understandings of citizenship.

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### *Citizenship as a political construct*

Citizenship is largely defined by three qualities: rights, participation, and membership (Bellamy 2008). *Membership* refers to the sense of belonging to the nation and communities of which one is a citizen. Citizens are entitled to rights by virtue of membership, and as citizens, they shape these rights through participation in the political process. Full citizenship requires participation in the life of a society.

Citizenship demands some degree of solidarity with other citizens. Participation in democratic government often presumes that those who vote and those who govern identify, to some degree, with the people and institutions constituting the state. Indeed, democracy functions best when those individuals holding elected positions are concerned for the well-being of their constituents and of the state. Although citizens recognize that politicians have their own interests that they hope to fulfill while holding public office—whether these be psychological or material in nature—the public ordinarily expects these interests to be subjugated by the public good. The United States and many other countries have laws and regulations intended to diminish government officials' inclinations to pursue private goals at the expense of the public good.

Similarly, some sense of identification with the state is often seen as a prerequisite for citizenship. To the extent that voters and representatives act out of self-interest and an interest in the prosperity of one's community, citizenship guarantees a certain protection for the state—in the form of citizens' investment in their communities and nations. Critics of permissive immigration policies sometimes argue that large immigrant populations create communities in which subjective identification remains with the country of origin rather than the country of residence, resulting in limited motivation to participate civically in the host country (see Huntington 2004). While there are many reasons to doubt that such arguments are correct (see Hart, Richardson, and Wilkenfeld forthcoming), such arguments do serve to highlight the facets of citizenship concerning attachment to the community.

As noted previously, a functioning democracy requires that citizens feel that their lives are joined in important ways with their counterparts. The absence of such a sentiment reduces civic life to the point that it is expressed as instrumental action intended to fulfill purely selfish interests—and such a scenario is incompatible with a healthy democracy. Although it is possible to assign the identity of "citizen" to an individual who feels no identification with fellow citizens—indeed, every democratic society has citizens for whom this is true—this is not the kind of civic identity that can serve as the goal toward which analysis and practice ought to build.

### *Legal and political citizenship*

The criteria for legal citizenship in the United States, and the steps necessary to obtain it for those who do not have it, are intended to ensure the three elements of citizenship discussed above—membership, concern for rights, and participation. Consider again U.S. naturalization law that requires that a candidate be "attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States, and well disposed to the good order and happiness of the United States" (U.S.

Department of Homeland Security 1952b). The requirement for “attachment” to the principles of the Constitution clearly emphasizes the importance of membership for citizens. To be a citizen is not only to know about the Constitution but also to identify with its underlying principles. Attachment implies a visceral commitment of the individual, the result of which is that the individual is emotionally invested in the principles and, presumably, motivated to enact and defend them.

“Good moral character” as a prerequisite to naturalization is surely intended to provide a rationale for denying citizenship to chronic criminals and others whose behaviors are judged to be destructive. But “good moral character” also refers to the elements of citizenship concerned with participation in civil society and the formulation and legislation of rights. There is a broad consensus that citizens in the United States must be committed to some moral virtues for a liberal democracy to function. One of these is tolerance. *Tolerance* refers to a willingness to allow others to speak about and to participate in society, even when their views and actions are unlike those of the majority. In the United States, groups of all sorts seek to advance political agendas quite at odds with those of most Americans (for example, the legalization of marijuana) and are accorded legal protection to do so. Sullivan and Transue (1999) have argued that tolerance is a cardinal virtue of successful liberal democracies. It is likely because of the recognition of the centrality of tolerance to democracy that the United States judges that those who are members of groups and organizations that promulgate decidedly intolerant, totalitarian political views are ineligible for citizenship (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 1952a).

The processes by which citizenship can be obtained in the United States seem less directly oriented toward participation, perhaps because some forms of civic participation may be required by laws (jury duty, for example), while others are generally viewed as strictly voluntary. Nonetheless, the requirement that potential citizens demonstrate a minimal level of civic knowledge seems intended to ensure that the foundation for informed civic action is present. Civic knowledge is one of a set of dispositions that seem to motivate and inform civic action. There is solid evidence that adults with civic knowledge are more likely to participate in various ways in the political system (Galston 2001). Political scientists (see Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990; Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991) have identified other dispositions related to civic knowledge that are important for motivating civic and political participation. For example, *political skills* facilitate participation; knowing how to participate effectively in the political system may be just as important in energizing voting, lobbying, and so on as possession of the facts about the political system. *Political efficacy*, reflected in the beliefs that one is an effective political actor, is one of the most widely studied characteristics of voters and citizens and is related to participation. *Political and civic interest* is also crucially important; those who are interested in community and national news possess more civic knowledge and are more likely to participate in civic life. That an ideal citizen is knowledgeable about the political system, possesses the skills to engage with the system effectively, feels a sense that his or her efforts are effective, and shows an interest in the functioning of the community seems consistent with, if not specified by, legal and philosophical connotations of citizenship.

Moreover, these qualities appear to be psychologically interconnected; they are not simply qualities that legislators and theorists admire. Civic knowledge, political efficacy, and political action are mutually reinforcing; knowledge contributes to the sense of oneself as an individual who can contribute to the political process, which in turn motivates civic action; civic action, in turn, contributes to political efficacy and efforts to acquire political knowledge (see Finkel 1985).

Legal and political notions of citizenship overlap in their emphases on the importance of membership, concern for rights and values, and participation. While legal constructions of citizenship surely have arbitrary elements, this brief exposition illustrates how facets of requirements for citizenship in the United States reflect broad, widely shared, historically meaningful notions of citizenship. Furthermore, that legal definitions of citizenship rest upon a foundation of shared understandings that derive from thoughtful considerations of individuals in their relations to political institutions suggests that the qualities of citizenship are important—for citizens and democratic institutions. It follows, therefore, that according citizenship has implications for the individual and the political institutions to which he or she belongs. Citizenship is important; it ought to be accorded to all who are deserving (for example, the Athenians' exclusion of slaves, women, and many others from citizenship was illegitimate, as was the exclusion of blacks and women in the United States) but should not be granted to those who are unable to fulfill the responsibilities of citizenship.

In the next section, the question of when children are capable of citizenship in its full sense is addressed. Though not the focus here, some of the elements discussed in the next section are also relevant when considering whether adults with cognitive and psychiatric impairments ought to be allowed to vote (Appelbaum 2000) and whether convicted felons should be enfranchised (Manza and Uggen 2004).

## Children and Citizenship

Citizenship includes experiences, beliefs, and emotions concerning membership, rights, and participation (Bellamy 2008). Although these three qualities are conceptually related and necessary for citizenship, psychologically they are likely to be partially independent. It is conceptually possible, for example, for one to identify with one's fellow citizens yet not be highly involved in civic life; similarly, an individual might be concerned about the rights of citizens without identification with others in the community and absent political participation.

### *Development in childhood*

The sense of membership in a nation and of civil rights both emerge at very young ages. For example, Barrett, Wilson, and Lyons (2003) demonstrated that English schoolchildren as young as five years of age were able to distinguish between British citizens and those from America and Germany. Moreover, even

young children preferred citizens of their own nations to those of others. Barrett, Wilson, and Lyons (2003) found that the importance of national identity increased over the course of childhood, with older children judging nationality to be more important to them than gender- and age-based identities.

Young children are also able to infer that citizens have rights. In a series of studies, Helwig and colleagues (Helwig 1998, 2006; Helwig et al. 2003) found that children and adolescents believe that citizens have rights that should not be abrogated by the government. In Canada, the United States, and China, six-year-old children used the principle of fairness to judge that citizens should not be prevented by legislation or authority from criticizing the government (Helwig 1998). Although older children's judgments on the principle of fairness are more differentiated and more pragmatic about the consequences of such actions (for example, it might be dangerous to voice opposition to governmental policies if the country officially opposes free speech) than are those of six-year-olds, Helwig's findings demonstrate that a sensitivity to citizens' rights emerges early in life. Moreover, the sensitivity to rights appears even in countries that are traditionally viewed as less rights-oriented than Western democracies, such as China (Helwig et al. 2003).

Less is known about children's sense of themselves as civic actors. However, children do volunteer, which is a precursor to adult forms of civic participation (Hart et al. 2007), and by adolescence, volunteering can be consolidated into adolescents' identities (Hart and Yates 1997).

It is clear from these studies that the capacities necessary for citizenship are present in children, in at least rudimentary forms. Children identify with their countries and perceive themselves to be members of their societies; children are concerned with the rights and obligations of citizens; and in some respects, children participate in and contribute to civic welfare.

Yet rudimentary capacities for citizenship may not warrant full participation in political life. It is probable that children lack some of the qualities necessary to participate effectively as voters. While these necessary qualities flower in adolescence, the precise timing during adolescence is uncertain. In the next section, we present findings suggesting that sometime in midadolescence, adolescents likely have the necessary capacities to vote.

## The Developmental Readiness of Adolescents for Voting

One approach to determining the age threshold for voting is to compare age groups on each side of the threshold to determine whether there are differences relevant to citizenship and voting between the two groups. For example, a proposal to move the age threshold for voting from 18 to 25 could be defended by demonstrating that 27-year-olds have more qualities, or better-developed qualities, necessary for effective voting than do 23-year-olds. We use this approach in this section to compare the qualities associated with citizenship and voting in midadolescence to those in late adolescence and adulthood. In the analyses that



follow, we examine the developmental trajectories for *tolerance*, *civic knowledge*, *political skills*, *political efficacy*, *political interest*, and *volunteering*. Each of these qualities, except for volunteering, are, as discussed above, reflections or facets of citizenship. Volunteering is considered here as one form of civic participation. For each of these qualities, we use data from a national survey to trace the developmental course from early adolescence into adulthood. This analysis suggests that there are few indications that 16-year-olds are sufficiently distinct from adults to warrant exclusion from voting.

## Methods

*Participants.* We used two samples in the analyses that follow. The first is the adult sample of the National Household Educational Survey of 1996 (NHES:96), which was intended to allow estimates “representative of all civilian U.S. adults” (Collins et al. 1997, 1). Random digit dialing was used to contact representative households throughout the United States (Collins et al. 1997), with oversampling of neighborhoods with high concentrations of blacks and Hispanics. There were 2,250 participants in this sample.

The second sample is the youth sample of NHES:96; it included 4,217 participants between 14 and 18 years old. Households with one child or adolescent were telephoned, with children serving as the participants (see Nolin et al. 2000).

*Survey questions.* In both samples, two parallel sets of five questions were used to assess *civic knowledge* (e.g., “Which of the two major political parties is most conservative at the national level?”). The number of correct responses for each set was used as the summary measure of civic knowledge. The two sets of questions differed slightly in average difficulty; we added the difference in means to the sum of correct answers to the more difficult set to equalize the scores across question sets.

Participants in both samples were asked whether in their communities a person ought to be permitted to make a speech opposing religion and whether books with unpopular messages should be banned from public libraries. Those who advocated tolerance in both instances were judged to be *tolerant*.

*Political skill* was determined using the sum of affirmative answers to two items concerning political participation (“Could you write a letter to a public official?” and “Could you make a statement at a public meeting?”), with high scores indicating greater political skill than those with low scores.

*Political efficacy* was assessed by asking whether participants agreed with two statements tapping political understanding (“I can’t understand politics and the government”) and efficacy (“My family has no say in what the government does”). Responses indicating disagreement with these two responses were totaled and used as an index of political efficacy.

*Political interest* was measured with two items that assessed the frequency (from infrequent to daily) with which participants followed national news in print

("How often do you read about national news?") and on television or the radio ("How often do you watch or listen to national news on the TV or radio?"). We used the average as the index of political interest.

Unfortunately, *community service* was not assessed in exactly parallel fashions in the youth and adult samples. In the youth sample, participants were asked if they had done voluntary community service or volunteer work at school or in the community in the previous year. Those who responded affirmatively to this question, and who also reported that the community service was neither required by school nor contributed to a grade, were judged to be involved in voluntary community service. Adults were asked whether in the past year they had performed any community service.

### *Analyses*

Mean scores for participants at each year of age were calculated for each of the variables described above (we used the survey weights provided with the NHES:96 data to ensure that the mean scores were characteristic of the population in the United States). These scores were then plotted against age in separate graphs, with separate lines for the youth and adult samples. The goal was to determine for each construct at what age participants in the youth sample first resembled adults.

Consider Figure 1, which depicts the association between civic knowledge and age. The small circles in the graph correspond to average scores for civic knowledge for adults at each age, and the triangles provide the same information for participants in the youth sample. The lines in the graph represent interpolated points (spline) joined to yield an estimate of the actual developmental trajectory. The line estimate is helpful because it makes clear that the average scores for civic knowledge vary from one year to the next; this is especially true for the adult sample. The wider variation in estimates from year to year for adults is a consequence of the relatively small number of adults in the total sample (~2,200) and the wide age range, with the consequence that on average there were only thirty-eight scores to average for each age in years. That is, there is more error in the estimation of what American adults know about civics at each age (because the sample for each age is small) than in the estimation of what American adolescents know about civics (for which on average there are more than nine hundred participants per each age group).

Despite the error in the estimates, several trends are evident. The first of these is that civic knowledge increases between ages 14 and 16 and then changes relatively little thereafter, although, 18-year-olds might be slightly higher in civic knowledge than are 16-year-olds. Most important for the argument in this article, 16-year-olds apparently know as much about the American political system as do many young adults; indeed, the average score for 16-year-olds is higher than the averages for civic knowledge for 19-, 21-, and 23-year-olds, all of whom are entitled to vote.

Figure 2 depicts the association of tolerance with age. Tolerance increases sharply in adolescence. While less than 30 percent of 14-year-olds express a willingness to endorse the right to unpopular speech and controversial books in their



FIGURE 1  
The Relation of Civic Knowledge with Age

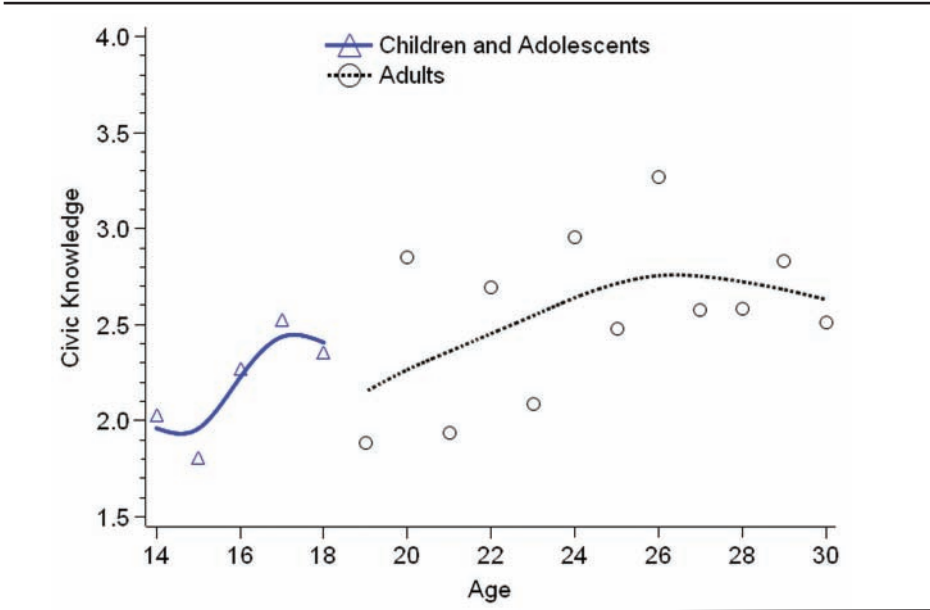


FIGURE 2  
The Relation of Tolerance with Age

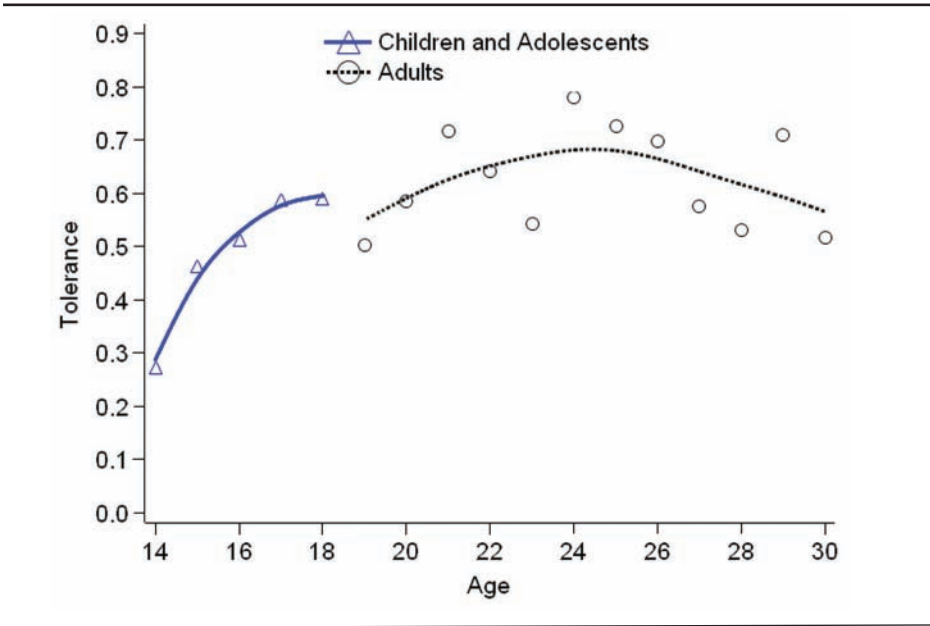
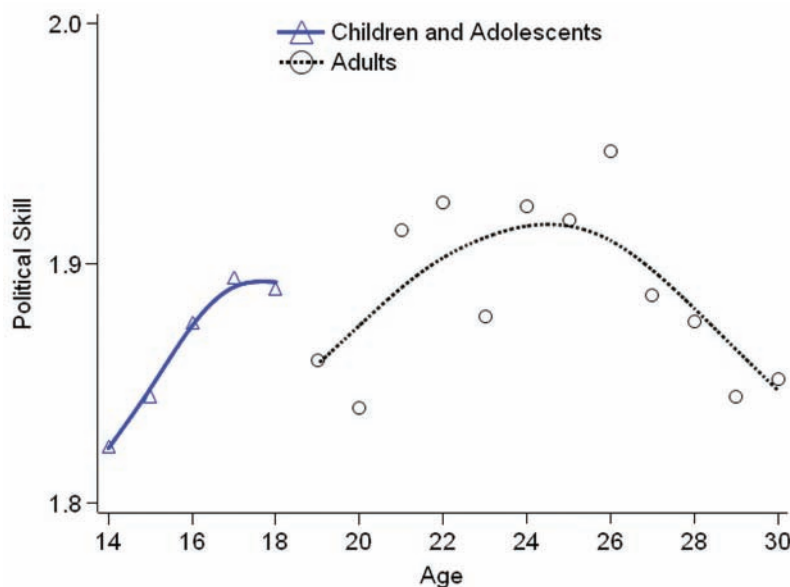


FIGURE 3  
The Relation of Political Skill with Age



libraries, more than 50 percent of 16-year-olds do so. Tolerance continues to increase, although more slowly, in late adolescence, with 59 percent of 18-year-olds rejecting intolerant stances about unpopular speech and controversial books.

The percentage of tolerant 16-year-olds is higher than that found for 19-year-olds and only slightly lower than that found for several other ages in adulthood (ages 23, 28, and 30). In contrast, tolerance among 14-year-olds is much less likely than in every age range in adulthood.

Political skill—the perceived ability to participate effectively in civic life by writing to political leaders and by speaking publicly at meetings—grows steadily between ages 14 and 16 and then more slowly through age 18, as Figure 3 illustrates. Fourteen-year-olds receive lower scores for political skill than every age between ages 19 and 30; in contrast, the average for 16-year-olds is the same as, or higher than, that of six ages between ages 19 and 30.

Figure 4 suggests that even 14-year-olds feel as politically efficacious as do many adults. Political efficacy increases slightly between ages 14 and 18, but the average level of political efficacy at 14 is already equivalent to that observed in many adults.

Civic interest increases over the course of adolescence, as illustrated in Figure 5, but is generally lower than that observed among adults. One possible interpretation for this trend is that the trends depicted in Figure 5 reflect changes in media consumption rather than interest in political affairs. Reading newspapers and listening to news programs has fallen among all age groups but particularly sharply among younger cohorts of Americans (Pew Research Center

FIGURE 4  
The Relation of Political Efficacy with Age

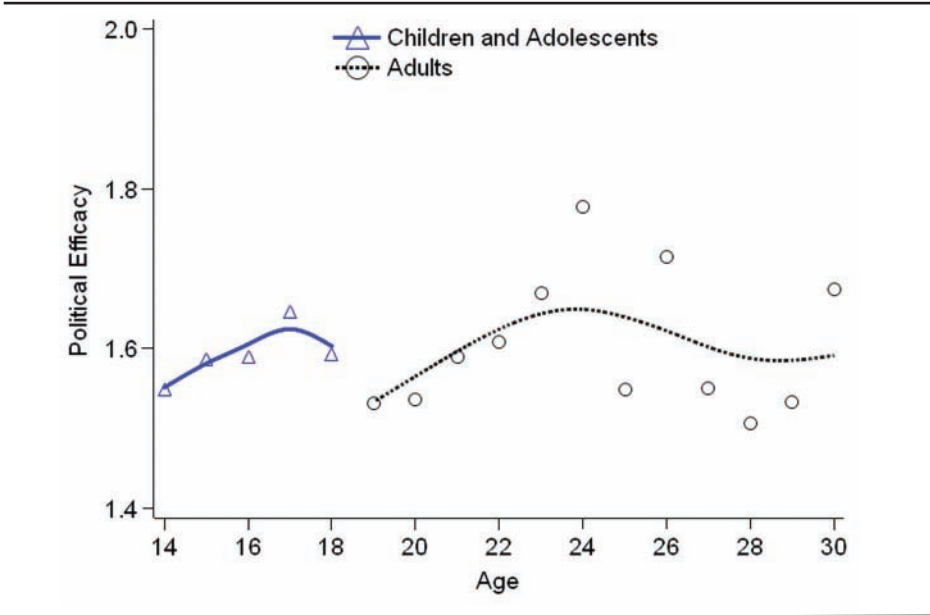


FIGURE 5  
The Relation of Civic Interest with Age

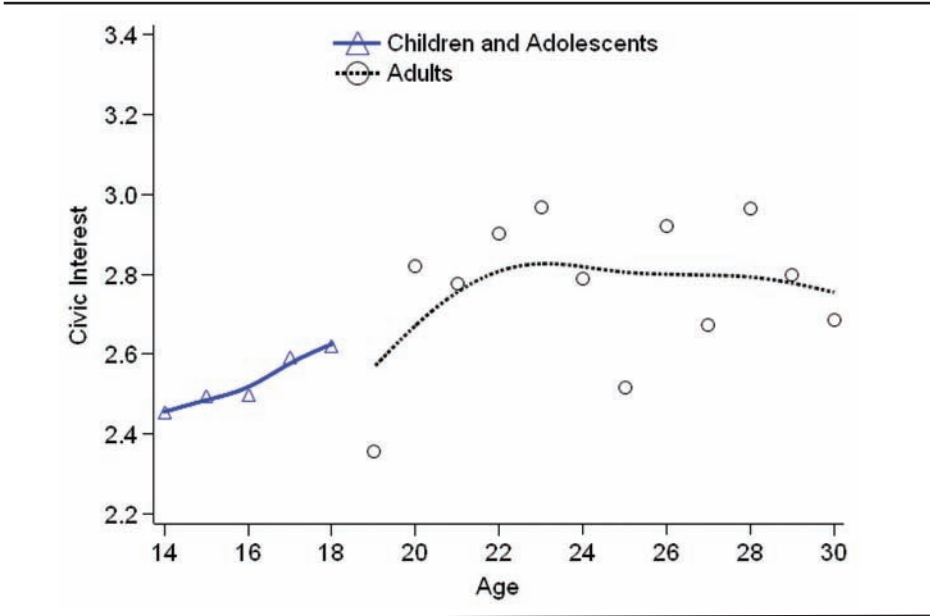
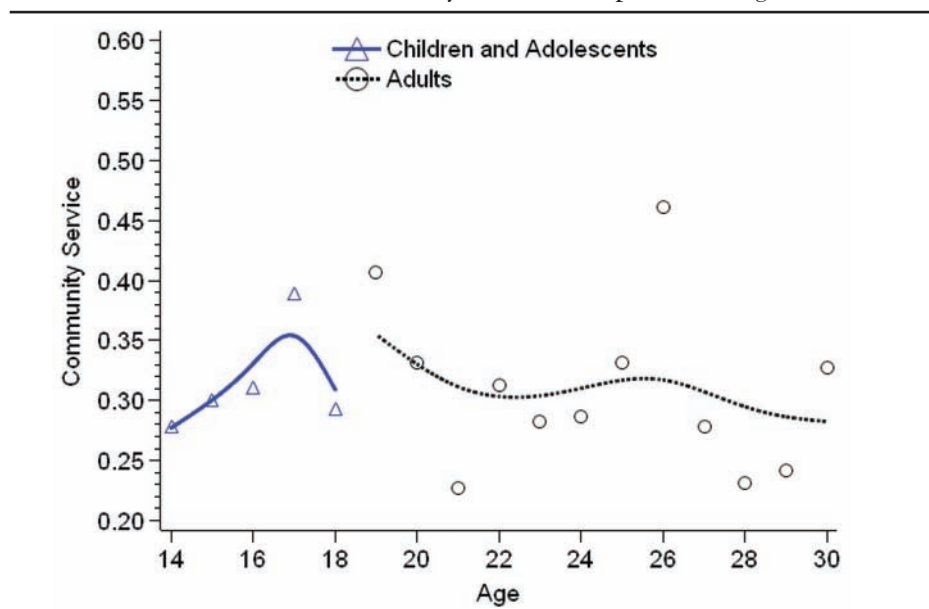


FIGURE 6  
The Relation of Community Service Participation with Age



2009). This finding means that the adolescents assessed in the survey are simply less likely to be reading newspapers and listening to news stories on the radio than are adults, and as a consequence of this broad trend, they are less likely than adults to be exposed to political stories in these media, rather than disinterested in political matters specifically.

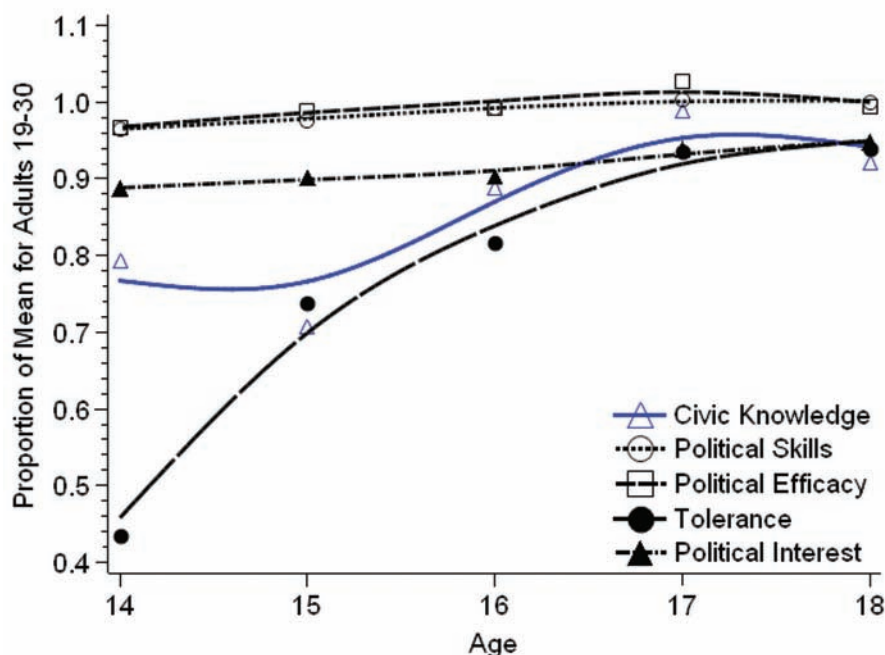
Figure 6 presents trends for voluntary community service in the youth and adult samples. Because the questions used to assess voluntary service in the two samples differed, it is difficult to make precise comparisons. Nonetheless, it is apparent that adolescents are volunteering at a rate that seems not much different from that observed among adults.

Finally, Figure 7 depicts the ratio of an age group's mean score in adolescence to the mean for adults between the ages of 19 and 30. For example, the average score for 16-year-olds for political efficacy is .99 of the average political efficacy score of adults between the ages of 19 and 30. In contrast, the average for tolerance for 14-year-olds is only .44 of the mean for adults ages 19 to 30. The benefit of Figure 7 is that it indicates that for most of the indices of citizenship discussed in the preceding pages, 16-year-olds are at or near adult levels. There is little development after age 16 on these variables and considerable development before that age.

### *Interpretations*

The evidence from the NHES:96 suggests that 16-year-olds are prepared to vote responsibly. On measures of civic knowledge, political skills, political efficacy,

FIGURE 7  
Ratio of Adolescent Age Groups' Mean Scores to Mean Scores  
for Adults, Ages 19 to 30



and tolerance, the 16-year-olds, on average, are obtaining scores similar to those of adults. Moreover, while there appears to be substantial evidence for rapid development in some of these constructs through age 16, development after it seems relatively slow. Based on the developmental trajectories traced in Figures 1 through 7, there is little empirical reason to award the vote to 18-year-olds but to deny it to 16-year-olds.

It might be argued that the trends depicted in Figures 1 through 7 are somewhat dated and are not representative of adolescents assessed 15 years later. There is little evidence on national exams testing civic knowledge that there are any differences between historical cohorts of adolescents (Lutkus and Weiss 2007) of the past 15 years. It seems unlikely that historical forces would leave civic knowledge unchanged but transform the other indicators. Moreover, it might be argued that if 16-year-olds in 1996 were basically as civically mature as 18-year-olds and achieved this level of competence without special programs, then 16-year-olds clearly have the capacity to acquire these abilities in the context of typical institutional experiences in schools, families, communities, and so on.

Dejaeghere and Hooghe (2009) have reported similar findings. These authors found that Belgian 16-year-olds had differentiated conceptions of citizenship that reflected, in many respects, the distinctions that adults made. However, Chan and

Clayton (2006) reviewed survey findings concerning civic knowledge among youths and adults in the United Kingdom and found that adolescents knew less than did adults. They used this finding to argue against extending the vote to 16-year-olds. These findings and the conclusion are complicated by the measures and age trends. First, the questions tapping into civic knowledge were presented to adolescents in the context of a survey that was very different from the survey used to measure civic knowledge in adults. Second, the age trends within adolescence for correct responses for four questions assessing civic knowledge suggest that 15- and 16-year-olds knew more than did 19- and 20-year-olds for three of the questions. While 15- and 16-year-olds in the United Kingdom may have less civic knowledge than do adults in their thirties and forties (a conclusion complicated by the measurement of civic knowledge in two different surveys), they apparently have *more* civic knowledge than 19- and 20-year-olds who are allowed to vote.

## Why Should 16-Year-Olds Be Allowed to Vote?

### *Representation of the interests of young people*

The changing demographics of American society are central in the argument for extending the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds. Over the past 50 years, the age structure of the United States has changed dramatically (Shrestha 2006). For example, the proportion of the population composed of children (those younger than 18) was nearly 50 percent higher in 1960 (approximately 36 percent of the population was 17 years old or younger then) than it is in 2010 (the estimate is that 24 percent of the American population is under the age of 18) (see Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2009). As the percentage of children has declined, the percentage of older adults has increased. These demographic changes in the structure of American society set up the possibility for diverging political interests between young and old.

The American National Election Studies (ANES) have data against which the possibility of diverging political interests between young and old can be judged (ANES n.d.). The ANES have data concerning voting and political attitudes dating back to the 1940s. We have used the cumulative data file, augmented with the 2008 postelection data, to examine the association of age to political attitudes concerning federal funding for social security, public schools, and financial aid for colleges. We selected these three topics because of their manifest interest to citizens of different ages. Participants in the ANES were asked whether federal spending in each of these areas ought to be increased (coded 1), decreased (coded -1), or kept about the same (coded 0). We assume in these analyses that 16- and 17-year-olds would resemble 18- to 24-year-olds in their interests. We graphed the average score for 18- to 24-year-olds who voted (because only those who vote have their interests directly represented) for each attitude as well as the average for voters between the ages of 65 and 74—an age bracket that is expanding rapidly.



FIGURE 8  
Support for Federal Expenditures for Social Security as  
a Function of Age Group and Year

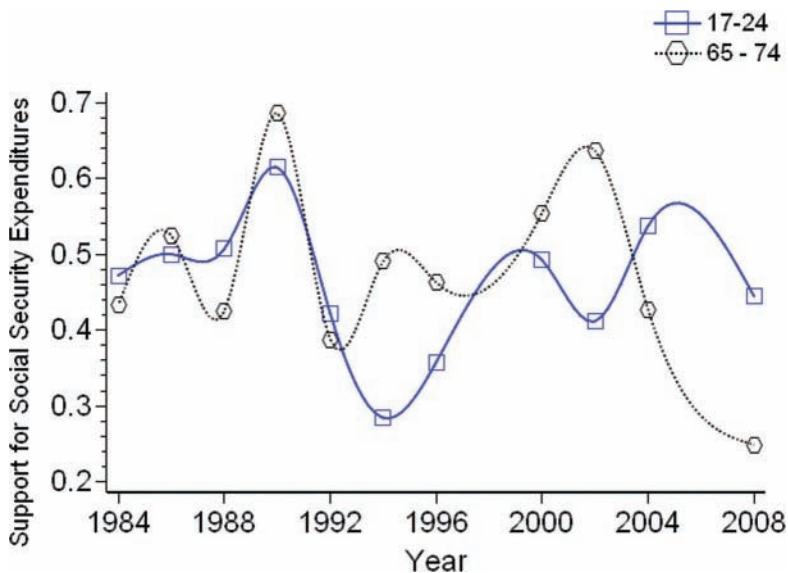


Figure 8 depicts historical trends in support of federal spending in social security by age group. Perhaps contrary to what might be predicted (Bergstrom and Hartman 2005), for much of the past 30 years, the young and old have been similar in their advocacy for federal support for social security. However, in 2008, the age groups diverged; the older voters have apparently become disenchanted with social security, while the younger voters seem to have maintained faith in the system. Surprisingly, then, there is little historical evidence that younger voters differ from older voters in the level of support for social security—a major federal program that benefits, primarily, older Americans.

However, younger and older voters differ substantially in attitudes concerning support for education. Figure 9 illustrates average support for federal funding of public schools for the two age groups of voters over the past 30 years. At each measurement point, younger voters view federal funding of public schools more favorably than do older voters. A similar picture, with more exaggerated differences between young and old, emerges in historical trends for support of federal funding for financial aid for college students (see Figure 10; data for this question were available only for a few measurement points).

These differences likely have real implications for public policy. Poterba (1998) reviewed research suggesting that school districts with large fractions of older voters are less likely to approve increases in school budgets than are districts with small fractions of older voters—a finding consistent with the trends

FIGURE 9  
Support for Federal Expenditures for Public Schools as a  
Function of Age Group and Year

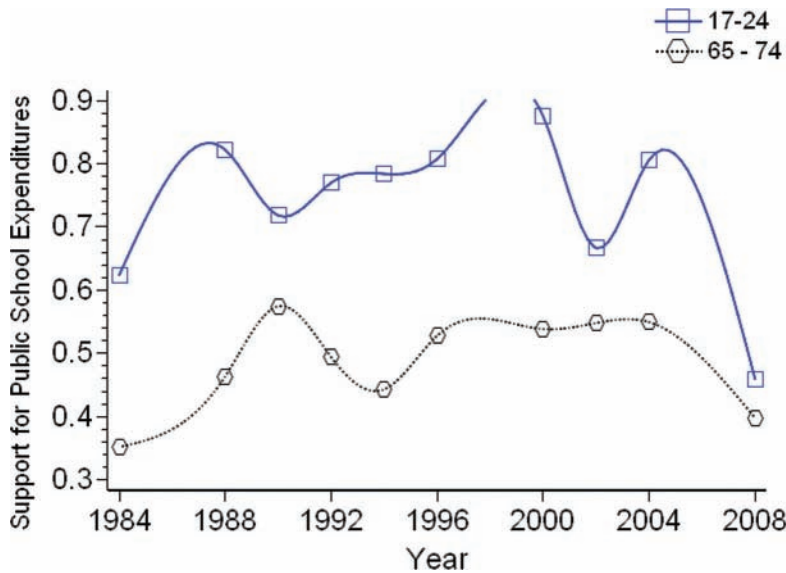
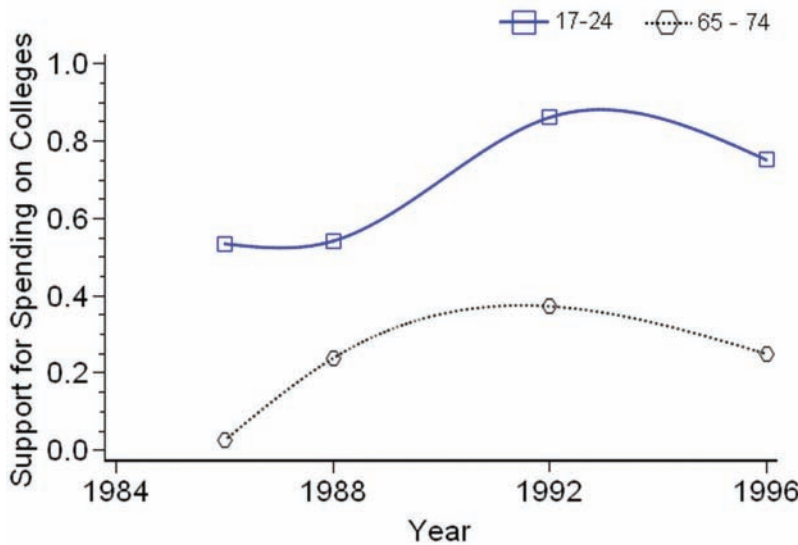


FIGURE 10  
Support for Federal Expenditures for Financial Aid for  
Colleges as a Function of Age Group and Year



illustrated in Figure 9. Moreover, Poterba described reports indicating that older voters were particularly unlikely to support increases in school budgets when the ethnic makeup of the school-aged population was substantially different than that of the older voters. The demographic trends in the United States suggest that the ethnic composition of children and youths will be increasingly diverse (Johnson and Lichter 2010); if the observations reported by Poterba are correct—that is, that aging white voters are not inclined to support public schools serving ethnically diverse populations—then enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds may be particularly important as a means of representing the interests of those enrolled in schools.

What these graphs suggest is that if the attitudes of 16- and 17-year-olds are similar to those 18- to 24-year-olds who vote and the former were also enfranchised, then there would be more public support among voters for federal spending on public schools and colleges. Undoubtedly, there are other issues that divide the electorate by age. Given that the relative size of the young age group has declined sharply over the past 40 years, and the relative size of the older age groups is increasing substantially, it may be more important now than ever before to extend the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds in the United States. As Johnson and Lichter (2010, 169) note, over the past 40 years “the social and economic realities of children [have] deteriorated while the circumstances of the elderly [have] improved.” This has happened, we suggest, because the fraction of voters who are elderly has increased, and this group has used its right to vote to advance its interests. One way to improve the circumstances of children and adolescents is to allow their members who are capable of voting responsibly—16- and 17-year-olds—the opportunity to use the electoral process to improve the lots of youths.

### *Participation deepens civic commitment*

Because 16- and 17-year-olds have not been allowed to vote in the United States, we know little about the long-term consequences for their own political development if they were permitted to do so. However, there is converging evidence of a variety of sorts to indicate that there likely would be considerable benefits to allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote. Most of this evidence points to the importance of participation in deepening commitment to civic life. For example, Hart et al. (2007) used longitudinal data gathered from adolescents who were followed from high school into early adulthood. They found that those who were involved in community service in high school—even those who participated as a result of a school requirement—were more likely than those with no volunteer experience to vote and to volunteer in early adulthood. The implication of this finding is that providing opportunities for adolescents to participate civically deepens the civic propensities in adulthood.

Discussions about voting and elections also seem to promote the development of civic knowledge and civic commitment. Syvertsen et al. (2009) found that adolescents in classrooms randomly selected to deliver an election-oriented curriculum were more advanced in their civic knowledge, civic interest, and self-reported

civic disposition than adolescents in classrooms in the control condition. It seems likely that the impact of such a curriculum would be deepened by the opportunity to cast votes. Evidence from similar civics interventions that feature the opportunity to cast mock votes also indicates that emphasis on voting, and the opportunity to cast mock votes, increases civic knowledge and the propensity for political participation (Meirick and Wackman 2004). Together, then, these studies suggest that participation—volunteering, mock voting—and discussion of voting and elections create a foundation for civic participation. If voting is in part a habit (Plutzer 2004) acquired in late adolescence and early adulthood, then this habit will likely be strengthened by allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote. The value of the opportunity to vote would be increased by building civics curricula and experience around it.

### *Sixteen- and 17-year-olds vote in other countries*

In recent years, other countries have enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds, and many others are considering doing so. Austria permitted 16- and 17-year-olds to vote (Associated Press 2008), and preliminary analyses of the consequences of this decision are positive. Austrian researchers polled a representative sample of Austrian teenagers between the ages of 16 and 18, following the first national election for which 16- and 17-year-olds were eligible to vote, and found that the newly enfranchised voters reported voting at approximately the rate of the general population (Institute for Social Research and Analysis 2008). Moreover, the researchers found little evidence to indicate that 16- and 17-year-olds made voting decisions that reflected immaturity. England (Electoral Commission 2003) and Australia (Berkovic 2009) are considering enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds; the Isle of Man has recently done so (Tonge 2009). There are no reports, thus far, indicating that mistakes were made by awarding the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds in countries that have done so.

### *Little cognitive development after age 16*

Analyses presented earlier indicated that 16-year-olds had acquired, or nearly acquired, the competencies and qualities of citizenship. Although these findings in respect to citizenship are new, findings from other studies generally indicate that 16-year-olds are as cognitively sophisticated as young adults. For example, Steinberg et al. (2009) tested nearly one thousand adolescents and young adults, using simple measures of cognitive ability as reflected in vocabulary and memory as part of a project to estimate the capacities of adolescents in respect to decisions important for legal considerations. They reported that “scores increased between ages 11 and 16 and then leveled off, with no improvement after this age. This gives us greater confidence that the absence of age differences in cognitive capacity after age 16” (Steinberg et al. 2009, 592). Steinberg and his colleagues use this finding to argue for the propriety of 16-year-olds to make important health care decisions on their own.

## Arguments against Extending the Vote to 16- and 17-Year-Olds

A variety of reasons have been offered in opposition to the proposal for allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote.

### *Public opinion*

Chan and Clayton (2006) have suggested that one important issue is whether the general public supports an extension of voting privileges to this new group. There are no survey data on this issue in the United States (to the best of our knowledge), so it is difficult to judge with any precision the degree to which such a proposal would be supported by the American electorate. Extending the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds does not seem to attract much discussion in the media, so it seems safe to conclude that it is not an idea that is of widespread appeal. Certainly there would need to be some public support for enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds for the idea to be discussed seriously and to mobilize political action.

Yet the extent of prevailing public support for the idea cannot stand by itself as the criterion for deciding whether to enfranchise younger voters. Once a public discussion concerning the idea is under way, public support might very well shift. Moreover, public opinion on a matter such as extending the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds also reflects self-interests. To the extent that American adults prefer not to enfranchise younger Americans, because such a step might increase public funding toward public schools and college (for example) and consequently raise taxes, public support for allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote seems an inappropriate criterion. Denying women the right to vote—people who met the criteria for citizenship and who were capable of voting responsibly—was wrong even when the enfranchised males opposed it.

### *Deficits in neurological maturity*

In recent years, much research has examined neurological maturation, occurring over the course of adolescence, in the frontal lobes of the brain. The thrust of this research is that young adolescents' brains differ from those of young adults in ways significant for decision-making (Reyna and Farley 2006; Ernst and Paulus 2005). For example, young adolescents' brains seem particularly sensitive to reward and novelty and lack full maturation in areas responsible for the modulation of emotion and impulse control (Reyna and Farley 2006). The consequences for decision-making are likely to be that under conditions of emotional arousal. Young adolescents are more likely than young adults to act impulsively, seeking to gain immediate reward, and without weighing long-term consequences of such behavior.<sup>1</sup>

No doubt, 16- and 17-year-olds are not fully mature. They are more susceptible than are adults to peer pressure and risk-taking behavior (Steinberg and Scott

2003) and know little about work, stable romantic relationships, or the responsibilities in raising families. While it is likely true that adolescents' capacities to restrain impulsive, emotional behavior may be reduced relative to that of adults, and their life experiences are relatively circumscribed, these capacities do not figure prominently in citizenship and particularly in voting. Neither the sense of membership, the concern with rights, nor the ability to participate in the community rests heavily upon the ability to resist emotional, impulsive actions. Citizenship and voting in the electoral process require, for the most part, decisions made over long periods of time, which allows for deliberation and discussion with others. To date, there is no neurological evidence that indicates that 16- and 17-year-olds lack the requisite neurological maturation necessary for citizenship or for responsible voting; nor is there evidence to indicate that a breadth of life experience is necessary for effective citizenship.

## Conclusion

Sixteen- and 17-year-olds in the United States ought to be permitted to vote in local and national elections. This claim rests upon the exploration of the notion of citizenship, in some of its legal meanings in the United States, as well as its connotations in political philosophy. Citizens should be entitled to vote, unless there is good reason to imagine that they cannot fulfill their responsibilities as citizens or as voters. The research reviewed in this article, as well as the new analyses that were presented, demonstrates that 16- and 17-year-olds are generally indistinguishable in their capacities to function as citizens and to vote responsibly from the youngest adults (18-year-olds) who are entitled to vote. The implication is that to deny 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote is arbitrary.

Extending the right to vote to 16- and 17-year-olds is particularly important at this point in American history. The proportion of the American population composed of children has declined dramatically in the past 40 years, while the fraction of older voters, who are less inclined to support policies beneficial to the interests of children and youth, is increasing rapidly. By enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds, the political power of children and adolescents would be increased and perhaps necessarily so to balance the growing population of older voters.

The evidence presented here suggests that the voting threshold ought to be set at age 16. There is rapid development in many qualities related to citizenship and voting in early adolescence up to age 16 and then slow development thereafter. Adolescents in this age range are developmentally ready to vote. This pattern is in accord with research on adolescents' reasoning and cognitive abilities, which suggests that development in these areas plateaus at age 16. Finally, providing 16- and 17-year-olds with the right to vote will likely deepen their civic knowledge and strengthen their civic habits. By removing an arbitrary barrier to their full participation in society, enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds adds to the moral legitimacy of our democracy.



## Note

1. This body of research has led theorists to conclude that adolescents may lack the legal culpability of adults for some forms of criminal behavior (see Steinberg and Scott 2003).

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