Name - Representing the Leadership Institute - OPPOSING HB 6183 Lower Voting Age

Until the 1970s, the voting age in America was 21. A debate over lowering it to 18 began during World War II when President Franklin D. Roosevelt decreased the military draft age to 18. President Eisenhower called for citizens ages 18 to 21 to be included in the political process in his 1954 State of the Union address. But lawmakers didn't take action until marches and demonstrations drew attention to the fact that young people who were being drafted to fight in Vietnam did not have the ability to vote in most states. This set a precedent, not necessarily in statute but in principle, that voting age should be the same as the age required to serve in the military.

A 2019 Hill-HarrisX poll found that 84% of registered voters opposed lowering the voting age to 16. The poll found every age group was against 16-year-olds voting, with the most support found among those under 35 where still only 39% were in favor. [1] A different survey found 8% support for lowering the voting age to 16; 45% want to keep it at 18; and 46% would like to raise it back to age 21. [2]

Only 12.5% of 18-year-olds participated in the 2014 midterm election, compared to 42% of the general population. According to the United States Elections Project's analysis of US Census Bureau data, just 16% of eligible voters ages 18-29 voted in the 2014 election, compared to 30% for ages 30-44, 43% for 45-59, and 55% for age 60 and up. Over the last 30 years, voter turnout for 18- to 29-year-olds has never exceeded 21% in a midterm election. [3][4][5]

Social scientists Tak Wing Chan, PhD, and Matthew Clayton, DPhil, say that 16- and 17-year-olds wouldn't be competent voters because "research in neuroscience suggests that the brain, specifically the prefrontal cortex, is still undergoing major reconstruction and development during the teenage years," and added that the prefrontal cortex is what "enables us to weigh dilemmas, balance trade-offs and, in short, make reasonable decisions in politics." [6]

David Davenport, JD, research fellow at the Hoover Institution, said, "My concern is if 16-year-olds were allowed to vote on any kind of broad scale, what we'd actually be doing is bringing the least politically informed, the least politically experienced, the least mature in terms of making long-term judgments and trade-offs, directly into and potentially affecting our voter turnout and results."

In conclusion, my organization opposes HB 6183 for 3 main reasons. Lowering the voting age to 16 is not supported by neurological science, polling of registered American voters across all age groups, or voter turnout statistics. Our young people are our future and it would be unfair for the legislature to place this sacred duty of voting as an unnecessary burden on them before they are ready. Allowing ample time for our young people to educate themselves on the complexity of the American political system is crucial so that when the time comes for them to cast their ballot they can be as ready and informed as possible.

Where have similar laws been implemented: Two cities in Maryland—Tacoma Park (population 10,000) and Hyattsville (population 18,000)—have lowered the voting age to 16 for municipal elections only. In the primaries, 22 states allow 17-year olds to vote if they will turn 18 prior to the general election in the fall. I suppose this makes some sense, allowing the same voters to narrow the field who will ultimately choose the winner.

Background info: Congress ratified the 26th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1971, which stated, "The right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of age." Interestingly enough, the MI constitution has still not been updated to reflect this change despite it being law for 50 years. [Article II, Section I of the Michigan constitution]

Citations:

1. The Hill, "Poll: Americans Overwhelmingly Reject Lowering Voting Age to 16," thehill.com, May 3, 2019
2. Lehigh Valley Opinion, "Poll: Should the Voting Age Be Lowered to 16? Raised to 21?," lehighvalleylive.com, Feb. 27, 2018
3. United States Census Bureau, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2014: Reported Voting and Registration, by Sex and Single Years of Age: November 2014," census.gov, July 2015
4. Emily Guskin, "Are Young Voters Going to Sway the Midterms? New Data Shows That's Not Very Likely.," washingtonpost.com, Aug. 1, 2018
5. United States Elections Project, "Voter Turnout Demographics," electproject.org
6. Tak Wing Chan and Matthew Clayton, "Should the Voting Age Be Lowered to Sixteen? Normative and Empirical Considerations," Political Studies, Oct. 2006