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Abstract

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.



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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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