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Vivian E. Hamilton

William & Mary Law School, vhamilton@wm.edu

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The Youth Vote Matters. But Just How Young Should Voters Be? [Part I]

Posted By [Vivian Hamilton](#) On January 3, 2013 @ 1:49 pm In [Civil Rights, Election Law, Uncategorized](#) | [26 Comments](#)

[1] Happy New Year, and thanks to Solangel Maldonado for inviting me to participate.

One of the most consequential events of 2012 was the presidential election, and critical to it was the [youth vote](#) [2]. Young voters aged 18 to 29 turned out at virtually the same rate as they had in 2008, despite predictions that their enthusiastic participation in that historic election would be a one-time anomaly. On November 6, a lopsided 60 percent of the youth vote went to the President, while 36 percent went to Mitt Romney. Had Romney managed to garner 50 percent of the youth vote in four [swing states](#) [3] (Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia), he would have won those states' electoral votes, and the presidency. The political implications of the youth vote for future elections are thus significant. Young voters have established themselves as an important voting bloc, particularly in swing states.



Across the United States, the voting age to participate in general elections is 18, with age serving as a proxy for the attainment of electoral decision-making competence. Whether young voters will continue to [lean left](#) [4] in future election cycles is a significant question. A more significant question, though, is whether the current voting age is the best available proxy for electoral competence. Indeed, the latter question cuts to the core of democratic government. I explore it in a [recent article](#) [5] and will highlight aspects of this critical, yet largely ignored, question in upcoming posts.

More than a [dozen nations](#) [6] have recently lowered local, state, or national voting ages to 16, aiming primarily to increase youths' political engagement and counter the disproportionate political influence of older citizens. In Europe, these include Austria, Scotland, Wales, the self-governing British Crown Dependencies, nearly half of all German states, and several Swiss states (Scotland and Wales are awaiting from Westminster authority to effectuate the measure but have implemented it for local elections). Norway instituted a pilot project in 2011 allowing 16 year-olds to vote in local elections. Latin American countries that allow 16 year-olds to vote include Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and—as of October 2012—[Argentina](#) [7]. [British](#) [8] and [Canadian](#) [9] Parliaments have voted on bills proposing to lower national voting ages (though these have so far failed to pass), and former Prime Ministers [Tony Blair](#) [10] and [Gordon Brown](#) [11] both announced while in office their support for a lower voting age.

That the global trend is to extend, or consider extending, the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds does not mean that the United States should automatically do the same, nor that doing so necessarily makes for better democracy. But for the United States, which holds itself out as a beacon of democratic participation, not to be among the world's democracies at least evaluating the electoral inclusion of some cohort of its younger citizens demonstrates a complacency with respect to exclusion that is itself a democratic deficit.

In upcoming posts, I will explore ideals of the citizen-voter from classic democratic theory, argue for a conception of electoral competence, and examine research from several disciplines within the developmental sciences exploring the connection between age range and the attainment of certain cognitive competencies. I conclude that age 18 may have been the best available proxy for electoral competence when the nation adopted it as the voting

age in 1971, but developments since then enable us to identify a better proxy.

That younger voters have demonstrated a proclivity to lean left may make some policy makers reluctant to even entertain what ought to be a question of democratic legitimacy, not politics. That may ultimately be political reality, but, as future posts will aim to show, it would also be a real shame.

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- [1] Image: <http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2013/01/the-youth-vote-matters-but-just-how-young-should-voters-be-part-i.html/youth-vote-2>
- [2] youth vote: <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Elections/President/2012/1107/Youth-vote-decides-presidential-election-again.-Is-this-the-new-normal>
- [3] swing states: <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2012/11/30/the-half-impressive-youth-vote>
- [4] lean left: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/12/youth-vote-gap-republican_n_2100155.html
- [5] recent article: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2086875
- [6] dozen nations: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2123.html>
- [7] Argentina: <http://www.cnn.com/2012/10/31/world/americas/argentina-youth-vote/index.html>
- [8] British: <http://www.parliament.uk/edm/2008-09/1472>
- [9] Canadian: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/content/hoc/House/381/Debates/047/HAN047-E.pdf>
- [10] Tony Blair: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/blair-will-give-vote-to-16-year-olds-562185.html>
- [11] Gordon Brown: <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/2009/07/24/i-d-like-to-see-the-voting-age-lowered-to-16-says-brown-91466-24228229/>

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