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## Just How Young Should Voters Be? Part IV: Assessing Adolescents' Electoral Competence

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## Just How Young Should Voters Be? Part IV: Assessing Adolescents' Electoral Competence

Posted By [Vivian Hamilton](#) On January 14, 2013 @ 2:17 pm In [Civil Rights, Election Law, Uncategorized](#) | [1 Comment](#)

[1]Citizenship and suffrage go hand in hand. This series of posts, drawing on a recently-published [article](#) [2], considers the age-based exclusion of citizens younger than 18. A growing number of countries, as I noted in my [first](#) [3] post, have lowered their voting ages to 16 or are considering doing so. The United States should be among those democracies reassessing the electoral exclusion of at least some cohort of its younger citizens.



Electoral standards have long required both (1) ongoing community connection and interest, and (2) vote decision-making competence. Individuals lacking either of these characteristics (or more precisely, the indicia of them reflected in specific voter qualification rules) are commonly disqualified from voting. Thus, voter qualification rules that require citizenship, residency, and law-abidingness presumably ensure that voters meet the first standard — community connection and interest. The young meet that standard. They are members of the political community, with significant interest in and ongoing connections to it. It is only their failure to meet the second standard — vote decision-making competence — that can justify their exclusion.

### ***What Constitutes Vote Decision-Making Competence [Redux]?***

The state excludes citizens younger than 18 from the electorate because they have presumably not yet attained vote decision-making competence, but missing from this justification of their exclusion is a conception of that competence. Some conception of electoral competence — the basic capacities required for voting — is required before the state can credibly assess its attainment, or identify its absence. Age-based line drawing with respect to the development-related attainment of electoral competence is a practical necessity. The state owes its citizens its best effort (*some effort*) to first ascertain a principled yet pragmatic conception of electoral competence, then to assess young people's attainment of it, and finally to draw the voting-age line in a manner consistent with that assessment. Otherwise, the state cannot meet its burden of justifying electoral exclusion.

What constitutes vote decision-making competence? Based on empirical studies of voter decision making, incorporating factual knowledge (of civics, politics, etc.) into a standard of electoral competence risks disfranchising much of the current electorate, and it is also unnecessary to ensuring correct vote decisions (those a voter would have made under conditions of full information, given the voter's subjective values). I thus argued in my [second](#) [4] post for a cognitive-process-driven conception of electoral competence. It requires "adultlike" rather than "mature" reasoning processes, because there is no universal state of maturity attained by all, or even most, adults. Requiring "mature" reasoning, like requiring factual knowledge, risks disfranchising many current voters.

I thus propose a conception of electoral competence in which *a minimally competent voting decision involves an adultlike application and coordination of various reasoning processes to make a choice that could be justified by a good-enough reason.*

### ***The Development-Related Attainment of Vote Decision-Making Competence***

Cognitive capacity improves more or less linearly throughout childhood and reaches adultlike

levels by midadolescence. By age 15 or 16, adolescents are as able as adults to acquire, retain, and retrieve relevant information and apply to it reasoning processes that lead to justifiable conclusions. Researchers have consistently found the logical reasoning and information-processing abilities of 16-year-olds to be essentially indistinguishable from those of adults. According to developmental psychologist [David Moshman](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, “[n]o theorist or researcher has ever identified a form or level of thinking routine among adults that is rarely seen in adolescence.”

But while they have adultlike abilities to think and reach rational judgments, adolescents' capacities are more susceptible than are adults' to being confounded by the real-world contexts in which they make decisions. When they must make decisions quickly or under pressure, or when they are highly emotional or stressed, adolescents' performance suffers. In contexts in which adolescents are likely to make poor decisions — especially when their decisions will have negative externalities — the state properly constrains their decision-making liberty.

[For an elaboration of the context-specific nature of adolescent decision making, see [here](#) <sup>[6]</sup>. For a discussion of neurologically-based models that have the potential to explain adolescents' poor decision making despite their mature cognitive abilities, as well as other aspects of adolescent psychology and behavior, see [here](#) <sup>[7]</sup>.]

Elections are a decision-making domain in which adolescents' cognitive-processing abilities would almost certainly remain uncompromised. Elections unfold over a period of time, giving voters the opportunity to deliberate and evaluate options without undue pressure. Many sources of information are readily available (televised debates, party affiliations, etc.), which serve as scaffolding or heuristics to help voters evaluate their choices. And voting itself is done anonymously and in private, which diminishes the concern that adolescents' ultimate choices will be unduly pressured or dictated by their peers or others. (Ken A., in a comment to my previous post, mentioned the potentially undue influence of parents, but the intergenerational transfer of party affiliation seems to be a well-established fact of political life.)

Democratic legitimacy requires the presumptive electoral inclusion of members of the political community. Democratic systems may nonetheless legitimately impose competence-related electoral qualifications, particularly with respect to the development-related attainment of competence. By studying voter decision making and the cognitive-processing skills such decision making employs, it is possible to derive a pragmatic conception of electoral competence. Young people reliably attain that competence by age 15 or 16. Thus, labeling them incompetent is error and can no longer justify their continued exclusion. We should join the growing number of democracies lowering their ages of electoral majority to 16, by which age it is safe to say that adolescent citizens will be competent voters.

In my final post on this topic, I will offer policy-based (as opposed to democratic-legitimacy-based) reasons for lowering the voting age, and suggest different paths to effectuating such a change.

photo: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NYRA\\_Berkeley\\_voting\\_age\\_protest.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NYRA_Berkeley_voting_age_protest.jpg)

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[1] Image: <http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2013/01/just-how-young-should-voters-be-part-iv-assessing-adolescents-electoral-competence.html/youth-vote-4-protest>

[2] article: [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2086875](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2086875)

[3] first: <http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2013/01/the-youth-vote...ters-be-part-i.html>

[4] second: <http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2013/01/just-how-youth...ing-competence.html>

[5] David Moshman: [http://www.amazon.com/Adolescent-Rationality-Development-Cognition-Morality/dp/1848728611/ref=la\\_B001KHLQVO\\_ob\\_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1358188490&sr=1-2](http://www.amazon.com/Adolescent-Rationality-Development-Cognition-Morality/dp/1848728611/ref=la_B001KHLQVO_ob_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1358188490&sr=1-2)

[6] here: <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.wm.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=22407777&site=ehost-live>

[7] here: <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.wm.edu/10.1016/j.dr.2007.08.002>

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