

Additional Activity for Chapter 4: The Vote

Giving Youth a Voice: Voting at 16

On page 88 of the text, Craig Kielburger tells the story of a meeting he had with the former Prime Minister of Israel, Shimon Perez. During the discussion, Perez wondered whether Israel would be closer to achieving peace if those of its citizens under age 18 were eligible to vote. Reread Craig's comment, then read the following article, also by Craig, which appeared in the November 13, 2000 edition of the *Toronto Star*. After reading both pieces, complete one of the follow-up activities below.

It's time 16-year-olds were given the right to vote

Recently, a special Studio Two TVO broadcast examined the issue of globalization with representatives from government, business, unions and the media.

A young lady from the audience raised her hand to ask a question.

"Where are you from?" asked host Steve Pagan.

"I'm from B.C.," she replied.

"Did you ever vote for Glen Clark?" he inquired.

"I'm not old enough to vote," she answered.

"And your question?"

"I was wondering if John Crosbie can comment on what his opinion is on the way in which the WTO has integrated developing nations into the platform of globalizing trade and if the panel could comment on the ramifications that it has had for these countries."

Like Jasmine, the young lady from the audience, tens of thousands of intelligent 16- and 17-year-old Canadians who are deeply interested in issues such as poverty, homelessness, debt reduction, education and globalization will be denied the right to have a voice through their vote in the upcoming municipal and federal elections.

Section 50 of the Canada Elections Act states that only Canadian citizens who have attained the age of 18 on or before the day of election are allowed to vote.

"Young people are not knowledgeable or mature enough to form their own opinions at 16," are comments one hears frequently.

I beg to differ. Today, young people are more exposed to information than any other generation. Issues like NAFTA, free trade, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization are being discussed in schools at a younger and younger age as students use the Internet to search the government and university libraries around the world.

There is no magic age when an individual becomes an ideal citizen. Indeed, there are ignorant or indifferent people of all ages. I submit that most individuals at age 16 do have the maturity and intelligence required to vote.

Many 16-year-olds have part-time jobs and pay taxes. All pay PST and GST. Should they not also have a say as to how their tax dollars are spent?

It is obvious that if young people had the vote, political parties would take them more seriously. Consider how little discussion there has been in this federal election (and the one in 1997) on child poverty, education, the environment and other youth-related issues. Topics arbitrarily decided upon by adults who are not directly affected by the decision-making process would find a new and more prominent place on political agendas. Who better to challenge the government on its record on children and youth issues than youth?

Canada was one of the first of 194 countries of the world to ratify the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child that gives children (under the age of 18) the right to participate in finding solutions to issues affecting them and their peers. A 16- and 17-year-old group of voters would give a political voice to this entire segment of Canadian citizens for the first time in our democratic history. Empowering 16-year-olds with the vote would open the door to new respect for young people's opinions and an era of equality for all generations.

Current statistics indicate that approximately 75 per cent of first time 18-year-old voters in Canada are not yet registered for the upcoming elections. Attaining the right to vote at 18 is too late. Many young people have already become apathetic about the political process. They feel powerless and believe that their thoughts and opinions do not really matter.

In North American society, companies compete for the disposable income of the young population, and spend millions of dollars in advertising and market studies to try to entice them to purchase their goods and services.

Ironically, however, politicians do not really take much notice of young people until they are of voting age and thus important to their political success. Too frequently, token gestures are made to youth for the sake of appearances and the media.

Get them young! We should learn what cigarette companies already know. Habits formed in youth are difficult to break. Instilling in young people a sense of civic duty while still in high school would increase the overall voter turnout as the population ages.

Where do people learn about the democratic process and their civic responsibility as Canadians? Only 67 per cent of eligible adult voters cast their ballot in the last federal election and a mere one third took the time to vote in municipal elections. How often do we hear adults say that they know nothing about the political candidates in their area?

A lower voting age could be tied in with the current program in civics education in high school where political parties, issues and candidates are studied in depth. Active participation in the voting process with polling booths set up in schools during election periods would help to foster a lifetime of electoral participation.

Lowering the voting age to 16 is not a novel idea. Brazil has recently given the right to vote at all levels of government to 16-year-olds in that country. France, England and Australia are also contemplating lowering the voting age.

Last month I attended meetings with world leaders at the State of the World Forum in New York City and met with the Japanese Minister of Finance to discuss youth issues during a trip to Japan. On November 27, however, I shall be denied the right to cast my vote for the individual I believe should lead my own country. Why? Because I am 17 years old.

The time has come for Canadians to take a serious look at lowering the voting age to 16.

Craig Kielburger
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(Kids Can) Free the Children

Follow-up Activities

1. Do you agree or disagree with Craig that citizens aged 16 should be eligible to vote? Write an editorial for submission to your school or local newspaper in defence of your point of view. Support your position with as much evidence as possible.
2. What does your MP think about lowering the voting age to 16? Write a letter to her/him stating your opinion and requesting a response. Remember that letters sent to Parliament Hill do not require postage.
3. Imagine that you are a lobbyist working to have the voting age lowered to 16. Prepare a poster to help further your cause. Consider your message carefully, along with your intended audience. Try to make your poster as colourful and striking as possible. Remember, you only have a few seconds to grab a person's attention as she or he walks by.