**Don’t lower the voting age, raise it**

By J.K. Baltzersen

web posted March 11, 2019

*Liberty requires limiting majority rule; limited suffrage could be part of it.*

On an otherwise perfectly normal Monday in mid-February, a bill was [introduced](https://olis.leg.state.or.us/liz/2019R1/Downloads/MeasureDocument/SJR22/Introduced) in the Oregon legislature to lower the [voting age](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voting_age) from 18, as required (maximum) by [Amendment XXVI](https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/amendmentxxvi) to the [US Constitution](https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution), to 16. The bill made [headlines](https://news.google.com/stories/CAAqSQgKIkNDQklTTERvSmMzUnZjbmt0TXpZd1NoOGFIV1I2TTNsMmVXRnZWbGRSVDFSSlRVSlFlR3hrUkhOYWNHSkVYMjlOS0FBUAE?q=oregon+lower+voting+age&lr=English&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwij5qmg1dHgAhXZ4KYKHVq5BgkQqgIIKjAA&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en) and was, among other places, discussed on [*The TODAY Show*](https://www.today.com/video/oregon-considers-lowering-voting-age-to-16-1445390403557).

There has been a slight beginning trend to lower the voting age, in Europe and elsewhere. Austria [lowered](https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/06/world/europe/06fbriefs-austria.html) the general elections voting age to 16 in 2007. In Malta, a [bill was passed](https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20180305/local/16-year-olds-granted-the-vote-in-national-elections.672453) only last year to do the same. Estonia has a voting age of 16 for [local elections](https://news.err.ee/115792/voting-age-lowered-to-16-in-local-elections). In Europe, the voting age varies from 16 to 25, the most common being 18, as elsewhere around the world. The voting age for the [Italian Senate](https://www.senato.it/3801) is 25, where the eligibility age is 40.

*Fourth Defeated Attempt in Norway*

In my own home country of Norway, there has been a campaign for some years to lower the voting age from 18 to 16, and it has been unsuccessful thus far. [Constitutional amendments](https://www.stortinget.no/en/In-English/About-the-Storting/The-Constitution/) in Norway need to be introduced in one parliamentary term, by approximately a year before the next election, and then voted on in the next term, requiring a two-thirds majority. A constitutional bill to lower the voting age [failed](https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Saker/Sak/Voteringsoversikt/?p=66403&dnid=1) in January for the fourth consecutive term. [Experiments](https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/valg-og-demokrati/den-norske-valgordningen/forsok-med-stemmerett-for-16-aringer_2/forsok-med-stemmerett-for-16-aringer-2/id581646/) with lowering the voting age to 16, limited to a small number of municipalities, were conducted in 2011 and 2015 during local elections. There were mixed results, according to evaluation reports from the [Norwegian Institute for Social Research](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norwegian_Institute_for_Social_Research).

In Parliament, support for lowering the voting age is currently at approximately 13 percent. According to Norwegian elections and democracy researcher [Johannes Bergh](https://www.samfunnsforskning.no/english/people/res/johaberg/index.html), support among the public for lowering the voting age to 16 typically lies around 25 percent. An [opinion poll conducted](https://www.minervanett.no/1-av-4-vil-heve-aldersgrensen-for-stemmerett/) in January indicated support for a lower voting age was at 20 percent, whereas the support for a higher voting age was measured at 23 percent.

With all this beginning drive to lower the voting age, as if there is some law of gravity of politics that whatever has limits must come down to no limit at all, i.e., zero, perhaps we should start considering raising the voting age.

***Classical Liberals on Suffrage***

After all, [Friedrich August von Hayek](https://fee.org/people/f-a-hayek/) had an [interesting proposal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law%2C_Legislation_and_Liberty) of letting people vote once in a lifetime, i.e., at 45, for candidates to the legislative assembly, of their own age, for a term of 15 years. The legislative assembly was, in von Hayek's idea, to be elected with 1/15 of the assembly each year, such that it would consist of members of 45-60 years of age.

Limiting and expanding suffrage has been an important part of the long development of democracy. The Frenchman [Benjamin Constant](https://fee.org/people/benjamin-constant/) is an example of a classical liberal who wanted [limited suffrage](https://press.princeton.edu/titles/6564.html). The Englishman [John Stuart Mill](https://fee.org/articles/topics/John%20Stuart%20Mill) proposed giving [extra votes](https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john_stuart/m645r/chapter8.html) to the well-informed.

More recently, [Bryan Caplan](https://press.princeton.edu/titles/8756.html) and later [Ilya Somin](https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=26809) have [been](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Myth_of_the_Rational_Voter) arguing [that](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_and_Political_Ignorance) democracies produce uninformed and irrational outcomes simply because it is irrational for a single voter to spend very much time studying the relevant issues given the very limited impact of a single vote in a mass democracy. [Jason Brennan](https://press.princeton.edu/titles/10843.html) recently took it to the next level by proposing [replacing democracy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Against_Democracy) with some sort of [epistocracy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistocracy), rule of the informed, starting small with limited experiments.

Now, should we be reversing the apparent one-way development of democracy? Given that the epoch of unlimited suffrage and mass [democracy](https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/what-is-democracy-anyway/) has not exactly shown impressive results when it comes to limiting politics, government, and power, we should at the very least be open to it as an option.

***Why Raise the Voting Age?***

If we look at the voting age, adjusting it is certainly a very broad and general measure. Indeed any general voting age, i.e., not having individual requirements, will be based on an evaluation of people as a group—age group in this case—and not as individuals. It is also important to keep in mind that when it comes to voting, it is the number of votes that counts; the one single vote hardly matters at all. Arguments for raising the voting age—as for lowering it—will necessarily be less fine-tuned than those for more individually-oriented measures.

I [have launched](https://www.bt.no/btmeninger/debatt/i/gPBRB1/stemmerettsalderen-br-heves) the idea that the (Norwegian) voting age should be [raised to 25](https://www.nettavisen.no/meninger/friskemeninger/hev-stemmeretten-til-25-ar/3423482318.html). I have had the opportunity so far to [argue for this position](https://radio.nrk.no/sok?q=J.K.%20Baltzersen) twice on [Norwegian national radio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NRK). The main argument is that there should be greater requirements for taking part in decisions for society as a whole—or in deciding for others, if you will—than for taking full legal responsibility for one’s own affairs. The anarchist position would be that such lording over others should not take place at all, but in any case, more responsibility would be better than less—for both [anarchists](https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Anarchism#Anarcho-capitalism) and [minarchists](https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Minarchism).

These requirements involve maturity and life and work experience, but they also involve having paid an accumulative share of taxes before receiving loads of free stuff from the government, incentivizing more responsibility. The latter is more relevant the more so-called generous the welfare state is, but it still is relevant in most countries, even the United States, where so-called democratic socialism is apparently growing in popularity.



We hear the argument that young people need to be involved in politics, so a low voting age, i.e., letting the young vote, is a good way of including them. No, they don’t need to be involved in politics. A free society with limitations on power and low involvement of government in society needs to have less such involvement. Young people should be involved in their own lives, not politics.

*No Fringe Opinion*

As mentioned, there was an opinion poll in Norway in January showing 23 percent support for a higher voting age. Polling for support for a higher voting age is not very common, as the unawareness of any such polls of prominent Norwegian elections and democracy researcher Johannes Bergh should bear witness. The January poll was conducted by [a polling agency](https://responsanalyse.no/om-oss/) upon my request, and the respondents were asked what they would set the voting age to if they themselves could freely set it with no limiting or guiding alternatives. Hence, it has been shown that there likely is considerable support for raising the voting age; it is not a fringe position. I would encourage more such polling, not taking the one-way development for granted.

Let's go the other way than what those Oregon legislators are suggesting. Given how the reach and size of government have grown as the franchise has been expanded, there is reason to believe there is empirical evidence that people have been voting themselves other people's money. Hence, looking at ways of reducing the franchise should at least be explored. Raising the voting age should certainly seriously be considered.

*This opinion piece* [*originally ran*](https://fee.org/articles/don-t-lower-the-voting-age-raise-it/) *at the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE). In the following week (which has passed since) U.S. Representative* [*Ayanna Pressley*](https://pressley.house.gov/) *introduced an amendment (to a bill) to lower the voting age to 16 for federal elections via ordinary legislation. The* [*motion failed*](http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2019/roll111.xml)*.*

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