



**LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF DELAWARE**  
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## **LWVDE SUPPORTS ALLOWING 16 AND 17-YEAR-OLDS TO VOTE IN DELAWARE SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS.**

On March 29, 2023, House Bill 96 was introduced in the General Assembly to make 16 and 17-year-olds eligible to vote in Delaware school board elections.

### [Why LWVDE Supports This](#)

The topmost in LWV's long list of public policy positions addresses a Citizen's Right to Vote: ***"Protect the right of all citizens to vote; encourage all citizens to vote."*** Allowing younger voters to participate in local elections encourages a whole new set of young citizens to exercise their right and duty to vote for the first time while they are still in a structured school setting, where they can be supported and encouraged in this new endeavor.

School board elections as a first voting experience makes sense for multiple reasons:

- 16 and 17-year-olds attend high school, so the school board election directly affects them.
- School board elections occur state-wide and happen every year, so all Delaware youth will have an opportunity for this first voting experience as they reach the required age.
- Delaware school board elections are nonpartisan, giving the students practice at selecting candidates based on merits rather than labels.
- The students' ability to vote may spark conversations about the election with their parents, increasing general community interest and voter turnout for Delaware school board elections, which historically have been very poor.<sup>1</sup>

### [Addressing Potential Concerns](#)

In April 2023, the LWV of Maine made a study of four municipalities in the US where the voting age for municipal elections has been lowered to age 16: Takoma Park MD, Culver City CA, San Francisco CA and Brattleboro VT. The study team interviewed young people, researchers, and elected officials in those locations to determine real-life learnings.<sup>2</sup>

Among others, the LWV of Maine voting age study addressed the following potential concerns:

#### **1. Are 16-year-olds competent to vote?**

"Researchers have also examined how the 16- and 17-year-old's voter readiness compares to their closest age group – 18- to 23-year-olds. In a 2011 study by professors at Rutgers University, over 6,400 individuals across age spans were surveyed for the qualities associated with voting – civic knowledge, skills, and cognitive ability. The results showed no difference for those from age 16 to 18 versus those aged 18 to 23. In fact, 16-year-old Americans scored higher in areas related to civic knowledge than those in their early twenties. The researchers concluded adolescents in this age range were developmentally ready to vote (Hart and Atkins, 2011)."<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Will voting choices be overly influenced by parents or others?

“Additional studies have found the 16- to 17-year-old voter does not simply reproduce the political beliefs of the parent as argued by opponents.” ... “In Maryland, researchers examined the impact of influences of parents, teachers, peers, or celebrities on the 16- to 17-year-old voters. Findings showed little evidence to suggest any more influence on this group than the social influences that take place on older adults by families, communities, and historical events (Hart, Atkins, Allred, 2020).”<sup>4</sup>

## 3. Will the 16/17-year-old bother to vote?

The limited research on voter turnout for the 16- and 17-year-old largely refutes the opponents’ concerns that they will not vote if eligible. “In Chicago’s primary in 2014, seventeen-year-olds had a higher turnout rate than people aged 20-50 (Pearson, 2014). In Takoma Park, Maryland, in 2013, after the voting age was lowered to 16, voters under 18 exceeded the average turnout in both 2013 and 2014 municipal elections with a turnout rate four times higher than voters over 18 years of age (Hart, P., 2013). As shown in the graph below, this high turnout rate continued into 2015 and 2017, providing support for the additional research finding that early voting during the teen years may contribute to the habit of life-long voting (Gerber et al., 2003; Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014; Bronner & Ifkovits, 2019). ”<sup>5</sup> (reference the LWV of Maine study for the mentioned graph, “Voter Turnout in Takoma Park, MD 2013-2017”)

## Summary

The LWV of Delaware urges the 152<sup>nd</sup> Delaware General Assembly to pass HB 96, to enable 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in Delaware School Board elections. For those legislators who have concerns about the prospect of younger voters in the school board elections, we recommend that you take a look at the LWV of Maine “Voting Age Study” conducted in April of 2023, whose rigorous research may help put your mind at ease.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 2023 voter turnout varied by school district with between 2 and 10 percent of eligible voters casting ballots: [https://www.wdel.com/news/2023-delaware-school-board-election-results/article\\_1ff139a6-eec2-11ed-bcfff6a6bd299ff.html](https://www.wdel.com/news/2023-delaware-school-board-election-results/article_1ff139a6-eec2-11ed-bcfff6a6bd299ff.html), “2023 Delaware School Board Election Results” WDEL, 5/9/2023

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.lwvme.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/2023 April Voting%20Age%20Study WEB.pdf](https://www.lwvme.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/2023%20April%20Voting%20Age%20Study%20WEB.pdf), “Voting Age Study,” LWV of Maine, April 2023, p14

<sup>3</sup> LWV of Maine study (see link above in footnote 2), pp.42 to 45

<sup>4</sup> LWV of Maine study (see link above in footnote 2), pp.46 to 48

<sup>5</sup> LWV of Maine study (see link above in footnote 2), pp.51 to 52