

OREGON TEENS PUSH FOR LOWERING VOTING AGE TO 16

Hundreds of teens spent their spring break pleading with Oregon state lawmakers to consider lowering the voting age to 16, saying young people deserve a say on issues that will directly shape their future including gun control and global climate change.

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Posted By: Sarah Zimmerman, Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. (AP) -- Hundreds of teens spent their spring break pleading with Oregon state lawmakers to consider lowering the voting age to 16, saying young people deserve a say on issues that will directly shape their future including gun control and global climate change.

“The decisions our election officials make now will affect us for the rest of our lives, which is why we need a say,” Jeremy Clark, a 14-year-old from Portland, testified on Wednesday. “We are tired of waiting for the adults to take action.”

Legislators are considering changing the state constitution to lower the voting age to 16 in all elections, including for federal office. The move would ultimately need approval from voters in the 2020 ballot.

Teens around the country have emerged as a powerful political force since a school shooting at Parkland, Florida, that left 17 students and teachers dead. Students have since staged multiple school walkouts calling for more gun control, and have separately staged political demonstrations demanding action on climate change.

The idea to lower the voting age has picked up some national support, gaining the endorsement of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. A push to lower the voting age on the federal level fell short earlier this month.

The move to lower the voting age in Oregon also has the approval of Democratic Gov. Kate Brown and U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer.

“Sixteen-year-olds are legally permitted to work, required to pay income tax on their earnings, permitted to drive motor vehicles on their own, and can be tried as adults in the criminal justice system,” Blumenauer said in written testimony. “It stands to reason that they should be able to shape their future by participating in the political process as well.”

But opponents say that teens aren't mature enough to understand the political process, and that they're too young to own property or enlist in the military. Republicans add that the move is a Democratic bid to get more liberal voters.

"People are not legally considered adults in this country until they are 18 years old, and I believe they shouldn't be able to vote until then either," said Oregon Senate Republican Leader Herman Baertschiger, Jr., of Grants Pass. "This is nothing more than an attempt to expand the voter rolls to sway elections."

The 26th amendment to the U.S. Constitution lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 in 1971. While states cannot raise the minimum voting age, they can lower it in state and local elections. Thirteen states have introduced measures to let teens vote, though none have passed.

Two Maryland cities, Takoma Park and Hyattsville, let 16-year-olds vote in city council elections.

Oregon is one of 14 states to let 16-year-olds pre-register to vote, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. At least 195,500 young people preregistered in the state since the program began in 2007, with nearly half of them preregistering between 2016 and 2018. At least 18,800 of those pre-registered voters who turned 18 before the 2018 midterm elections cast a ballot, according to a report from the Center for American Progress.

"Being young doesn't mean we can't make educated decisions," said Amira Tripp Folsom, a junior at La Salle Catholic College Preparatory near Portland. "The changes being made to our future should be decided by those actually impacted."

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