



**LOWERING THE VOTING AGE FOR  
LOCAL ELECTIONS IN TAKOMA  
PARK AND HYATTSVILLE, MD**

A CASE STUDY

**OCTOBER 2016**

*From Generation Citizen*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2013, Takoma Park, Maryland became the first municipality in the United States to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds when its city council passed a charter amendment to lower the voting age for local elections. Hyattsville, a neighboring city, made the same change in 2015. State law allows cities in Maryland to pass this type of charter amendment with a city council vote, rather than having to put the issue before voters as a referendum.

In the elections since the changes, both cities have seen 16- and 17-year-olds who are registered to vote turn out at higher rates than older voters, but the overall number of 16- and 17-year-olds who are registered to vote remains low. Interviews with students, teachers, and policymakers indicate that lowering the voting age has been generally embraced by the communities, but the actual effects of the policy change are still playing out. Some political candidates and elected officials have increased their interactions with high school students, and some young people have become more active in local politics. School and district policy around civics classes has not been officially changed, but classroom teachers welcome the opportunity to make civics lessons more relevant to students' lives. As these changes are extremely recent, it will take many more years to properly evaluate the consequences of lowering the voting age on the municipal level in these communities.

However, as other cities across the United States consider making this change for their local elections, it is worth exploring the initial effects of the policy in Takoma Park and Hyattsville. Proponents of lowering the voting age cite numerous reasons for considering such a move: it can create habitual voters at a younger age, it can incentivize schools to teach civic education, 16- and 17-year-olds are demonstrably mature enough to make informed votes, and they deserve to have a meaningful voice in matters that affect their local communities. Evaluating the two municipalities that have already lowered the voting age can help determine whether the policy change adheres to its theoretical underpinnings at this point, and how it may in the future.



# HISTORY

## TAKOMA PARK

Takoma Park is a suburb of Washington, D.C. with a population of about 18,000. Many community members describe the city as having a unique culture of political engagement due to its proximity to Washington, D.C. and the number of residents who work in government. The city also has a history of promoting innovative local voting policies. In 1992, Takoma Park enfranchised non-citizens for local elections after a redistricting process left some districts with disproportionate shares of non-citizens. In 2006, it implemented instant runoff voting. Despite the city's political culture and the city council's actions to encourage voting, turnout for municipal elections has consistently lagged. In 2013, when the council took up the idea of lowering the voting age, turnout for local elections had only crossed 20 percent once in the previous 10 years. This led councilmember Tim Male to introduce a charter amendment to lower the voting age to 16 in October 2013.

***IN 2013, WHEN THE COUNCIL TOOK UP THE IDEA OF LOWERING THE VOTING AGE, TURNOUT FOR LOCAL ELECTIONS HAD ONLY CROSSED 20 PERCENT ONCE IN THE PREVIOUS 10 YEARS***

Advocates argued that a reform to lower the voting age could increase turnout for city elections and encourage young people to become active participants in local democracy. The proposal faced initial skepticism, but proponents were able to overcome this by articulating the benefits and making sure young people were at the center of advocacy. Youth testimony at public hearings proved influential, and the council voted 6-1 to pass the charter amendment in May 2013. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds in Takoma Park are now allowed to vote for mayor and city council members; school board elections are controlled by the county.

The council simultaneously adopted charter amendments to establish same day voter registration and allow felons who have served their sentences to vote. These changes came alongside the establishment of a Voting Rights Task Force to further study ways to make voting more accessible and increase turnout.

Because 16 year olds could already register to vote in Maryland, and the city had already passed a similar policy allowing non-citizen voting, implementing 16- and 17- year old voting in Takoma Park was relatively easy logistically.

## HYATTSVILLE

Following Takoma Park's success, Hyattsville city council member Patrick Paschall proposed a charter amendment to lower the voting age to 16 in Hyattsville in January 2015. The council voted 7-4 to pass the amendment, inspired by passionate public comment from community members, especially young people. As in Takoma Park, implementation of the new policy was aided by the fact that Maryland already allowed 16-year-olds to register to vote. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds in Takoma Park are allowed to vote for mayor and city council members; school board elections are controlled by the county.

# EARLY EFFECTS

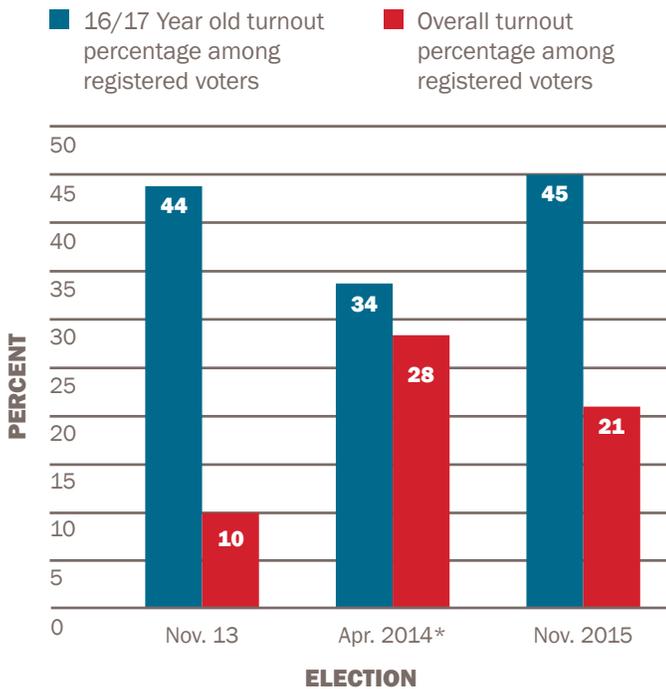
## TAKOMA PARK

### I. Turnout and Registration

The city council passed legislation to lower the voting age in May 2013, and 16- and 17-year-olds were eligible to vote in the municipal election that November, in which none of the races were seriously contested. Of the 16- and 17-year-olds who registered to vote, 44 percent turned out, compared to 10 percent overall turnout. (However, only 134 16- and 17-year-olds were registered out of about 370 eligible, so the total number of 16- and 17-year-old voters was still low.)

In April 2014, Takoma Park held a special election for one district, and 34 percent of registered 16- and 17-year-olds voted. In the regular 2015 municipal election, 45 percent of registered 16- and 17-year-olds voted, although again the total number was low (105 16- and 17-year-olds were registered and 47 voted).

### 16 AND 17-YEAR OLD TURNOUT VS OVERALL TURNOUT IN TAKOMA PARK



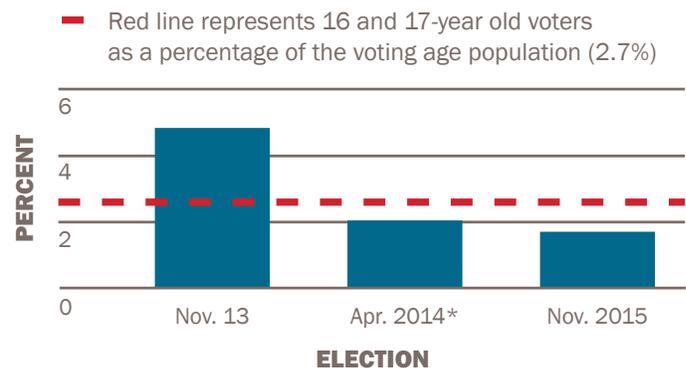
\*The 2014 election with a special election, with a race in only one of the city's 6 wards

### 16- AND 17-YEAR-OLD REGISTRATION AND TURNOUT IN TAKOMA PARK

	Nov. 2013	Apr. 2014 (special election -one ward)	Nov. 2015
<b>Total 16 and 17-year olds (estimate)</b>	~370	N/A	~370
<b>Registered</b>	134	41	105
<b>Voted</b>	59	14	47
<b>Turnout among registered</b>	44%	34%	45%

Among registered voters, 16- and 17-year-olds in Takoma Park have shown up at higher rates than the general population. At the same time, though, not many 16- and 17-year-olds are registering in the first place. To form a more full judgment, it is also important to investigate 16- and 17-year-old voting in the context of their share of the population. There are about 370 16- and 17-year-olds in Takoma Park. This means they comprise about 2.7 percent of the voting age population. This group accounted for 4.9 percent of ballots cast in 2013, 2.1 percent in 2014, and 1.8 percent in 2015. So, while the numbers of 16-17 year old voters seem low, they have voted in numbers roughly proportional to their share of the population, as demonstrated in the graph below.

### 16 AND 17-YEAR OLD VOTERS AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL VOTES CAST



\*The 2014 election with a special election, with a race in only one of the city's 6 wards



# EARLY EFFECTS

The downward trend, however, is concerning. The 2014 election was unique as it was a special election for only one ward, but the difference in turnout between the regular municipal elections in 2013 and 2015 is worth investigating. Overall turnout in 2015 was more than double that of 2013. Turnout among registered 16- and 17-year-olds increased slightly, but the overall number of 16- and 17-year-olds who registered and voted in 2015 was lower than 2013.

This begs the question – when the overall number of votes cast more than doubled in 2015, why did the number of 16- and 17-year-olds casting votes not rise in the same fashion? 2015 was a more contested election and included a ballot measure, so it's not surprising that turnout overall turnout was higher than in 2013 (the city may have more effectively promoted the election, too). It is possible that 16- and 17-year-old turnout in 2013 was especially high because of the novelty of the lower voting age. This question merits further study over the next several years, especially as the city switches its municipal election date from odd years to even years in 2018, to align with higher profile elections.

## II. Civic Education and Community Impact

Students from Takoma Park attend Montgomery Blair High School, which is located in Silver Spring and is the largest school in Montgomery County. The school serves numerous communities, making Takoma Park residents a relatively small percentage of the overall student body.

All Maryland students are required to take a government class in high school and must pass a High School Assessment on the subject to graduate. The class does not include meaningful action projects, although some individual teachers facilitate action components like writing letters to elected officials or inviting an elected official to class. Takoma Park's lower voting age has helped teachers make civics lessons more relevant, but it has not yet had a noticeable effect on school or district social studies policy.

Teachers say they discuss Takoma Park's recently lowered voting age when teaching about enfranchisement and the role of citizens in democracy. The topic can also provoke questions and debate, as students who are not from Takoma Park grapple with

the fact that some of their peers can vote while they cannot. Some students are optimistic that if the voting age is lowered in the other communities in the school district, the policy would make its way into classroom discussions in a more meaningful way. At this time, they feel that it's less engaging since the policy is relevant to students from Takoma Park but not all of their peers.

As the charter amendment was being considered in 2013, it was an active topic of discussion in many classrooms at Blair. The school newspaper also covered the issue extensively, and students organized voter registration tables at the school. Amalia Perez, who is from Takoma Park and was a student at Blair at the time, said students appreciated talking about the issue with teachers and classmates, but the new policy's impact was felt in civic life in Takoma Park more than in school.

*IN A PLACE WHERE YOU ALREADY FELT SO CONNECTED TO THE CITY, IT MADE YOU FEEL THAT MUCH MORE CONNECTED TO POLITICAL CANDIDATES. LOWERING THE VOTING AGE AND SHOWING YOUNG PEOPLE THAT THEIR VOTE COUNTS IS THE FIRST STEP IN SHOWING YOUNG PEOPLE THAT THEY HAVE TO BE INVOLVED.*

**Amalia Perez**, a Takoma Park resident who was in high school at the time of the change

Current Takoma Park Mayor Kate Stewart's attitude toward young people is perhaps the clearest example of the policy's influence. During her 2015 campaign, Stewart enlisted a 17-year-old campaign manager and actively reached out to the city's young people. She talked with student groups at Blair, ran ads in the school newspaper, and organized an event where high school bands played music and students could meet with local politicians. None of this would have happened if the minimum voting age was 18.

# EARLY EFFECTS

Stewart said youth voter outreach is really no different than outreach to any other constituency, and 16- and 17-year-olds are now a constituency just like any other. She also acknowledges that youth voter outreach, like any outreach to a specific subset of voters, is more important for candidates for city-wide office than for individual council seats. Perez similarly recognized this fact, and speculated that more young people might register and turn out if they were able to vote for offices higher up the ballot.

Now that 16- and 17-year-olds can shape the future Takoma Park at the ballot box, the city is considering options to more fully embrace their voices by establishing a youth council, according to Mayor Stewart. Such a group would advise elected officials on youth issues and would also take the lead in efforts to boost registration and turnout numbers among young voters.

*I LEARNED IN GOVERNMENT CLASS THAT VOTING IS HABIT FORMING AND IT'S SO IMPORTANT TO START YOUNG, BEFORE YOU GO TO COLLEGE. I WANT PEOPLE TO VOTE, THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS TO WORK BETTER, AND I WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW THEIR VOTE MATTERS.*

**Amanda Wessel**, a politically active student from Takoma Park

# EARLY EFFECTS

## HYATTSVILLE

### I. Turnout and Registration

Hyattsville has had just one local election since lowering the voting age, and it was only four months after the city council passed the charter amendment. As such, there is not yet enough evidence to thoroughly evaluate registration or turnout numbers. However, it is clear that the city must act to make sure 16- and 17-year-olds are aware of their right to vote and take advantage of it. In the one election 16- and 17-year-olds could vote in, which took place in spring 2015, overall turnout was 12.5 percent (1,190 voters turned out). Only eleven 16- and 17-year-olds registered, and four voted. This can be reported as a 36 percent turnout rate, but it is clear these numbers must be improved in future elections, and the city is already working toward that goal.

### II. Civics Education and Community Impact

Hyattsville is in the Prince George's County Public School System, and most Hyattsville students attend Northwestern High School, although they make up just a portion of students at the school. Just like in Takoma Park, Northwestern is responsible for the state requirement that mandates students to take a government class, and the standard curriculum does not contain specific action components, although some teachers incorporate action projects to help students learn about engaging with government. Hyattsville's lower voting age has not, to date, impacted civics education policy, but like in Takoma Park, it did make its way into some classroom discussions. However, not every teacher was aware of the policy change, and among those who were, some were reluctant to discuss the change as it only applied to students from Hyattsville.

Hyattsville did establish a Teen Advisory Committee soon after passing the voting age charter amendment. The nine-member committee makes recommendations to the council about issues related to young people in the city. This shows that, regardless of the policy's effect on elections, seeing 16- and 17-year-olds as voters can spur decision makers to give their voices a more meaningful place in city decision-making. To date, there has been less evidence of the lower voting age inspiring candidates to engage with young people in Hyattsville

than in Takoma Park. This is likely because the only election since the change was so soon after the charter amendment passed. The next municipal election should be a better indicator for the potential impact that the lower voting age can have on local campaigns.

*OUR LOCAL TURNOUT ISN'T GREAT. IT SEEMS LIKE PEOPLE IGNORE THE SMALLER ELECTIONS. I THOUGHT, "I'D VOTE." I KNOW WHAT I'D BE VOTING ON AND FOR. WE'RE LEARNING ABOUT GOVERNMENT IN SCHOOL RIGHT NOW, SO WE MIGHT EVEN KNOW MORE ABOUT GOVERNMENT STRUCTURES THAN AN AVERAGE ADULT. WE'RE PASSIONATE AND DO RESEARCH. I DID A LOT MORE RESEARCH ON WHAT OUR CITY COUNCIL DOES [WHEN THE CITY WAS DEBATING LOWERING THE VOTING AGE].*

**Sarah Leonard**, a Hyattsville student who was a vocal proponent of lowering the voting age

# LESSONS FOR OTHER CITIES

Takoma Park and Hyattsville have paved the way for similar campaigns in municipalities across the country. Looking back at how these cities came to make the change and what the effects have been gives us valuable insight for future efforts.

## **PROPOSE LOWERING THE VOTING AGE IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER EFFORTS TO INCREASE VOTER PARTICIPATION AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT**

Takoma Park's success in enacting the policy change shows that it can be helpful to approach the issue in the context of a broader effort to increase voter turnout and citizen engagement on the local level. Takoma Park recognized room for improvement in this area, identified lowering the voting age as a potential piece of the solution, and moved ahead to make the change. Framing the issue in the context of a larger conversation about voter participation and democratic renewal could be helpful for advocates in other cities.

## **KEEP YOUNG VOICES FRONT AND CENTER**

The best advocates for this policy are those it aims to enfranchise. In both cities, public testimony from young people themselves is what clinched the votes needed to pass the charter amendments. Furthermore, when young people lead the way to make this change, they are likely to stay engaged with crucial voter education and registration efforts.

## **FOCUS ON REGISTRATION AND VOTER EDUCATION EFFORTS**

As data from both cities shows, it is not enough to just lower the voting age for local elections – a concentrated effort is necessary to ensure that 16- and 17-year-olds know they can vote and take advantage of the opportunity. Public awareness of the policy change is key. This could be accomplished by sending direct mail to each home in the city announcing the change, school-based registration drives that actively seek out students eligible to vote, or other strategies. Hyattsville is already planning more extensive school outreach in advance

of the 2017 municipal election, and this should be a central piece of any plan to lower the voting age.

Maryland allows 16- and 17-year-olds to preregister to vote, so it may be possible to promote young voter registration in Takoma Park and Hyattsville in concert with improved county- or state-wide preregistration efforts. The same can be said for cities considering lowering the voting age that are in other states with preregistration.

## **COMBINE THE LOWER VOTING AGE WITH IMPROVED CIVIC EDUCATION FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT**

Opportunities for the lower voting age to impact civics classes in Maryland have been limited by a number of barriers: (1) students from Takoma Park and Hyattsville attend schools that serve much larger populations, (2) the change did not affect school board elections, and (3) the state requires a standard government class and assessment. However, if a city's lower municipal voting age could be combined with improved civic education, or more substantially weaved into civics lessons, it is likely that both civics classes and voter engagement would improve. Lowering the voting age can make civics relevant to students' lives and catalyze demand for stronger civics education, and strong civics education boosts voting rates and further cultivates an active and engaged citizenry.



# CONCLUSION

While these policy changes are still extremely recent, the early results indicate that the effects have been generally positive, despite low registration and turnout numbers. The initial proposals brought young people in touch with local government in a new way, teachers used the voting age to make government classes more relevant, and some local campaigns have embraced youth outreach for the first time. Perhaps most importantly, both cities are making serious commitments to involving youth voices in their policymaking. Furthermore, there have been no reported negative effects. It is still early, and there is a long way to go in making sure young people take advantage of their right to vote, but there is strong reason to believe that lowering the voting age will ultimately have a lasting positive impact on Takoma Park and Hyattsville.

Takoma Park and Hyattsville are pioneers in their embrace of a new, bold idea to improve government on the local level. Cities around the country struggle mightily to reach 15 or 20 percent turnout in local elections, and young people are increasingly disengaged with politics. Takoma Park and Hyattsville acknowledged these challenges, sought out an innovative solution, and are putting it to the test. Other cities should follow suit. ■