

September 8, 1998

1998 SEP -8 P 3:20

Members of the Cambridge City Council
City Clerk - Council Communication

OFFICE OF THE CITY CLERK
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

Councilors:

Would you please draft appropriate language for general review which would lower the age for voting in municipal elections (School Committee, City Council and municipal referenda) from age 18 to age 16.

Such a voting age change would result in young men and women having the opportunity to vote in one election prior to graduation from High School. It is believed by many experts that such direct involvement in voting will begin to reverse the dismal voting participation which exists for those aged 18 to 25, a lack of participation which often continues on into later life. Elected officials, school personnel, police and community advocates talk about involving young men and women in decision-making, yet young adults must stand on the sidelines until age 18 when it is a matter of voting.

Those aged 16 and over are directly impacted by the decisions of elected officials, especially in regard to school policy, but also in regard to a wide variety of broad community issues such as job training, programming, health care, recreation, transportation, park development etc.

Area 4, where I live, is the neighborhood which has the highest proportion of young adults under the age of 18 in the City of Cambridge, over 25%. Area 4 is often thought of as the most disenfranchised area of the city, and a lowering of the voting age would help empower my neighborhood.

Young adults confront serious issues on a daily basis: AIDS, racism, declining wages, shortage of affordable housing, environmental crisis, violence, poverty, and hunger. Yet they remain active concerned citizens, taking it upon themselves to improve the world, to work with adults and infuse our somewhat stalled commitment to social change with their energy. They deserve the right to vote.

The right to vote is a democratic extension of community involvement and individual concern. In Cambridge, young adults are already planning youth centers, holding educational forums, designing multicultural curricula, speaking out at meetings. We are already taking leadership, organizing against racism and sexism, violence and drugs. We are already acting to construct a future more healthy and equitable than the present.

Young people have the productive energy and creativity to work for changes which would impact many community issues. The right to vote in local elections would give us the opportunity to replace voices of alienation with empowerment: the capacity to alter and improve our own destiny. Young people's entire lives have been manipulated by political forces. With the vote, we would be better able to fight such manipulation, and with an electoral voice we would have added reason to educate ourselves and each other on the issues.

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A lower voting age will be an investment in our city. We will be telling young adults that they are accountable as members of our community, and with that accountability comes the power to help shape our lives. The voices of authority -- politicians, police, parents, teachers -- talk about taking responsibility and becoming involved, yet young adults are denied one of the basic means to their involvement, the right to vote. In addition, we are absolutely dependent on the representation and participation of youth to fulfill our commitment to a truly diverse city.

Lowering the voting age would not be complicated. In Cambridge, for example, the City Council would write a Home Rule Petition and submit it to the state legislature for approval. With the support of the local state legislative delegation, democracy would be readily extended to the 16- and 17-year-old residents of our city.

In discussions with the Cambridge Election Commission I learned that because of computer technology, lowering the voting age would not add significantly to the expense or complications of city elections.

Will the youth vote be an additional vote in the hands of influential adults? No, of course not. That condescending argument was used by men to deny women the right to vote. A glance at teenage participation in mock elections verifies their independent and responsible choices. Would allowing 16- and 17-year-olds the vote be risking mistakes? No, they would make no more mistakes than many adults; this is the risk we take with democracy. Would they be voting before they are ready? No, like most adults, they would become involved in the electoral process when they were confident of their choices, when they were fully informed.

Giving young adults the real power of the vote would end the cynicism many feel toward their city and their neighborhoods; cynicism resulting from exclusion from power and accountability. Imagine young adults across the city discussing who should represent them on the School Committee and City Council, debating how their lives would be impacted by policies on issues such as public health, recreation, job training, education, public safety, wages, racism... issues that affect our communities on a daily basis.

Please draft the appropriate election language which could form the basis for discussion, and a final vote, over the coming weeks.

We owe it to ourselves, for our common future, to lower the voting age.

Thank you,


Gerald Bergman
82 Elm Street
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354-2648

motion:

That the Cambridge City Council forward a homerule petition to the State Legislature requesting passage of legislation that would lower the voting age in Cambridge City Council elections, Cambridge School Committee elections and Cambridge local city referenda ballot questions to age 16, beginning with the City Council and School Committee elections of November, 1999.

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A communication was received from Gerald Bergman, requesting the drafting of home rule legislation to lower age fro voting in municipal elections from age 18 to age 16.

In City Council September 14, 1998

NO Action Taken

SEP. 28 1998

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