

How young is too young to vote?

by SHERALYN ROMAN

I'll admit, prior to a recent discussion, this is a topic about which I had not given a great deal of thought. Prompted to do so however, I've been reflecting upon it with friends, family and with the many young adults of my acquaintance. I've also done some research and it seems to me, in an era where Greta Thunberg and Autumn Peltier, aged 16 and 15 respectively, are addressing the UN and single-handedly making a global impact, it is nothing short of pompous to suggest youth have nothing of merit to add to political debate and/or no valid opinion and so must be prevented from exercising the right to vote.

In an age where young adults feel disenfranchised and at the same time we (us older folk) are seeking out ways to ensure youth become more politically engaged, what better way to do so than by granting them the right to vote at age 16. Young adults often believe they have no potential influence over the outcome of an election and they're right, because at least for those between the ages of 16-18 they're not eligible to exert that influence. Yet, all political parties allow young adults between the ages of 14 ? 16 (it varies) to volunteer for candidates, to join a political party and/or to canvas on their behalf. Presumably, these are engaged and involved young adults. Is it too much of a stretch to entertain the concept that they have sufficient intelligence to weigh the pros and cons of candidates in order to register an informed vote? Youth aged 16 or more are granted a license to drive and they are eligible to work and to pay taxes for the privilege of doing so. I ask ? if you can drive a car, earn income and pay taxes to the government, all at age 16, why not also allow these young citizens to vote?

Some of you may recall that locally, we had a young adult running for the position of school trustee. He was 19 at the time and a student in university. The provincial Progressive Conservatives have a sitting MP who is just 22 years of age and who was first elected at age 19. Neither emerged as fully formed, politically savvy and sentient human beings at age 19. Those seeds would have been sown much earlier. Who ? and what - determines maturity? Who assesses fitness to vote? Why is age (specifically the age of 18) the ?magic? number? I know of (and I'm sure most of you do too) many older adults who have no business exercising their right to vote. They might be 30, or 40 or 50+ but their mental fitness to vote? That's another matter entirely! Perhaps there should be some form of ?means test? to determine voter competency? If only.

Not long ago, in 2018, Stéphane Perrault, then acting chief electoral officer, told CBC News, ?changing the minimum legal age for casting a ballot is a ?fundamental policy? change only Parliament can make? ? but he thinks it's worth considering. ?Voting when you're 16 is voting at a time when most Canadians?. are still in school, at a place that we can actually get to them and engage them.? Polling stations are located inside schools and many schools actively engage their students in education around the electoral process. There is no doubt in my mind that some young adults are significantly better informed than their adult counterparts and well-equipped to handle the responsibility of voting. In fact, Mr. Perrault went on to share another fact: ?we know that Canadians who vote early in their lifetime will continue to vote, and those who don't vote in the first few elections will tend not to vote later on. So there's a real benefit to making sure that Canadians vote early.?

Stéphane Perrault is not alone. Elizabeth May, leader of the Green Party, tabled a private members bill just this past August suggesting young adults aged 16+ be given the right to vote. In a tweet on the 23rd of that month she wrote: ?Yes. I tabled a private members bill to change voting age to 16! Greens are clear that young people need a voice.? With this announcement, at least one political party is acknowledging that young adults not only have the right to join a party, canvas and to volunteer but also to vote for them. It remains to be seen after this federal election who will be in power and whether this bill will gain any traction in parliament.

I'll end with this. Not only do I believe there is significant merit in having the voting age reduced to 16, I believe too that we can capitalize on it. I suggest we partner students with seniors for a ?Drive the Vote? initiative where students volunteer to drive a senior to the polling station. Think about it. It's a win ? win situation for both students and seniors and potentially, for all of Canada as well. #DrivetheVote. BTW ? Where's DOFO?