

Lawmakers Want to Give Voting Rights to Teens They Treat Like Toddlers

Newly-elected US Rep. Ayanna Pressley caused a stir this month when she filed an amendment to lower the legal federal voting age from 18 to 16. While Pressley's amendment failed to pass, the action brought attention to the place of teenagers in society. Regardless of how we may feel about the role of the voter, many of us would argue that teenagers should have more autonomy and agency and be more active, productive members of their communities. The irony, however, is that at the same time legislators seek to empower teens by expanding voting rights, they are increasingly infantilizing them in other pernicious ways.

Confining Teens through Compulsory Schooling

For instance, the call to lower the voting age comes at a time when more states are tightening compulsory schooling statutes, requiring teenagers to stay in school longer under a legal threat of force. As of 2017, 24 states plus the District of Columbia had raised the minimum age at which a young person can legally leave school to 18. Lawmakers in Oregon announced legislation last month to lower the voting age to 16, but the state also raised its compulsory schooling age to 18. Sixteen-year-olds may get permission to vote, but in school, they still need permission to use the bathroom.

The alleged goal of expanding compulsory schooling laws is to lower drop-out rates and improve academic and social outcomes, yet research shows no clear benefit in raising the compulsory school attendance age. In Pressley's home state of Massachusetts, a Boston city councilor recently proposed offering an optional 13th year of public schooling, prolonging the state stewardship of teens.

More time in compulsory school settings means less time adolescents spend working or otherwise constructively engaged with their larger communities. In fact, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported a sharp decline in teenage labor force participation from a high of 57.9 percent in 1979 to just 34.1 percent in 2011. Much of this decline is due to the increased emphasis on time in school and academic performance while devaluing the critical life skills, mentoring, and real-life problem-solving that teens can experience through work and community involvement. Even summer jobs have been replaced by school. According to the BLS, 42 percent of teens were enrolled in school in July 2016 compared to only 10 percent in July 1985.

Psychologist Robert Epstein points out how our society harms adolescents by stripping them of responsibility and authentic immersion into adult life. In his book, *Teen 2.0*, he writes that "high school is little more than a prison for many of our teens, and the time has

come to explore bold new approaches to education that will allow our young to reconnect meaningfully with the adult world they are about to enter.” Dr. Epstein argues that the “artificial extension of childhood” past puberty is why so many US teenagers today are in turmoil.

The Power of Self-Education

The concept of adolescent empowerment and greater participation in the larger community is not new. For decades, social reformers have been advocating for more freedom and responsibility for teenagers. Paul Goodman brought these ideas to the forefront in his books, *Growing Up Absurd* (1960) and *Compulsory Mis-education* (1964). Goodman influenced John Holt, who took the ideas a step further. In his 1974 book *Escape from Childhood*, Holt promotes extending children’s rights, including allowing children the right to vote, as well as to direct their own education. The self-directed learning principle is critical for Holt. He writes in *Escape from Childhood*:

“A person’s freedom of learning is part of his freedom of thought, even more basic than his freedom of speech. If we take from someone his right to decide what he will be curious about, we destroy his freedom of thought. We say, in effect, you must think not about what interests and concerns *you*, but about what interests and concerns *us*.”

Holt went on to coin the term “unschooling” in 1977 as part of the nascent homeschooling movement, urging parents to remove their children from institutional schooling in favor of non-coercive, self-directed learning. Today, unschooling continues to gain popularity, particularly as more self-directed learning spaces provide alternatives to school for children and adolescents.

Lowering the voting age is a reasonable proposition. Indeed, it’s something worth considering as a mechanism for inviting adolescents into the larger discourse of our society. But lowering the voting age while forcing these same teens to spend additional years in mandatory schooling environments, cut-off from authentic, inter-generational community interactions, is nothing more than a political ploy.

Teenagers are capable of being valuable contributors to civil society. They should be granted greater freedom and responsibility. Lowering the voting age while trapping them in compulsory schooling gives teenagers neither freedom nor responsibility.