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Special Committee on Electoral Reform

## **Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française (FJCF) brief**

# **Establishing the Right to Vote From the Age of 16, a Priority in Order to Improve our Electoral System**

Ottawa, September 8<sup>th</sup> 2016



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## **About the Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française (FJCF) – French Canadian Youth Federation**

The Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française is a national organization founded in 1974, managed BY youth and FOR youth, made up of 11 youth organization members from 9 provinces and 2 territories. It contributes to the sociocultural development and identity of French-speaking young Canadians aged 14 to 25 through activities and events held across Canada, as well as youth employment programs.

### **FJCF Recommendations :**

1. That Article 3 of the Canada Elections Act, which sets the minimum age to be a qualified elector at 18 years of age, be modified to set the minimum age to be a qualified elector at 16 years of age;
2. That the Government of Canada collaborate with its provincial and territorial partners to establish measures developing civic education among high school students in order to provide a framework for their first federal voting experience.

### **The FJCF's Position**

Article 3 of the Canada Elections Act stipulates that any person who, on the day of the election, is a Canadian citizen and has reached the age of 18 is a qualified elector. The FJCF believes that the minimum age to be considered a qualified elector should be set to 16 in order to be fair towards youth, to allow federal politics to better represent Canadian society, and, furthermore, because there exists no reason to rationally justify the current legislation.

If you look past certain preconceived ideas floating around, it is easy to see that a person of at least 16 is just as capable of voting as any older person. If some are quick to denounce youth as immature, impressionable and ignorant of politics, they should first be reminded of the intellectual perils of generalization, and then reminded that those characteristics are far from exclusive to youth; indeed, the same could be said of certain individuals at any age. Such personal attributes should never be used to discriminate against youth, or anyone for that matter, in an electoral process. The capacity to form an enlightened opinion, and to exercise it in an electoral period, is never guaranteed, regardless of the voter's age.

If most Canadian legislatures recognize that at 16 a person is, namely, capable of driving a vehicle, there is therefore national recognition of the principle that a 16 year-old is generally capable of



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learning the Canadian Highway Code, of applying it and recognizing potentially dangerous driving situations. Therefore, the FJCF concludes that if a 16 year-old has these abilities, they are also able to vote. The Federation has no knowledge, moreover, of any credible proof that a 16 or 17 year-old is unfit to vote on account of their age.

The FJCF has heard, and rejects, the argument that the integrity of the electoral system would be compromised if 16 and 17 year-olds were allowed to vote. Rather, it believes that denying that segment of the population the right to vote is what compromises the electoral system's integrity. Indeed, setting the age at 18 relies on an arbitrary ideology that has no rational basis, which goes against the principles of a State of Law such as Canada. Refusing the right to vote is a serious blow to the rights and freedoms of Canadians, and it must be justified. Not a single convincing argument has yet been put forth that would justify such a blow to the rights of 16 and 17 year-olds in 2016.

In the FJCF's opinion, the question of why youth should be allowed to vote from the age of 16 is archaic. The question should rather be: why is Canada taking so long to set the minimum voting age to 16? Political partisanship aside, the FJCF is hard-pressed to explain why Canada is dragging its feet on this issue, when other nations such as Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Ecuador and Nicaragua act as leaders and forerunners by allowing people over the age of 16 to vote. The Committee should ask itself what is to be gained, and who has something to gain, by denying 16 and 17 year-olds the right to vote.

Though the FJCF has received a mandate from its members to defend the right to vote at 16, it is important to remind everyone that it is far from the only one to speak up on this important issue which concerns society as a whole. The Fédération des jeunes francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick (New Brunswick Francophone Youth Federation), for example, has been championing the initiative at a provincial level for many years. In 2004, Liberal MP Mark Holland introduced a bill in the House of Commons which namely aimed to set the voting age to 16 years of age. In 2014, New Brunswick Green Party Leader David Coon introduced a similar bill to that effect. In January of this year, NDP MP Don Davies took the lead by introducing Bill C-213 to the House of Commons, requesting that the voting age in the federal election be lowered to 16. In the past, the matter has also been discussed by the Liberals in Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as within the Parti Québécois. Other known institutions, such as the Institut du Nouveau-Monde and Samara Canada also regularly express their support for the right to vote at 16.

The interests of youth are seldom represented at the federal level, and recognizing the right to vote from the age of 16 can easily be implemented. Youth representation would thus immediately be improved through the expression of their will come election time. It would therefore be in the best interest of politicians and political parties to heed the concerns of youth, given their demographic weight at the polls. To illustrate this low representation in parliament, allow us to quote a report



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from the House of Commons from 2015, where only 7 federal MPs were aged between 20 and 29 years old, and 100 MPs were aged 60 years and older.

A healthy democracy depends on the active involvement of its citizens in politics. The earlier we can get them involved in the decisions that affect them, the earlier all Canadians can benefit from their contribution. At 16, most youth are still surrounded by family and school, providing them with a supportive framework to absorb the knowledge necessary to vote.

We must take advantage of these unique circumstances to create a sustainable commitment to active citizen involvement. Voting is a habit that must be maintained, and the earlier it becomes a part of an individual's development, the longer it will last. Besides, it is easier to reach youth through school to make them aware of their civic duty than once they are spread out after receiving their diploma.

The FJCF believes that it is urgent that the legitimacy of 16 and 17 year-old's involvement in politics be recognized, and that they be encouraged to claim the space that is rightfully theirs. Can we still be surprised at the low turnout among young voters in general elections when the current electoral system continues to exclude them? It is time to reverse the trend.

Recognition of the right to vote at 16 notwithstanding, the Government of Canada should seize the opportunity to work with its provincial and territorial partners to establish measures to develop civic education among high school youth to accompany their first voting experience. We cannot insist enough on the necessity to transmit a solid comprehension of the basics of democracy and the electoral system so that they may, on the one hand, understand the importance of citizen involvement, and on the other, learn to form their own political opinions based on facts. Establishing such civic education measures could easily be integrated into the myriad of school and family resources available to youth.

Voting for the first time among peers, before leaving the family nest, is a meaningful gesture fraught with significance that can help empower youth and make them aware of their power to change things. Let's give 16 and 17 year-olds this opportunity. Everyone will come out a winner.

Given all of the reasons provided above, the FJCF believes the Committee should make the voting issue a priority in order to recommend that the age to be a qualified elector be set to 16 years of age. This recommendation aligns on all points with the Committee's objective to improve the 5 principles outlined in its study on electoral reform, those being efficiency and legitimacy, participation, accessibility and inclusiveness, integrity and, finally, local representation. The FJCF remains fully available to answer any concerns the Committee may have.



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