



Political Science & Legal Studies Department

8 Ashburton Place
Boston MA 02108

617-573-8122
617-367-4623 (fax)

www.suffolk.edu/cas

June 22, 2023

Rachael V. Cobb, Ph.D.
Chair and Associate Professor, Political Science & Legal Studies
Suffolk University
73 Tremont Street, 10th Floor
Boston MA 02108
617-305-6380
rcobb@suffolk.edu

**Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on Election Laws
In Support of [S.412](#) / [H.670](#) An Act enabling children's right to vote
By Rachael Cobb, Associate Professor & Chair, Political Science & Legal
Studies, Suffolk University
June 21, 2023**

Chair Keenan, Chair Ryan, and members of the Joint Committee on Election Laws, I'm Rachael Cobb, and I SUPPORT S.412 / H.670 An Act enabling children's right to vote. I am the daughter of a long-time Election Commissioner of Cambridge; I earned a PhD at MIT; I've been Chair of the Department of Political Science & Legal Studies at Suffolk University since 2010; I study and teach about election administration, civic engagement and political participation; I serve as a member of the City of Boston Election Advisory Committee and on the board of MassVOTE; I am a mother of three.

I met the author of this bill, Robin Chen, a fellow mother in Cambridge, in 2019, when our children were enrolled in the same preschool. Let me tell you a story. I was moderating a panel at our local library called "[Dream Big: Protecting Democracy by Defending the Vote.](#)" The library event (recording link [here](#)) featured Lawrence Lessig, Harvard Law Professor and founder of *Equal Citizens*, and Carol Anderson, Emory University Professor and author of *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression Is Destroying Our Democracy*. Robin met with me beforehand, explained how she wanted to ask them a question about the problems stemming from children's disenfranchisement. I agreed to ask her question. Following protocol, at the event, she submitted it through a notecard. She politely phrased the question in the following way, and when I asked it, the panelists missed the point about under-18s: "How might we make our representative democracy more representative of the interests of **all ages** of

people?” Their thoughts went to voter turnout rates, to the youngest *eligible* voters, rather than those too young to be eligible under current law.

Do we do our democracy a disservice by failing to connect children with their government through voting? For under-18s in MA, ‘one person, no vote’ is still the law, although we count children for voting district apportionment. It’s normal now in MA for children to be part of the civic square in terms of public spaces like libraries, museums, parks, and even government hearings - there’s no minimum age to offer testimony. All ages are eligible to donate to a campaign, volunteer for a candidate, read or hear news, attend a rally. The minimum voting age is an exception, preventing an activity that is essentially a means of expression. We should examine that.

I acknowledge that children’s suffrage is a challenging issue. What would it look like in practice? It ought to be consistent with how decisions are made for children, with children, by children, but what does that mean for regulating the activity for individual children who gradually develop in both capacity and independence? Remember, this is a bill about **equal access** for all citizens to the electoral process.

A citizen with good intentions is seeking to translate persistent ideas from scholars into the Massachusetts General Laws. The bill author made a good faith effort to give a starting point for study, discussion, and debate. Like any designer, she has iterated on her ideas: four years ago, she filed a bill to allow 14-year-olds to register to vote with the consent of their legal guardians. Two years ago, she filed a bill to create a commission to study child disenfranchisement and recommend alternatives, and another to simply eliminate the minimum age for eligibility to vote (relying on the MA Voters’ Bill of Rights that any voter can bring a helper or get help from two poll workers, and have privacy if they prefer, and so forth). She has sought feedback and developed relationships with experts, co-founding The Children’s Voting Colloquium, an international discussion group active since 2020. She has volunteered with voting rights organizations and civic organizations. She has had many many conversations with strangers.

Last year, two students in two different courses I teach examined voting age requirements in other countries, specifically lowering the voting age to 16. They discovered several interesting pieces of scholarship.

- Austria lowered its voting age to 16 in all federal elections in 2007. A 2014 study found a "first-time voting boost" that was even stronger for 16 and 17-year-olds than for 18-year-olds (Zeglovits 2014). In lowering the voting age while accompanying it with awareness campaigns and civic education, younger citizens

voted more than older first-time voters and expressed high levels of trust in democratic participation.

- In 2020, a group of researchers participated in the “Ghent Study,” wherein the city of Ghent, Belgium invited 16 and 17-year-olds to take part in a municipal election. While previous scholarship focused on individual implications of lowering the voting age, this study showed potential downstream effects to increased political discussion in the home. In families that were targeted by the experiment, both parents and adolescents reported “more intensive political discussion” (Hooghe and Stiers 2020).
- In a developmental psychology approach to cognitive abilities of adolescents, there is no researching finding a lack of cognitive development in 16-year-olds that would prevent them from voting (Oosterhoff, Wray-Lake, and Hart 2022). Furthermore, cognitive development changes between the ages of 16 and 18 are minimal.

Nationally, civic education has been an afterthought. Instead, national education policy has focused attention and investment in STEM fields, including science, technology, engineering and math. Nationally, the United States spends about \$50 of federal funds per student per year on STEM and only 5 cents per year on civic education (Adams 2019).

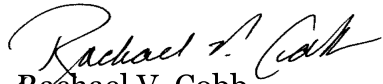
Massachusetts is a leader in civics education. According to a report, “The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History in 2021” produced by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Massachusetts was among the top five states in the country, earning a grade of A-.

If the degree to which people participate in democracy is a measure of the health of the democracy, then whether the state requires that young people learn how democracies work is a further measure of the state’s commitment to democracy and preparing young people to become informed and active citizens.

Is it counterproductive to keep all interested citizens from voting until they turn 18? It probably is. Is it meaningful to children to have the status of ‘eligible voter’? It probably is. Is this neither the beginning nor the end of a long series of consensus-building conversations? Absolutely.

I urge the Joint Committee on Election Laws to report **S.412 / H.670 An Act enabling children's right to vote** favorably and in a timely manner. If you must send it to study, then I urge the Joint Committee on Election Laws and all who follow its

business to seriously study the intent of this proposal and the scholarship, data, and lived experience that supports it. Thank you for your consideration.



Rachael V. Cobb

Chair and Associate Professor of Political Science, Suffolk University