

**Testimony of Hannah Kohanzadeh, Policy Research Assistant
At the Public Hearing on Bill 22-0778, Youth Vote Amendment Act of 2018
DC Council Committee Judiciary and Public Safety
June 27, 2018**

Chairperson Allen and members of the Committee, good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Hannah Kohanzadeh and I am a Policy Research Assistant at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute, a division of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. DCFPI is a member of the Vote 16 DC Coalition, which includes DC's leading children's policy, advocacy, and service nonprofits. At DCFPI, we promote budget choices to reduce economic and racial inequality and build widespread prosperity for all residents in the District, through independent research and policy recommendations.

Amending the voting age to 16 years-old provides DC an opportunity to improve our democracy in three ways. First, voting earlier reinforces voting as a habit. Second, expanding our civic base promotes better governance. Third, by lowering our voting age we can empower more of our residents born and raised in the District to vote.

Voting is a habit. Multiple studies show that voting is a gradually acquired behavior.¹ Voting must be practiced until it is second nature, similar to driving. In fact, when determining if a person will participate in an upcoming election it is more significant if a person voted in the previous election than how old they are or how much education they have received.² Meanwhile, research shows that 16- and 17-year-olds statistically have the same civic knowledge as 18- and 21-year-olds.³ With all this in mind, allowing residents to begin to vote at eighteen is less than ideal. For many young adults 18 is a less stable time of life than 16 is. It can be a period of transition, as 18-year-olds move for careers or education. While in the midst of that transition, they may not be able to make time to register and begin to exercise their voting rights. By enabling our younger residents to vote earlier in life we set them up to take civic action more frequently throughout their entire lives.

It is important to recognize that 16- and 17-year-olds contribute to and are active members of our community. They drive, work, pay taxes, and use city services, and yet do not have the same say in the city's decision-making. These residents deserve the opportunity to influence the laws that impact their everyday lives. When granted the right to vote, 16- and 17-year-olds show up. Our neighbors in Maryland's Takoma Park, Hyattsville, and Greenbelt have seen increases in voter turnout after they passed legislation allowing residents sixteen and older to vote in municipal elections. Takoma Park saw 44 percent of registered 16- and 17-year-olds vote in their 2013 elections, which was the first election cycle the newly enfranchised could vote in.⁴ Most importantly, 16- and 17-year-olds had the highest voting rate among any age group in that election.⁵ These young adults care about their communities and how they are regulated; they should be allowed to express their political will for the benefit of everyone in the District.

Ultimately by lowering our voting age to 16 years-old we may engage more residents born and raised in the District to participate in and shape DC's governance. More than half of DC students live east of the river.⁶ Lowering the District's voting age to sixteen will empower more residents to vote, and strengthen representation in Wards 7 and 8. Last week in our 2018 Primary Election, only 17.15 percent of registered voters cast a ballot. Wards 7 and 8 had the lowest voter turnout at 11.77 percent and 7.73 percent

respectively.⁷ By making more residents eligible to vote, we can change the culture around voting in DC from infrequent to commonplace. The District's younger members are in touch with the needs and challenges facing the city. They ought to have the respect and opportunity to direct and elect city officials to actualize their vision for their home.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

¹ Eric Plutzer. "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood." *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 1 (2002).

Gerber, Alan S., Donald P. Green, and Ron Shachar. "Voting May Be Habit-Forming: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment." *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 3 (2003): 540-50.

² Daniel Hart and Robert Atkins, "American Sixteen- and Seventeen-Year- Olds Are Ready to Vote," *Annals of the American Academy* 633 (January 2011): 208.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ "Young Voices At the Ballot Box: Lowering the Voting Age for Local Elections in 2017 and Beyond," *Generation Citizen*, Version 2.0 – Jan 2017.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "Population by age group," Kids Count, <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/6747-population-by-age-group-by-ward?loc=10&loct=21#detailed/21/1852-1859/false/870,573,869,36,868/3933,214,838,123/13833>.

⁷ "Primary Election 2018- Election Night Unofficial Results" available at https://electionresults.dcboc.org/election_statistics/2018-Primary-Election.