



## CASE STUDY

# Vote16USA's Campaign to Lower the Voting Age in San Francisco

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How can a youth-led movement keep its passion and idealism while also incorporating the expertise and experience of professional political consultants?

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## **SNF Agora Case Studies**

The SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University offers a series of case studies that show how civic and political actors navigated real-life challenges related to democracy. Practitioners, teachers, organizational leaders, and trainers working with civic and political leaders, students, and trainees can use our case studies to deepen their skills, to develop insights about how to approach strategic choices and dilemmas, and to get to know each other better and work more effectively.

### **How to Use the Case**

Unlike many case studies, ours do not focus on individual leaders or other decision-makers. Instead, the SNF Agora case studies are about choices that groups make collectively. Therefore, these cases work well as prompts for group discussions. The basic question in each case is: “What would we do?”

After reading a case, some groups role-play the people who were actually involved in the situation, treating the discussion as a simulation. In other groups, the participants speak as themselves, discussing the strategies that they would advocate for the group described in the case. The person who assigns or organizes your discussion may want you to use the case in one of those ways.

When studying and discussing the choices made by real-life decision-makers (often under intense pressure), it is appropriate to exhibit some humility. You do not know as much about their communities and circumstances as they did, and you do not face the same risks. If you had the opportunity to meet these individuals, it might not be your place to give them advice. We are not asking you to second-guess their actual decisions as if you were wiser than they were.

However, you can exhibit appropriate respect for these decision-makers while also thinking hard about the possible choices that they could have made, weighing the pros and cons of each option, and seriously considering whether they made the best choices or should have acted differently. That is a powerful way of learning from their experience. Often the people described in our cases had reflected on previous examples, just as you can do by thinking about their situation.

### **Target audiences are:**

- High school, college, and graduate students
- Youth organizers
- Policymakers

**Keywords:** Campaigns, organizing, voting, youth leadership, youth movements

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### About the Authors

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## Introduction

**THIS CASE STUDY EXPLORES CHALLENGES THAT EMERGED for a coalition of high school-aged activists who sought to pass a landmark law in San Francisco that would transform their participation in democracy.** This activist group,

led by young people, sought to balance the passion and idealism of its convictions with the need to convince a plurality of (mostly older) voters to support an initiative that they initially viewed with skepticism. Striking that balance raises important questions about how to preserve and elevate the voice and authenticity of the people most affected by policy decisions while also taking advantage of the acquired political expertise and experience of professional political consultants.

We explore these dilemmas through the real story of the Vote16SF campaign, a movement to lower the voting age to 16 in local elections in San Francisco.

The Vote16SF campaign was a local initiative of a larger Vote16USA campaign to lower the voting age to 16 in municipalities across the country. Once viewed as a radical voting reform, lowering the voting age is increasingly seen as a policy lever to boost voter participation and incentivize civics education. It is also considered a youth justice issue: It would ensure that younger citizens can have their voices represented on issues they care about and that affect them on a daily basis.

Once viewed as a radical voting reform, lowering the voting age is increasingly seen as a policy lever to boost voter participation and incentivize civics education.

A number of countries—including Austria, Ecuador, and Scotland—have lowered the national voting age to 16 in recent years. In the United States, Takoma Park, Greenbelt, Hyattsville, Riverdale Park, and Mount Rainier in Maryland have also lowered their local voting age to 16. Although research is still emerging, there is some compelling evidence<sup>1</sup> that lowering the voting age leads to higher overall participation rates, ensures that local schools teach more civics education, and garners more overall youth interest in local politics.<sup>2</sup>

In 2016, San Francisco became one of the first cities in the country to hold a ballot referendum on lowering the voting age to 16 for local elections. A second referendum was held in 2020. Both times, the effort was led largely by high school students, including those on the San Francisco Youth Commission, a city-ordained commission of 12- to 23-year-olds that advises the city's Board of Supervisors and mayor on issues impacting youth. This group of young people encountered numerous obstacles, including initial polling that showed weak public support and deep skepticism, from the public and political consultants alike, that the initiative could ever pass.

Along the way, as the effort gained more attention, the organizers struggled to strike a balance between a youth-led grassroots campaign and a more typical, professionally run operation. This

case summarizes the history of the effort in San Francisco and shares context that explores the challenge of balancing campaign authenticity and youth voice with the strategies and resources needed for overall campaign success. Readers will be asked to explore the realities of the Vote16SF campaign and consider which strategy they would have adopted. Given the fact that the referendum still has not passed at the time of publication of this case, these issues remain pressing and under discussion by the actual activists.

## Learning Objectives for this Case Study

**By the end of this case study, you should be able to:**

1. Gain an understanding of the tension in movements between the ideals of their leaders and the practical realities of political change.
2. Explore specifically the tension between the voices and techniques of grassroots campaigners and those of experienced campaign professionals.
3. Analyze the tradeoffs that youth-led campaigns face between youth energy and voice and professional campaign experience.
4. Learn what questions to explore, before accepting campaign funding from a particular source and on particular terms, about how that funding might impact the goals and structure of the campaign.

## Vote16USA: A New Movement to Lower the Voting Age

In 2014, Scotland's 16- and 17-year-olds gained the right to vote as part of Scotland's independence referendum.<sup>3</sup> In the fall of 2015, partially buoyed by Scotland's success, Generation Citizen (GC), a national civics education organization, launched Vote16USA, an initiative to lower the voting age to 16 in local elections nationwide. (At the time of the launch of the campaign, one of the authors of this piece was the organization's CEO, and the other was the Vote16 campaign manager.) While the idea was not new in the United States, with two Maryland cities having already lowered the voting age to 16 by then,<sup>i</sup> it was not prevalent, nor was it considered a viable policy reform in most quarters. Thus, probably because of the somewhat quixotic nature of the campaign's vision, the launch of the initiative received immediate attention and modest financial support.

Upon the campaign's launch, Vote16USA released a comprehensive [white paper](#) that detailed the rationale for lowering the voting age to 16 and offered a state-by-state analysis of the legality of

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i. Takoma Park, Maryland, lowered the voting age to 16 in 2013; Hyattsville, Maryland lowered its age in 2015; and Greenbelt, Maryland carried out the reform in 2018.

lowering the voting age to 16 under state laws and their respective home-rule laws.<sup>ii</sup> The white paper garnered national attention, including coverage in *The New York Times*, leading young people across the country to become enthusiastic about the possibility of such a reform.

For Generation Citizen, the decision to launch Vote16USA was driven by a two-fold rationale. First, from the perspective of the organization's mission, research indicates that lowering the voting age to 16, especially in local elections, would incentivize K-12 schools to focus more attention on civics education for their would-be voters. Second, while there was burgeoning interest in the reform, there was little infrastructure or research in place to support the work. GC, as a young organization, felt that it could be additive to the field and to the work.

At the same time, there was some pushback, externally and internally, as GC took on the work. The initiative seemed far-fetched, and even advocates of civics education did not necessarily think that 16-year-olds should be able to vote. Additionally, although GC's leadership felt that the linkage with the organization's mission was clear, some within the organization worried that the initiative was astray from

GC's main mission to empower young people to become active and engaged citizens through experiential action-civics education. Others expressed concern that the initiative would peg an ostensibly nonpartisan organization as aligned with more progressive policy reforms, no matter how hard the campaign worked to demonstrate that it was not aligned with any political party.

Regardless of these concerns, the organization decided to launch and move forward with the initiative. It chose to keep its points of focus primarily on helping to provide research and legal information as a clearinghouse for the movement to lower the voting age, and on empowering local youth activists on the ground to be effective in leading campaigns.

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## Vote16SF, 2016 Campaign

In 2015, against the backdrop of the national campaign launch, the San Francisco Youth Commission, composed of youth leaders from across the city,<sup>iii</sup> decided to mount a campaign to lower the voting age in their city to 16. They conducted intensive research, cultivated supporters on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and took steps to place the initiative on the ballot.

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ii Some states, like Maryland, have home-rule laws that allow counties and municipalities to adopt their own basic rules for self-governing and managing public services contained to their unit of government. Others require state constitutional amendments for changes to local governance processes.

iii The Youth Commission is an official city-ordained commission, created by San Francisco voters in a 1995 amendment to the City Charter, to advise the city's Board of Supervisors and mayor on policies and laws related to young people. It is composed of 17 youth between the ages of 12 and 23.

The commission also got in touch with Vote16USA and Generation Citizen, seeing multiple advantages from collaboration. First, GC had conducted research they could use to build and support their campaign. Second, as an official city commission, they would not be able to allocate funds or advocate for the initiative within the commission's infrastructure once the initiative became an official referendum. Local leaders asked, and Vote16USA agreed, to provide initial organizing and research support, and then to fundraise and organize the infrastructure, including recruiting additional youth organizations to participate, for the initiative in its later, more official, stages.

In the early days of the campaign, the commission was able to earn substantial support from public officials, including the majority of the Board of Supervisors and individuals like Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi. Through meeting with political clubs throughout the city (formal member organizations that play an outsized role in San Francisco politics), engaging in numerous face-to-face conversations, and writing opinion articles, they began to gain momentum for the policy idea that many had previously cast as misplaced idealism.

In late 2015, Vote16USA and the commission worked together to secure a \$100,000 grant from a local foundation to support the campaign. This funding enabled leaders to bring on a part-time staff person dedicated to the effort and to start engaging in more traditional, professional elements of a campaign. While the young people who comprised the Youth Commission would continue to play a leadership role in the campaign, Vote16USA and the youth leaders recognized that experienced political operatives would be necessary for ultimate campaign success.

With funding in hand, the commission and Vote16USA began working with a local political consulting firm who had specific knowledge and expertise in passing ballot referendums throughout

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California. In March 2016, they conducted an official poll of likely voters to assess the viability of the reform and to test messaging. For a boot-strapped campaign, the poll was expensive (approximately \$23,000, or almost a quarter of the initial grant) but deemed necessary for the campaign's long-term success.

The results were exceedingly negative. In a poll of about 400 likely San Francisco voters, approximately 35 percent were in favor of lowering the voting age to 16,

while 55 percent were against, with a strikingly low number of undecided voters. The poll also indicated that the public did not find a message of youth voices and rights compelling. The one message that did receive some support and showed the potential to change opinion was that lowering the voting age could help young people establish voting as a habit, creating lifelong voters.

Given the poll's results, the political consulting firm warned against moving forward with a campaign in 2016, as it was likely to lose by a large margin. They advised that most ballot measure campaigns need to see close to 60 percent support at this point in the year to be confident

in victory because, on most issues, support declines if opposition emerges. The youth organizers considered this advice seriously, but ultimately insisted on moving forward. It was their campaign, they said, and they did not want to turn back after making it so far. They remained optimistic about winning over voters.

Over the next few months, the Board of Supervisors overwhelmingly endorsed the initiative, placing it on the ballot. Vote16USA raised additional funds and hired a full-time organizer who helped the campaign's young leaders present to political clubs across the city, receiving endorsements from groups like the SF Democratic Party, the SF League of Women Voters, and nearly every elected official in the city. With help from the political consulting firm, and some large, last-minute financial contributions, the campaign was able to launch social media ads, canvass around San Francisco, and engage in phone banking. The campaign won the endorsement of several political clubs that mail "slate cards," or voting guides, to voters, meaning that the majority of voters looking at an organization's guide would see a recommendation to vote yes on the issue.

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In the end, the campaign was not successful, but it lost by a much closer margin than expected, falling short by only 3 percentage points: 187,860 people voted against the initiative (52.1 percent) compared to 172,744 for it (47.9 percent). The close race indicated that the proposition had a good chance of passing in the next election cycle, in 2020.

Beyond the electoral result, the campaign was successful in a number of ways. First, a reform that had until recently been dismissed as fringe could now be considered a realistic policy measure that might actually be enacted in the near future. Second, the young people who helped lead the campaign had developed as leaders; the fact that the campaign's final margin was so close was a clear testament to the young people who pressed forward despite the skepticism of more experienced campaign professionals.

## Vote16SF, 2020 Campaign

In 2020, as the November general election approached, both Vote16USA and the Youth Commission in San Francisco decided to move forward again with a campaign to lower the city's voting age to 16.

The original political consultants, who continued to advise the campaign's leaders, thought that the initiative had a decent shot of passing this time, both because it came so close to success in 2016 and because external events since 2016 could help push it over the edge. Specifically, the



youth activism that emerged following the 2018 Parkland shooting spurred further momentum in the campaign to lower the voting age. Across the country, local campaigns to lower the voting age to 16 had emerged, and come close to success, in places like Washington, D.C., and cities throughout Colorado. Additionally, the behavior and impeachment of President Trump, growing political polarization, and controversies around voter access, among other issues, contributed to a growing view that democracy itself was at risk, and the consultants thought young people's anti-Trump fervor might translate to support for youth voting rights.

As the 2020 campaign to lower the voting age to 16 in San Francisco kicked off, the activists planned to follow a similar playbook as they had in 2016: The Youth Commission would drive the work at the outset, eventually transitioning campaign leadership to an independent committee supported by Vote16USA that could raise funds, run advertisements, secure endorsements, and push the initiative to victory, with young voices playing a leading role at every stage.

The campaign was forced to become nimble—and virtual—as COVID-19 hit the country in March 2020. Youth leaders showed flexibility, creativity, and perseverance throughout the spring and summer of 2020, successfully securing endorsements and lobbying to get the measure placed on the ballot again by a unanimous vote of the Board of Supervisors, all via Zoom. Still, virtual campaigning made the persuasion process immeasurably more difficult for the young campaigners, who indicated in interviews that they saw direct conversations with individuals and organizations as a more effective way to convince people to support a measure than meetings over Zoom. Additionally, the pandemic indisputably hurt fundraising prospects. While the campaign entered late summer with a strong steering committee, made up of youth leaders and adult staff representing the supportive organizations SF Rising, Coleman Advocates, Power California, and Vote16USA, the campaign had no dedicated staff and a small and limited budget. At this point, the budget was not

Youth leaders secured endorsements and lobbying to get the measure placed on the ballot by a unanimous vote of the Board of Supervisors, all via Zoom.

large enough to buy any advertisements or to support a phone banking and text banking program to contact voters at scale. There were serious questions about how far the campaign could go without dedicated funding.

Then, in August 2020, less than four months before voters would take to the polls, a San Francisco community-based housing development corporation decided to invest nearly \$150,000 in the initiative, bringing the campaign's total budget to approximately \$175,000,

roughly on par with its 2016 budget. The unforeseen contribution was never formally explained, but likely emerged from a perception that expanding youth voting rights would result in an electorate more favorable to the organization's other policy priorities.<sup>4</sup>

While the initial reaction to the news of the influx of investment was positive, the money came with caveats that required changes to the campaign's structure. First, the funder stipulated that,

to receive the investment, the campaign would have to work with its preferred political consultant, who had a track record of success but lacked the same experience working with young people as the original consultants. Additionally, the funder would formally add other representatives to the campaign steering committee, bringing the total number to 11, only three of whom were young people. The new representatives on the steering committee would include nonprofit and advocacy leaders, former elected officials, and other experienced San Francisco politicians. This would change the degree of youth voice present on the committee.

According to interviews with young people after the campaign, it seemed to them that the funder wanted, above all else, to win and to pass the referendum—as would be expected for any campaign a group supports financially—and was interested in youth voice and leadership only to the extent that it helped push the initiative forward.

The young people worried that the funder would focus on tactics that could best lead to electoral success, without long-term interest in youth activism and in building the capacity of the youth involved in the campaign. Specifically, this resulted in tensions over how much of the budget to allocate to mail pieces versus how much to allocate for staff who would support youth involvement in the campaign. Tension also arose around timelines for decision making. A professional campaign aiming to win requires decisions to be made rapidly several times per day. But to truly involve youth in the decision-making process requires more time, both to accommodate school schedules and to ensure they can fully learn about the issue at hand before sharing input.

The funding would bring significant resources to the table and could enable activities like a robust phone-banking program, mail pieces sent to voters, improved graphic design, and funding for part-time staff. But until that time, the Vote16 campaign in San Francisco had been foundationally and critically led by young people and organizations who supported value-driven work—the same young people who had pushed for the referendum to be on the 2016 ballot when more experienced consultants advised against it. Some thought that changing this formula, and giving into the dichotomy articulated by the politician above, was risky. They were wary of Vote16SF becoming a typical, poll-driven, consultant-led campaign. The reality, however, was that the more the campaign scaled, the more money and time would have to be spent on supporting youth to become authentic leaders in the campaign.

How could the campaign's organizers balance the need to be successful, and to bring in funding for that success, with its desire to ensure that youth voice would remain front and center? Was it possible to do both well?

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## What Would You Do?

The youth organizers faced a decision: keep the campaign grassroots-oriented; begin working with the new group; or, pursue a possible middle course.

The youth organizers in San Francisco faced a decision: They could reject the money from the housing development corporation and keep the campaign grassroots-oriented, risking insufficient resources to ensure a victory at the ballot box. Or they could begin working with the new group, with new resources at its disposal, and concentrate on winning, despite the potentially significant trade-offs to youth voice.

Or was there a possible middle course: taking the money and attempting to steer resources toward training young people to help lead the campaign (at the expense of traditional campaign professional tactics, like ads, paid phone bank, etc.)?

### Consider the following questions as you discuss this case:

- Do you think that the youth organizers should work with the housing development corporation? What are the advantages and downsides to taking on the resources it offered?
- How should the youth organizers balance ensuring that they lead the campaign with ultimately being successful? How should they learn from the campaign in 2016 for the 2020 effort?
- What matters most: winning the campaign, or ensuring that the campaign is run in a way consistent with its original values? In other words, is outcome more important than process, or vice versa?
- What is the balance between catering to what older voters want to hear about lowering the voting age and having young people express their original vision for that change?
- How can you build coalitions that work together collaboratively, but do not all come from the same ideological bubble? How can you build a truly diverse, and high-functioning, steering committee?
- How can you take money and resources from funders without catering to their demands?

## How It Turned Out

Ultimately, the campaign decided to accept the campaign contribution from the housing development corporation and to work with the new political consultants. This also meant forming a steering committee that was adult-heavy, with three young people and seven adults, many of whom had significant professional campaign experience but had spent little time working with young people.

The result was that the young people often felt like they were in a “listening role,” as one of the young steering committee members explained it. As the campaign took on more of a traditional, professional approach, many of the steering committee conversations were focused on technical strategy issues, like where to spend digital ads and which voters to target.

Multiple young people who had been involved in the campaign later noted that, once the additional funding was secured, the adults involved in the effort shifted their rhetoric. For example, one politician involved in the effort told the young activists that the additional funding meant that the campaign would need to choose between being youth-led or winning—creating an unnecessary and harsh dichotomy.

In the campaign’s aftermath, the young people on the steering committee articulated in interviews that “they didn’t know how a campaign was supposed to be run,” and therefore, sat in on the committee meetings as bystanders, putting most of their energy into phone-banking sessions and virtually mobilizing peers. As one young staff member described it: “Youth don’t feel comfortable advocating for themselves.” They ran the risk of becoming tokens at strategy sessions rather than real stakeholders in steering committee meetings, with the political consultants and more experienced members of the committee often making decisions because “this is how we do things.”

The influx of dollars did help to resource the campaign, including through professionally produced videos, significant advertisements, well-run phone banks, and mail pieces sent to thousands of targeted voters. Many young people were involved with publicity and media engagement, messaging, and the phone banks.

Ultimately, however, the campaign again fell short. This time, the result was even closer: 207,054 people voted for the proposition (49.21 percent) but 213,694 voted against it (50.79 percent). The campaign garnered more than 30,000 additional voters than in 2016 but was unable to fully close the gap.

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## Conclusion

Of course we can only surmise, in retrospect, what other actions or choices the young people could have made that might have changed the campaign's outcome. Undoubtedly, however, the 2020 campaign was not as youth-led as the 2016 campaign.

Youth organizers and campaign leaders did identify a key lesson from the 2020 effort. It may not be entirely accurate to suggest that there is a dichotomy between being youth-run, on the one hand, or being successful on the other. But it is clear that it does take significant resources to run a campaign in a manner that allows a large group of affected constituents—especially when they are youth—to truly lead. The young people on the steering committee may have been able to take more of a leadership role, but they also may have needed more initial training to fully understand how campaigns are run.

The question, then, is partially one of timing. The resources from the housing development corporation probably came too late to enable the youth to be involved in real campaign training. Had the funding come a year or two earlier, the campaign might have had time to train the youth campaign workers to play more of a leadership role throughout.

And it is partially a question of resources: Should the campaign have put significant resources towards youth training and support, when those dollars could be used for mail pieces that might help a victory? The option chosen during the 2020 campaign was to spend as much money as possible on traditional methods of campaigning.

Thus, the lesson from the 2020 campaign may be that accepting funding for campaign professionalization should not be seen as a zero-sum trade-off between ensuring youth voice and winning a campaign. There is something potentially paradoxical about a campaign that was once seen as overly idealistic being taken over by traditional political consultants who think they can pull it over the finish line to victory.

Indeed, youth voice and leadership may be vital and necessary to win. But in order for youth voices to matter, they need to matter from a resource perspective, and to be treated as a campaign investment on par with more traditional spending priorities.

The campaign needed the energy and optimism of the young activists, who believed in the issue when professionals were telling them not to bother. But—as we see from 2020—the professionals did bring skill, experience, and strategy to the table and were able to get a bigger win than the youth did on their own. (There is the possibility that the campaign's second iteration was destined to do better anyway—we can't know.) The lesson may be that we should reject the false dichotomy of youth/idealism and money/skills, and instead seek a balance between harnessing youth energy and using professional skill and training to hone that energy into existing frameworks for change.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Eric Plutzer, “Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood,” *American Political Science Review*, 96, no. 1 (March 2002): 41-56. doi:10.1017/S0003055402004227.
- <sup>2</sup> Much of this evidence is cited in Vote16USA’s white paper: <https://vote16usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/white-paper-5.14.20.pdf>.
- <sup>3</sup> Declan Harvey, Greg Dawson, Emma Brant, “Scottish Referendum: How First Vote Went for 16/17 Year-Olds.” *BBC News*, September 19, 2014, [www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-29279384](http://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-29279384).
- <sup>4</sup> Polling and organizing is beginning to show that young people prioritize affordable housing, potentially more than older generations. See Lilia Luciano, “Millennials Tell Boomers ‘Yes In My Backyard,’” *ABC10*, <https://www.abc10.com/article/news/millennials-tell-boomers-yes-in-my-backyard/103-440668204>.