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'Voting Age': by Governor Madeleine M. Kunin

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Lower the voting age to sixteen—that was the proposal of a symposium I participated in at Oxford University. I was surprised that there was no dissent among the representatives of Emerging Market nations which included Brazil, Russia, India and China. This is a large chunk of the world. It contains fifty percent of the world's population and controls forty percent of the world's economy.

Last year the group studied the impact of the aging population, this year, we went to the other end of the spectrum---the surging youth bulge.

The rapid growth of the youth population may have positive results. It may yield a youth dividend---more workers mean more productivity. Or it may be negative, creating high unemployment and political upheaval. We've seen youth violence played out on our television screens, and watched unemployed, uneducated young people topple governments and provide recruits for terrorism.

What is the best way to engage this new wave of young people? the fifty symposium participants asked. I expected we would recommend more education, better health care, and job creation. I did not expect that lowering the voting age to 16 would receive unanimous approval.

The main argument was that young people, between the age of 16 and 18 must be taken seriously if they are to be integrated into society. If they had the power of the vote at 16, they would have more control over their own future. They might not take to the streets if they could enter the voting booth. Only two countries have a 16 year-old voting age today; Brazil and Indonesia. It is hard to know the impact.

The proposal made me wonder what would happen if we lowered the voting age to 16 in the United States?

There are pluses. Preparation for citizenship would have to be well taught in high school. Instead of young people feeling shut out of the government, they would be voters of equal standing with their parents and grandparents.

When the habit of voting is inculcated early it can last a lifetime. Issues like opiate addiction and drunk driving would receive

greater attention. Candidates would speak at high schools and middle schools as often as they do at Senior Citizen Centers.

Of course, there is a counter argument. Young people may not be mature enough, not educated enough, to cast a ballot. At a younger age, they could more easily be swayed in one direction or another

I am not yet ready to sign on to a 16 year old voting age, but I think it's time to debate it. Young people are more mature and knowledgeable than we were at their age. They are also more impatient about demanding change. It's time to discuss whether to invite them into the democratic process early, rather than late.