

Should the voting age

**Jessica Hardy and
Clare Stansfield debate
the question**

YES

The myth that young people are not interested in politics was completely undermined by the Scottish referendum in 2014: 75% of 16–18-year-olds took part, which is a higher turnout than at all UK general elections since 1992. It was also higher than the turnout for 25–34-year-olds. This amazing and unexpected turnout has given new impetus to the argument that the voting age should be lowered to 16.

16-year-olds already have many responsibilities

Young people can and do have plenty of responsibilities at 16 — they can already pay taxes, join the army, get married/have a civil partnership, face criminal charges, have sex and leave school — so there is no logic behind the argument that they are too irresponsible to vote. Political decisions affect them in many different ways, such as education and training policy, so they should be able to be part of the process that forms these decisions. Leaving them out is unfair, undemocratic and makes no logical sense. The Brexit vote in 2016 left many young people furious — how could such an important and significant decision for their futures and for the destiny of the UK be made predominantly by pensioners?

The belief that young people are apathetic is wrong

As the Scottish referendum showed, young people are not apathetic and they do want to be involved. However, they may show their interest in politics in less formal and traditional ways, such as through social media, which has only recently been recognised as significant. A huge amount of energy, passion and interest is being neglected and wasted.

In a recent survey conducted by the NUT, 75% of 18–24-year-olds said they would definitely vote in the next election. Being excluded from voting at 16 may result in apathy and a sense of disenfranchisement, which ironically may later result in a decision not to vote when they are finally able to, at 18. Allowing 16-year-olds to vote will prevent alienation and teach them the role and value of democracy, at a time when around the world, democratic values can be seen as under threat.

Political parties would have to listen to young people more

Brexit, tuition fees, cuts in education and welfare payments — all of these issues have a huge impact on young people and their future. However, young people have no influence on them. Pensioners, who vote in larger numbers than any other age group, are courted and protected from cuts by politicians from all parties, while the young are neglected because they have no voice.

If younger people could vote, parties would have to change and adapt their policies to win the new voters over. This would change the result of elections. In the 2017 election, around 70% of the over seventies voted Conservative and only around 19% of 18–19-year-olds did so. This may explain Theresa May's continued opposition to votes at 16.

Adults are not necessarily more politically aware or educated

The argument that young people do not know about politics, cannot be trusted to vote 'sensibly' or are not interested is flawed. In fact, all state schools provide citizenship and political education, many young people are involved in their local communities and they often have a better understanding of the political process than poorly educated and ill-informed adults. As voters, 16–18-year-olds would feel valued as citizens instead of powerless children, and many would then participate in politics in other ways, such as through pressure groups and parties. This will keep democracy alive and relevant.



Conclusion

The Scottish referendum, where 16–18-year-olds could vote, and the Brexit referendum, where they could not, have both shown that it is time for change. Labour, the Lib Dems, the Greens and the SNP are all in favour. Age is now becoming a huge dividing factor in British politics — more than other divisions in voting behaviour such as class or geography. Therefore it is completely undemocratic to exclude 16–17-year-olds from the franchise any longer. Giving 16-year-olds the vote will encourage the young to believe that voting is not a choice, it is a responsibility and a duty.

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Should the voting age be lowered to 16?



Turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum was 75%

politics, to an extent at least, their political knowledge remains limited. Citizenship education is only compulsory in state schools in England and Northern Ireland and is a minor part of the curriculum, meaning that young people are largely uninformed about the mechanics of politics and government. They lack the awareness and understanding that those eligible to vote should have before participating in the political process.

Decisions made in the ballot box can be of huge significance and it is only right that such decisions are made by those who are educated in and understand the weight of the decisions they are taking.

Low turnout among 18–24-year-olds

Historically there has been low turnout among 18–24-year-olds, which suggests that reducing the voting age would be of minimal value. Even when voter turnout among young people increased, as in 2017 when 58% of 18–24-year-olds voted, up on 43% in 2015, this is not an argument for reducing the voting age, but rather one that suggests the importance of political parties engaging with 'youth' issues, such as tuition fees. This increased turnout also suggests that young people are responsive to political affairs and developments and do not need the vote at 16 in order to be persuaded to vote. As voter turnout of 18–24-year-olds remains lower than overall turnout (for example in 2017 total turnout was 69%), increasing voter turnout among those who do have the vote is more important than reducing the voting age to 16.

No evidence that reducing the voting age leads to increased voter turnout

Parties tend to focus their policies on the 'grey vote' and are disinclined to engage with issues that affect young people. This is evident even with a voting age of 18 where the vast

majority of policies prioritise older voters. As parties have not shifted their focus to young people who do have the vote, there is no evidence that they would engage with issues that are relevant to 16–18-year-olds. This lack of focus could disengage from politics those who were intended to have been encouraged by any reduction in voting age.

Although youth turnout in the Scottish referendum was 75% of 16–18-year-olds this did not translate to increased turnout in the 2017 general election. Overall turnout in Scotland in 2017 was 66.4%.

The rights of 16–18-year-olds remain limited

The rights of young people at 16 are limited. Although young people can marry at 16, they still need their parents' permission to do so. The same rule applies to joining the armed forces. Young people cannot learn to drive until they are 17. In addition, young people now have to continue in some form of education or training until they are 18.

It is only when young people reach 18 that decisions are theirs to make alone. Therefore it does not make any sense to have a reduction in the voting age, when young people have not been given sole responsibility for other decisions that affect them.

Conclusion

Allowing young people to vote in the Scottish referendum when the voting age had not been reduced across the United Kingdom is actually an example of democratic deficit rather than enhancement. Without a coherent debate about politics and citizenship education there should be no debate about the reduction of the voting age. While the age of majority, in terms of sole responsibility for rights, remains at 18 the voting age should too.

NO

Despite the recent spate of elections and referendums which have led to calls to reduce the voting age, there is no real evidence that this would be a positive political development. It is clearly significant that young people are increasingly engaged in politics and political debate, but this does not mean that the voting age should be reduced to 16 — 18 remains the most appropriate age to be able to vote.

Lack of education in politics

Although the Scottish referendum result suggests that young people are engaged in

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