

# Response to the Youth Citizenship Commission's consultation on the voting age: "Old enough to make a mark?"

## Q1 Do you think the voting age should be lowered?

### YES.

As society has developed and changed, the age at which people start to take on the rights and responsibilities of a citizen has changed too. Voting is the defining right of the citizen, and it has to come in at the age when the majority of people have the knowledge and responsibilities of a citizen. 40 years ago the UK responded to changes in society and lowered the voting age to 18, precipitating a response from a number of countries that led to the global standard being set at 18. Now it is time for the UK to respond to the changes of the last four decades, and recognise that the age at which people take on the responsibilities of a citizen, and the age at which they have the knowledge and capability to cast a considered vote, is now lower than 18.

The Electoral Reform Society co-founded the Votes at 16 Coalition in 2003, when we believed the case for lowering the voting age was effectively made. Since then, the case has grown stronger. There is also now an overwhelming support for lowering the voting age – as well as all the leading youth and democracy organisations that have declared their support a range of democratic institutions including the House of Lords, the Scottish Parliament and Executive, the Welsh Assembly and a number of local authorities have all called for the voting age to be lowered. In the last few years Votes at 16 has become a reality in Europe and in British waters, as Austria,

Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man joined the German Länder and Swiss Canton in lowering the voting age. Politicians from all parties and people of all ages and walks of life are calling for a lower voting age. Importantly, young people themselves want change. Probably the most authoritative polling is that conducted in 2006/2007 by Funky Dragon, the Children & Young People's Assembly for Wales, which found that 80% of young people in Wales favoured a voting age of 16.<sup>1</sup> The Electoral Commission's original public consultation on the voting age in 2004 found that 72% of respondents favoured a voting age of 16- the consultation attracted huge participation, including nearly 8,000 young people.<sup>2</sup> The Electoral Reform Society holds talks in schools and youth groups, and has participated in a great many youth events across the UK. In virtually all the polling on the voting age, and in all of our experiences, these findings have been backed up with support for lowering the voting age usually between 60% and 80%.<sup>3</sup> Despite this clear and consistent majority demand for a lower voting age, it must be remembered that voting is a right of the citizen. No other age group or other demographic (e.g. gender, ethnicity, class etc.) is required to demonstrate majority support among their peers in order to have the right to vote. The case for lowering the voting age is made on the basis that 16 and 17 year olds are capable of voting, and it is on this basis that change should be made.

The Electoral Commission's conclusion in 2004 was that the voting age should remain at 18 until citizenship education has become more established, and that their decision should be reviewed in five years. For a few years this response from the Electoral Commission effectively stymied much debate on lowering the

1 Funky Dragon (2007) Our Rights Our Story p75. Their research had a confidence level of 95%, making it one of the most authoritative polls on this issue. [www.funkydragon.org/en/fe/page.asp?n1=1036](http://www.funkydragon.org/en/fe/page.asp?n1=1036)

2. Electoral Commission (2004) Age of Electoral Majority: Report and Recommendations p40. Late in the process the Commission decided to carry out a separate poll on the issue, because of the overwhelming support for law reform and its concern that the responses it received were not 'representative'. The ICM poll of just 1,200 people found most people supported the status quo. This was not surprising given the loaded question: 'If the choice came down to it, do you think the minimum voting age should be lowered to 16 years or kept at its present 18 years'. When, in this separate poll, people were asked the open question 'At what age do

you think people should be able to vote in elections', four of the seven age groups gave a person's 17th year, while three gave a person's 18th year.

3. See for example: CYPY (2002) Young people and politics; British Youth Council (2000) Listening to the Unheard; Save the Children (1999) On the right track; The Children's Society (1999) It's not fair! Young People's reflections on children's rights

4. Peter Viggers MP on behalf of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, in response to an Oral Question from John Robertson MP

voting age. Last year, however, this block was lifted as the Electoral Commission refocused on the twin objectives of regulating party and election finance and delivering well-run elections, and stated that it was for Government and Parliament to decide on the voting age.<sup>4</sup> This - along with the increasing support for lowering the voting age, the development and establishment of citizenship education, the proliferation of youth engagement projects, and the increasing prominence of the voting age as a political issue - has contributed to a significant momentum and an expectation of a meaningful outcome. Past consultations and surveys, however strong the support for change was, have led only to promises of more reviews. There is now not only a real case for lowering the voting age, but a real momentum and a real support - and a demand for action. All of the work that has been done on youth participation, and all of the debate around citizenship, points strongly to lowering the voting age as the next logical step. To fail in this now would be to undermine much of the work that has gone before, and would suggest to all those who have had their say that they will not be listened to and cannot make a difference.

There are many different age limits for different rights and responsibilities in the UK: some are at 18, but many are lower and some are higher. Voting is a citizen's right and a civic action, and as such it is important that the other rights and responsibilities it is measured against are comparable and commensurate. The purchase of alcohol or cigarettes, for example, cannot seriously be held to be a civic act. Being taxed, joining the armed forces, receiving benefits, starting a family and leaving home are within the realm of the citizen. It is against these civic rights and responsibilities that the voting age

must be measured and the most appropriate age chosen. These rights, responsibilities and decisions fall more heavily now on 16, not 18.

The development of compulsory citizenship education and the rapid development of 24 hour, instant access global communication and news media, means that the current younger generation is the most politically aware generation ever. They are not only taught about democracy, politics and world affairs, but they are taught to question and analyse it, and have access to a wealth of information and resources to do so. Furthermore, with the development and implementation of a wide range of youth engagement projects - backed up by a developed professional sector - they are also encouraged and equipped to act on it. With compulsory citizenship education ending at 16, there is a strong implication that it is at 16 that young people are expected to really act on this sense of citizenship.

## Q2 Do you think the voting age should remain at 18?

**NO.**

40 years ago it was realised that society had changed sufficiently to require that the voting age be lowered to 18. Over the last four decades the pace of change has increased dramatically, and areas around citizenship have seen particular debate, change and development. Society now expects people to recognise and act on their roles and

responsibilities as citizens at a younger age, and the awareness and understanding of younger people has increased substantially. The rights and responsibilities that are most comparable to voting and life decisions that are most commensurate with the act of choosing whom to cast your vote for, come in before 18. Denying 16 and 17 year olds the vote at a time when they are making these important decisions sets voting apart from their lives and other civic rights and responsibilities, undermining its importance and relevance.

The principle of universal suffrage is that anyone who is capable of exercising a vote and haven't transgressed the rules of society should be able to do so. 16 and 17 year olds are capable of voting. Any view that they are incapable is based on stereotypical assumptions that do not reflect the reality of the implementation of citizenship education and youth engagement programmes, and the effect of instant global communications and media. The Commission has rightly recognised that voting is only one component of participation and citizenship, and we would agree with many in the youth sector who argue for greater opportunities for young people to influence government and decision making. However, we would also support moves to increase the influence of citizens of all ages. Just as for older people voting and other forms of influence are not mutually exclusive; neither should they be for 16 and 17 year olds. If they are capable of formulating viewpoints and influencing decisions and government, they are capable of casting a vote. Voting is the fundamental right and act of a citizen, and not a substitute but a basis for all other forms of influence and participation. 16 and 17 year olds are capable of voting, and their capability and right to influence decisions has been

established. To continue to deny them the vote would be to refute the principle of universal suffrage.

The introduction of compulsory citizenship education, finishing at 16, sends a strong message to young people and society as a whole that it is at 16, not 18, that we become citizens with the responsibilities related to that. Denying them the defining right of a citizen while simultaneously telling them they are a citizen and are expected to act like one sends a confusing and negative message. It signals to young people and to the rest of society that young people's views are not valid and that they are not 'real citizens'. This contributes to the disconnection that many young people feel from the political process and structures, and undermines other work to increase participation and citizenship.

The decline in turnout among 18-24 year olds is well known, but an understanding of the problem leads not to a rejection or postponement of a lower voting age but an acceptance that lowering the voting age can positively address it: the exclusion of 16 and 17 year-olds from elections is fuelling the disengagement of 18-24 year olds. The longer young people are denied involvement in the formal democratic process, the less chance there is of engaging them ever. It ensures a minimum two year gap (which can stretch up to seven years) between finishing citizenship education and having the right to vote. Lowering the voting age to 16 would permit a first engagement with parliamentary democracy for all young people by the time they are 21 years old.

### Q3 Do you think the voting age should be lowered to 16 in all elections?

#### YES.

For the reasons given above, we strongly believe the voting age should be lowered to 16. We believe this should be for all elections in the UK.

In the UK there are a number of levels of government, and the eligibility for these different elections differs only on issues of nationality – a European Union citizen may vote in European and local elections but not elections to the House of Commons, as for national elections they would be expected to vote in their home country. 16 and 17 year olds in the UK are UK citizens, not visitors with a different home nation. Restricting their right to vote to only some elections in the UK would be illogical and would undermine the integrity and principles of democracy.

16 and 17 year olds are interested in and affected by local, regional, national and international issues. Citizenship education, youth engagement programmes, informal political activism and life experience cover all levels of government. The case for lowering the voting age to 16 applies equally to all elections.

Enfranchising 16 and 17 year olds would draw them into democratic society at the level of that particular election, encouraging them to take a greater interest and involvement, and

encouraging elected representatives at that level to take their views seriously and engage with them. 16 and 17 year olds need to feel more involved in all levels of government, and elected representatives of all levels need to respond to the views of 16 and 17 year olds – therefore they must be enfranchised at all levels of election.

Introducing different age limits for different levels of election would be confusing. It would suggest that 16 and 17 year olds have only a limited capability to cast a vote in certain situations, and that those levels of government are of less importance. Neither of these is true.

### Q4 Do you think the voting age should only be lowered in local elections?

#### NO.

It is paramount that there are the same minimum age levels for all elections in the UK. Such a move would be confusing, and is based on the incorrect view that 16 and 17 year olds are not as capable as older groups when it comes to voting. It would be seen as tokenistic and patronising, sending a message to both young people and local government that they are less important.

It is incorrect to assume that young people are only interested in issues in their immediate community, or that they are only affected by

very local issues. Many of the decisions which have a major affect on young people are made at regional, national and European levels. While young people are interested in local issues, the high levels of debate and activity among young people on issues like climate change, war and peace and a wide range of other issues demonstrates that their interests are at least as focused on regional, national and European levels as the local level.

## Q5 Do you think lowering the voting age might encourage young people to take part in elections?

### YES.

Ignoring the changes in society which have led to the appropriateness and the capability of 16 and 17 year olds to vote is fuelling the disengagement of 18-24 year olds.

Today's 16 and 17 year olds are the first generation to have ever undergone a structured course of citizenship education, and the end of compulsory citizenship education at 16 signals the end of the training period and the beginning of life as a citizen. By denying them the right to put what they have learnt into practice for between two and seven years, the importance and relevance of voting can be much less apparent. The gap between learning and doing has the effect of separating voting from all

the work to promote and develop citizenship among young people, undermining the link between citizenship and voting: a voting age of 16 would reflect and support citizenship education and youth participation programmes, linking the formal democratic process to their understanding of citizenship.

Because so many important responsibilities and decisions come in at 16 – such as leaving home, starting a family, getting a job and paying taxes, joining the armed forces, etc. – many people will have already made decisions that have significantly affected their lives by the age of 18, without ever voting. This separation between voting and real life can make voting seem irrelevant and unnecessary. Evidence shows that the closer an individual's 18th birthday is to an election; the more likely they are to vote. The longer the wait between achieving the right to vote and putting it into practice the less likely a person is to vote. Furthermore, evidence also shows that someone who votes when they are first able to is more likely to vote throughout their lives, whereas those who do not vote when they achieve the voting age are more likely to continue this habit. While this birthday lottery cannot be erased, lowering the voting age to 16 will ensure that every person has the chance to vote in an election by their 21st birthday, meaning they are more likely to see the importance and relevance of voting and more likely to continue to vote throughout their lives.

Lowering the voting age would also have implications for voter registration and awareness. A voting age of 16 would mean all attainers and some voters would be in secondary education, and many voters would be in further education. This would mean that voter registration and election awareness work

5. Electoral Reform Society, January 2008: "Would lowering the voting age significantly reduce turnout?" [www.votesat16.org.uk/shared\\_files/effect%20on%20turnout.pdf](http://www.votesat16.org.uk/shared_files/effect%20on%20turnout.pdf)

could be carried out in a controlled environment, linked to citizenship education. This may offer opportunities to overcome some of the barriers to turnout, as through compulsory and further education it would be easier to reach electors, facilitate their registration and ensure they are aware of elections. It would also allow a secure and regulated forum for new electors to engage with elected representatives and candidates for election, and vice-versa. Lack of awareness of candidates and elected representatives, and what political candidates and parties stand for, are frequently cited as a disincentive to voting among young people and people of all ages. Lowering the voting age to 16 would provide the incentive for elected representatives and candidates to directly engage with new electors, and provide the means to do so in a controlled and structured way. This way, political participation and citizenship education would be mutually supportive.

Finally, it should be noted that turnout is not the litmus test for enfranchisement. If it were, we would be looking to restrict eligibility to vote not just on the grounds of age, but on grounds of ethnicity, class, gender, property, profession and a whole host of criteria that would not be acceptable. However, our research shows that there would be no negative consequences to lowering the voting age. If 16-18 year olds were enfranchised but none of them voted, overall turnout would fall by less than 2%. If they were to turnout at a the same rate as 18-24 year olds, overall turnout would drop by less than one percentage point, which may well disappear in rounding to the nearest whole number and is much smaller than variations between elections that occur for other reasons.<sup>5</sup> As we have argued here and elsewhere, it is likely that turnout among 16-18 year olds would be

greater than that of 18-24 year olds – this has indeed been the case for example in Germany, and in parts of the UK where youth council elections have produced a higher turnout than their 'real' counterparts. At worst, then, lowering the voting age can only have a neutral effect on overall turnout, but is likely to have a positive effect.

## Q6 If the voting age were to be lowered, what measures should the Government take to ensure young people register and exercise their right to vote?

We believe that the Government should continue to invest in and develop citizenship education and youth participation programmes, and should develop registration and participation programmes that take account of schools, colleges and other institutions that engage with 14-19 year olds. Lowering the voting age is not a silver bullet, but an important pre-requisite for further work on engaging young people and raising their participation. Therefore we believe the Government – with assistance from other agencies and the voluntary and NGO sector – should develop an engagement programme to accompany the lowering of the voting age, to maximise awareness, registration and turnout. We also believe that citizenship

education should not shy away from the political and should provide an opportunity for students to engage with political parties, their ideologies and their representatives – though of course in a controlled manner, to prevent any bias. There should also be a renewed focus on and improvement of teaching on the structure of democracy including electoral systems. We believe this will encourage a sense of ownership over the electoral system by the student, leading to an increased sense of empowerment as the voter realises that the system and process of election, as well as their vote, belongs to them.

We believe that the Government should continue to experiment with ways of making voting and registration easier and more appealing to young people, but in doing so must ensure that any alternative methods of voting which are used do not, or do not significantly, make the electoral system more vulnerable to malpractice. The dangers inherent in e-voting (telephone, text message, internet voting and digital television voting) must be recognised and there should be no moves towards its introduction without careful investigation of how secure the systems are technically, their transparency and their ability to increase participation in elections.

16 and 17 year olds are far more likely to live at home, and their registration will be more likely to depend on their parents. Individual registration of electors should be introduced to remove this barrier, and support the work of citizenship education and youth participation programmes to promote the individual citizen's responsibility to participate. Furthermore, the accessibility of new electors and attainers via the education system means that a system of individual registration would be easier to implement and

ensure that a high proportion of electors are registered.

## Q7 What more can be done to encourage new electors to vote?

People will only participate if they feel their views will be heard and they can make a difference, and young people are no exception. Indeed, the development of instant communication and interactive media has increased this demand for rapid, visible results.

Unfortunately, the First Past the Post electoral system used for the House of Commons and local government in England and Wales means that the majority of people will have no effect on the result of an election and that their vote is wasted, either voting for a candidate that has no hope of winning or providing an unnecessary surplus for a secure victor in a safe seat. Other electoral systems used in the UK ensure that people's votes do count or that fewer votes are wasted, but can restrict voters' choices. This again, in an age where people see choice in almost every area of life, makes voting less appealing.

A more responsive electoral system, which ensured that voters can vote for whomever they prefer with a secure knowledge that their vote will count, would reassure new electors that voting does make a difference. We have found that the change to the Single Transferable Vote for local elections in Scotland has given councillors an incentive to be more responsive

6. Electoral Reform Society Scotland, January 2009: "Communities in Control"  
[www.electoral-reform.org.uk](http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk)

to their electorate, and voters who feel a stronger link to their elected representatives.<sup>6</sup>

As well as ensuring that fewer votes are wasted, the Single Transferable Vote would ensure that most people will have helped elect someone and will give them a choice of elected representatives to go to, increasing their sense of ownership and increasing the likelihood that they will engage with their elected representatives.

Disengagement with elections and formal politics is growing among all ages. Voters want to be sure that their vote will count and that they can make a difference. Young people are no exception – and if anything, have had their expectations raised by citizenship education, youth participation programmes, projects that give them greater direct influence over decisions, and societal change that has led to an instant access, instant result culture. A voting system that responds to them and ensures their vote makes a difference is crucial in realising the work done to promote citizenship, and to encourage new electors to use their vote.

Many independent enquiries have called for the implementation or consideration of the Single Transferable Vote for elections in the UK, including the Kerley Commission, the Richard Commission, the Sunderland Commission, the POWER Inquiry and the Councillor's Commission. We believe that the implementation of their recommendations on the Single Transferable Vote, for all public elections, is a vital step to encouraging all electors to use their vote.

## About us:

The Electoral Reform Society is a national membership organisation and one of the UK's leading authorities on democracy and elections. We conduct research into elections and democratic processes, and campaign for a change to the voting system. The Electoral Reform Society is a founding member of the Votes at 16 Coalition.

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