

EU Referendum Bill

*House of Lords – Report Stage Day 1
Wednesday, November 18th 2015*

The Electoral Reform Society strongly supports lowering the voting age. Enfranchising younger people is one of the ways we can try to build a better democracy in the UK; amending Clause 2 of the EU Referendum Bill to give 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in the referendum provides an opportunity to allow young people to engage more fully with politics.

There is a widening gulf between people and politics – we see lowering franchise age as vital to nurturing more active citizens for future health of our democracy. If they vote early, they vote often!

The next generation of voters are the first to have received citizenship education, yet are being denied their full rights as citizens. We need to look at how young people are involved in the whole political process including education, registration and participation. It's time to stop treating young people as political apprentices and give them a political voice.

A constitutional precedent

This bill represents a timely opportunity to revisit the arguments for changing the franchise. **A precedent was set by the Scottish independence referendum** that when a vote is being held on an issue of great constitutional importance, 16- and 17-year-olds should have their say too. Many 16- and 17-year-olds who had a vote in the independence referendum were denied a voice in electing their local MP in May; they and their peers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland must be given one in the EU referendum.

A stronger, more stable Union

Today (June 18th) is Stage 3 of the Scottish Elections (Reduction in Voting Age) Bill in the Scottish Parliament. This reflects fantastically on Scotland's experience of including 16- and 17-year-olds in the Scottish independence referendum. Votes at 16 are not just supported by the SNP, Labour, Liberal Democrats and the Greens – but also by the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Ruth Davidson who says she is a “fully paid-up member of the ‘votes at 16’ club now”.

In line with the Silk Commission's recommendations, the National Assembly for Wales will also have powers over the voting age for Welsh Assembly and local government elections devolved to it later this Parliament.

It would be a shame if something as fundamental as the franchise itself were another wedge driven between the nations of the United Kingdom.

The Electoral Commission report in 2004 which concluded against lowering the voting age also suggested that the issue should be reviewed in future, as circumstances change socially and improvements are made in citizenship education.

16 and 17 year olds in the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey are already able to vote. They can also vote in some elections in Germany and Norway and in all elections in Brazil and Austria.

Why change?

The next generation of voters are the first to have received citizenship education, yet are being denied their full rights as citizens. This is the first generation of voters who have ever needed to study our democracy, our electoral system and the importance of voting. Yet they are denied the right to use this knowledge for at least two, possibly seven years (depending on when during the 5-year term they turn 18).

Lowering the voting age to 16 would allow a seamless transition from learning about voting, elections and democracy to putting such knowledge into practice. We need to stop treating young people as political apprentices and give them a political voice.

Voter registration

Legislation was enacted in Scotland to ensure 16- and 17-year-olds (and 15-year-old attainers) were registered in time for the independence referendum. This process paves the way for better registration of young people in the rest of Britain.

Younger citizens (18-24 year olds) are much less likely to be registered than older voters, particularly students and private renters. Reaching young people when they receive their National Insurance number and whilst they are still living with their parents could massively improve registration rates for this age group.

Currently, in Northern Ireland, young people are registered by their school. Innovations in registering younger voters should also be considered for the rest of the UK.

Concerns about the timing of a referendum on UK membership of the EU in relation to the annual canvass in December 2016 are overstated. Age-specific advertising on social media, intra- and inter-school debates on EU membership, the involvement of youth-focused civil society organisations and traditional media campaigns could all be employed to ensure young people are equipped with the knowledge of their eligibility to vote and how they go about registering. **School-based registration drives would make 16- and 17-year-olds easier to reach than other groups.** If conducted well, such initiatives would get sufficient numbers of newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds on the register in good time for their successful involvement in the referendum.

Public engagement in politics, across all age groups, is reaching chronically low levels. A massive 109,593 16- and 17-year-olds registered for the Scottish independence referendum. This demonstrates that lowering the voting age to 16 will improve registration rates and engage younger voters, developing better political relationships that will be carried through to later life.

Turnout

It is a myth that 16- and 17-year-olds are insufficiently interested in politics to deserve the vote. Evidence from the Scottish independence referendum, substantiated by research from Austria and Norway, shows – aided by the encouragement of families and schools – **16- and 17-year-olds have higher rates of turnout than 18- to 34-year-olds.**

Whilst there is no silver bullet for improving citizen participation in formal politics and no singular cause, the way young people come into contact with politics in their formative years is crucially important for the future of representative democracy.

If young people are registered early and get into the habit of voting, we will see lasting improvements in turnout. **If they vote early, they vote often!**

Other information

The Hansard Society's *Audit of Political Engagement* has found, amongst young citizens, knowledge about Parliament is growing, whilst remaining the same amongst other age groups. It is time we revisit the case for votes at 16 and improving engagement and participation in politics for young people.

Over 40% of 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland had a different voting intention to their parent(s) in the independence referendum and discussing political issues in schools greatly increased their confidence in their political understanding.

Far more 16- and 17-year-olds polled after than before the independence referendum campaign felt closer to a political party – these are the party activists of tomorrow.

Introducing votes for 16- and 17-year-olds for a UK-wide referendum is an important next step, following on from their enfranchisement for the Scottish independence referendum. The Society is confident that stories and recent evidence of young people's engagement will further strengthen the already compelling case for votes at 16.