

Votes at 16

The Electoral Reform Society strongly supports enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds for all elections and referenda. Enfranchising younger people is one of the ways we can try to build a better democracy in the UK.

There is a widening gulf between people and politics – we see lowering the franchise as vital to nurturing more active citizens for the future health of our democracy. Giving 16- and 17-year-olds a vote provides an opportunity to get the next generation more engaged with politics.

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 to have ever needed to study our democracy, our electoral system and the importance of voting. Lowering the voting age to 16 would allow a seamless transition from learning about voting, elections and democracy to putting such knowledge into practice. 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!**

In June 2015 Holyrood voted unanimously to give 16- and 17-year olds the vote in Scottish Parliamentary and local elections. The House of Commons has missed opportunities to do so for young people across the UK but **it is not too late to give young people a voice.** In Wales, similar measures are being considered. These decisions form a **constitutional precedent.**

If you combine all the MPs from parties that pledged Votes at 16 in their manifestos with the Conservative MPs who are personally supportive, a **majority can be secured** in the House of Commons. A majority already exists in the House of Lords.

Better registration and engagement

Younger citizens (18- to 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.

Over 89% of 16- and 17-year-olds registered for the Scottish independence referendum. 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 and political interest

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.**

Research¹ from the Independence referendum shows 16- and 17-year-olds accessed more information from a wider variety of sources than any other age-group during the referendum campaign; discussing political issues in schools greatly increased their confidence in their political

¹ Eichhorn, J. (2014) 'How lowering the voting age to 16 can be an opportunity to improve youth political engagement: Lessons learned from the Scottish Independence Referendum, Dpart: Think Tank for political participation.

understanding and in addition, far more 16- and 17-year-olds polled after than before the Independence referendum campaign felt closer to a political party: these young people are the political activists of the future.

A constitutional precedent

The enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland was such a success, the Scottish Parliament introduced Votes at 16 for Scottish Parliament and Scottish local elections. This legislation was supported by many people who had opposed Votes at 16 before the Independence referendum, including Leader of the Scottish Conservatives Ruth Davidson.

Now 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland can vote, it would be unacceptable if their peers elsewhere in the United Kingdom could not. **Something as basic as the franchise itself should not be another wedge driven between the nations of the Union.**