

Votes at 16

1. The Electoral Reform Society strongly supports enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds for all elections and referendums. We see lowering the franchise as vital to nurturing more active citizens for the future health of our democracy.
2. 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. Research shows that voting habits entrench - those that vote when first able to do so go on to vote regularly, whilst non-voting can also become habitual. If young people are registered early and get into the habit of voting, we will see lasting improvements in turnout.
3. There is a constitutional precedent for lowering the franchise to 16- and 17-year olds. In June 2015, Holyrood voted unanimously to give 16- and 17-year olds the vote in Scottish Parliamentary and local elections. Similar measures are being considered in Wales.

Better registration and engagement

4. Younger citizens (18- to 24-year-olds) are much less likely to be registered than older voters. Owner occupiers are more likely to be registered than renters, and social renters are more likely to be registered than private renters. Young people are more likely than the general population to be resident in either temporary or short-term lets, making up a greater proportion of the private rental market than the general population. Reaching young people when they receive their National Insurance number and whilst they are likely to be still living with their parents could massively improve registration rates for this age group.
5. 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

6. 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, showed – aided by the encouragement of families and schools – 16- and 17-year-olds have higher rates of turnout than 18- to 34-year-olds.
7. Research from the Scottish 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 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 party activists of the future.
8. We do not support the notion that improving turnout among young people who already have the vote is a prerequisite for considering votes for 16- and 17-year-olds. Increased turnout in younger age groups in the 2017 general election is a positive development but extending the franchise and improving turnout are goals that should be pursued together.

A constitutional precedent

9. The enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland was such a success that the Scottish Parliament has 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.
10. Now 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland can vote, it is unacceptable that their peers elsewhere in the United Kingdom cannot. Something as basic as the franchise itself should not be another wedge driven between the nations of the Union.

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