

THE NEW FRONTIER

VOTES AT 16

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INTRODUCTION

The voting age in the UK should be lowered to sixteen. While there are arguments both for and against this move – arguments that are tested in this paper – the weight of evidence is now strongly on the side of reform. Sixteen and seventeen year-olds have the necessary capacity and responsibilities to exercise what John Stuart Mill called the ‘public trust’ of voting. This extension of the franchise would add one million voters to the electoral rolls, the same as the number of new voters created by the Reform Act of 1867. Such a reform would take political courage. But the moral imperative is clear.

Politicians of all stripes lament the lack of political engagement in the electorate in general, and among young people in particular. But the combination of a political system orientated towards older voters, and the fact that 16 and 17 year olds do not have the right to vote, could well be accelerating young people’s disillusionment with formal politics.

This Demos briefing considers the arguments on both sides of the debate on lowering the voting age, provides a survey of international evidence, and presents new evidence on the political attitudes of 16 – 25 year olds in the run up to the general election.

The right to vote has historically been closely linked to the ‘age of majority’, the point at which a young person is believed to make the transition into adulthood. In British society, certain rights and limitations are applied using age as a proxy for maturity and

competency. This requires a consensus to be reached about the competency that different activities demand. One of the most obvious examples of this ‘judgement of competency’ is the age at which the right to vote is awarded, when a citizen is given equal influence over choosing their elected representative.

Roman historians believed that the barbarians (also known as the ‘British’) were old enough to bear arms and be considered an adult at 15.¹ The 1968 Latey Commission Report, which looked at the British age of majority, showed that 15 was also the age of majority across Britain and Northern Europe during the 9th to 11th centuries. The idea that adulthood began at 21 was apparently only introduced with the Norman Conquest, and the enhanced status of mounted knights in battle, who had to be able to carry heavier arms. By the time of the Magna Carta, an individual’s 21st birthday had been established as the point at which they came of age.²

The minimum voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 in 1969, although many people opposed lowering the age of majority. History demonstrates that the age of political maturity is by no means set in stone, and is subject to revision and challenge. Indeed, the Government has recently reduced the minimum age for sitting as a Member of Parliament from 21 to 18 in 2006. Given low levels of youth engagement, changing population demographics, and the growing political will, 2010 is the right time to re-visit the consensus on the voting age. Votes at 16 is the next frontier of electoral reform.

THE UK DEBATE

In recent years the downward trend in the under 25 vote has sparked concerns about the level of political engagement of this group, and how the institutions and practice of politics in the UK might be contributing to this. While turnout has declined across all age groups, the trend is most prevalent for young people.

Reported Turnout at British General Elections (%) 1964-2001 by Age Group³

Year	<25	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	>64	All age groups
1964	88.6	81	91.7	90.5	89.9	88.2	88.6
1966	67.1	78.5	88.4	88	86	83.8	83.4
1970	73.6	75.4	82.5	84.9	84	87.5	81
1974	78.2	86	87.7	91.4	91.6	88.3	87.8
1979	70.1	81.2	85.5	91	91.3	87.1	84.8
1983	73.1	77.5	87.4	88.8	88.6	83.8	83.3
1987	76.2	84.7	85.6	91.6	90.2	86.9	86.1
1992	75.4	86.6	87.7	91.6	87.4	89.4	87
1997	59.7	68.6	77.5	84.3	88.2	85.4	78.7
2001	49.4	55.1	68.2	77.4	78.3	85.8	72.6
2005	44.3	55.2	71.3	75.9	84.1	86.1	74.1

This decline boosted support for lowering the voting age in the youth sector. The ‘Votes at 16’ coalition, which includes The Electoral Reform Society and British Youth Council, has been campaigning on the issue since 2003, and a debate was held on the issue in the UK parliament as early as 1999⁴. In independently administered jurisdictions of the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey, 16 year-olds can vote at all levels of government.⁵ Motions have been passed in favour of lowering the voting age by local councils such as Cambridge, Hastings, Eastbourne, Islington, Kent and Leeds.⁶

In the past decade, several independent bodies have been established to make recommendations on democratic participation in the UK. Many of these have considered the voting age. However, the results have been inconclusive. The government-led project “YVote/YNot?” worked with young people from across England to discuss what steps should be taken to re-engage young people in the political process, and recommended that lowering of the voting age should be seriously considered.⁷ Following this, the Electoral Commission undertook a consultation and published a report in 2004⁸ that stated “there appears to be insufficient current justification for a change to the voting age at the present time”. But the Commission was clear that “circumstances may change the context significantly over the next few years” and they recommended a further formal review on the issue within five to seven years - a review that has yet to take place.⁹

More recently, the Government initiated the Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC), which made recommendations about how to engage more young people in politics. It argued that strongly divided opinion and gaps in evidence (in particular the determination of the age of electoral majority) meant that further independent enquiries should not be undertaken on the voting age, and instead it should be decided through political process. However, the YCC did recommend a Government review into the collection of age thresholds for different responsibilities “for coherence, justification, relevance and public acceptability”, indicating that age restrictions should be revisited.¹⁰

This leaves power to change the status quo firmly in the hands of politicians – meaning that the most compelling political arguments in favour or against are likely to shift the balance, rather than the verdict of an independent commission.

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF REFORM

16 and 17 year olds are sufficiently mature and competent

As we have already seen, age is used as a proxy for maturity and competency for many age-differentiated rights and limitations. But how should this be determined and measured, and can it change over time? The 2004 Electoral Commission report defined maturity, in the context of the vote as “sufficient social awareness and responsibility”¹¹, and they tested this through the proxy of public opinion on the age of suffrage. But it should be noted that public opinion can follow legislative change, as well as driving it. When the franchise age was lowered from 21 to 18 in the 1960s, those in opposition cited the National Opinion Poll, in which some two-thirds maintained the belief that 21 remained the right age for adulthood to begin, not 18.¹² Public acceptability cannot be the only test for electoral reform.

It is important to look at a broad range of indicators of maturity and competency. Two relevant issues are the willingness of 16 and 17 year olds to vote, signifying an interest and engagement with wider society, and the age restrictions associated with other comparable age-differentiated rights.

16 and 17 year olds want to vote

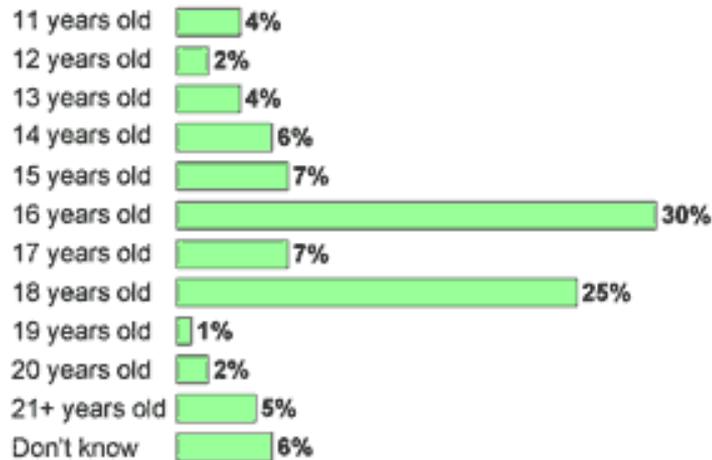
Willingness to vote is not necessarily an argument for lowering the voting age in itself, but it does point towards a certain level of interest and engagement from young people, which can be seen as an indicator of political and social awareness.

The Nestle Family Monitor report into “Young People’s Attitudes Towards Politics” showed that young people, aged between 11 and 18, wanted the voting age to be lowered to 16.¹³ Other research

supports this interest and willingness to vote amongst the 16 and 17 year old cohort.¹⁴

Voting Age

Q People are able to vote in a General Election in Britain at 18 years of age. At what age do you think people should be able to vote in a General Election?



Base: All young people aged 11-18 (914), March-May 2003

Source: Nestlé Family Monitor/MORI

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But ICM polling commissioned by the Electoral Commission in 2004 found that older age groups want the voting age to remain 18, and even within younger age groups, opinion on the age at which people should have the vote was mixed.¹⁶ The limited support for the move amongst the general public is often used as an argument against lowering the voting age to 16, and is outlined in more detail later in this paper.

16 and 17 year olds enjoy many comparable rights and responsibilities

The age limitations established for other activities are an important guide to level of maturity credited to different age groups. Change in one area can have a knock-on effect in another legal or policy area. The Latey Commission review of the age of majority¹⁷ was specifically not intended to impact on discussion of voting age, and yet its findings impacted the Government policy on voting age - lowered to 18 from 21 after the Commission's report was released.

Being able to join the armed forces at 16 is just one example of an age-differentiated right that lends support to an argument for lowering the voting age to 16. The ‘Votes at 16’ coalition states that some 4560 16 and 17 year olds were serving in the armed forces as of April 2007. Of the first 100 British soldiers to be killed in the ongoing war in Iraq, at least six were too young to have ever cast a vote in a general election.¹⁸

The fact that 16 and 17 year olds are liable to pay income tax is also regularly used as an argument in favour of reducing the voting age, appealing to the “no taxation without representation” principle in most democracies. First coined by Reverend Johnathan Mayhew in 1750, this principle emphasises the rights of those who are taxed by government to have a say in the democratic election of their representatives.

Between November 2009 and January 2010, 380,000 16-17 year olds were in some sort of employment.¹⁹ The Department for Work and Pensions estimates that in the past decade the total tax liability for 16 and 17 year olds was over £550 million pounds (based on 563,000 16-17 year olds in some form of work). During 2005-06 alone this was approximately £47 million pounds.²⁰

In addition, The Companies Act (2006) introduced a new minimum age of 16 for company directors, allowing 16 and 17 year olds to take on the full legal responsibility of company directorship.²¹ For limited liability companies, 16 and 17 year old directors are as liable as adults if their company goes bankrupt.²²

Growing political awareness

While the last comprehensive assessment of the age of electoral majority in 2004²³ ultimately concluded that 16 and 17 year olds should not be given the vote, it argued that this should be revisited in the years to come. In particular it suggested that citizenship education, implemented only two years before, might improve the political knowledge of young people in the future and strengthen the case for reform.

The introduction of citizenship into British schools in 2002 followed the recommendations of the National Advisory Group on

Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools²⁴. The subject is now taught in England at Key Stages 3 and 4 (ages 11 to 16) as a statutory requirement^{25 26}. Wales and Scotland have also established statutory citizenship teaching in schools for children up to the age of 16.

So has this reform had the hoped-for impact on British young people? Ofsted's "Citizenship Established" report, published in 2010²⁷, did find evidence of a positive impact from citizenship education on political and social activities in the classroom and wider community. The report found that "in most of the schools visited, there was evidence of at least some students being involved in learning through participation and responsible action in a wide range of relevant contexts"²⁸. Following the report, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector Christine Gilbert said "Citizenship is becoming a well established part of the school curriculum and this report highlights the ways in which schools are successfully promoting social responsibility, community involvement and political understanding."²⁹

As citizenship education seems to have resulted in increased knowledge and practical experience in citizenship is it possible that the criteria that the Electoral Commission specified in 2004 may have been met? It should be noted that Ofsted's report³⁰ does not offer evidence to confirm that citizenship education universally educates and engages young people in *external* citizenship related activities. Indeed, the report states that few schools monitored the opportunities to undertake active citizenship (for example in community activity) and refers to instances limited participation opportunity, often reserved for more able pupils.³¹

Although the 2010 report is far more comprehensive than the reports available in 2004³², more time will be needed to test the argument that citizenship education has increased levels of political and social awareness for British young people.

Getting into the voting habit early

There is often a large gap between teaching young people about citizenship (which finishes at 16), and the act of voting which, due

to electoral cycles, may not take place till young people are 23. Harriet Harman has argued:

“My concern is that there’s a generation of young people who are never going to get into the voting habit... we’ve got citizenship classes going on in schools... if people come straight out of the citizenship class into the polling station then there’s continuity and that might be an opportunity for them to get the habit of voting.”³³

Beth Breeze, former Deputy Director of the Social Market Foundation, found that the closer an individual’s 18th birthday falls to an election, the more likely they are to vote.³⁴ She demonstrated that people who turn 18 in the year leading up to a general election are significantly more likely to vote than those who turned 18 in the year after the previous general election and have to wait 5 years. This evidence, which led one writer to conclude “those who vote young vote often”³⁵, indicates that denying 16 and 17 year olds the vote could see them establishing a habit of not voting, which might well persist into adulthood.

Boosting young people’s political power

Levels of formal political engagement among young people could be enhanced³⁶ as a result of inclusion in the formal political process. “Power to the People: an independent inquiry into Britain’s democracy” published by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust in 2006³⁷ recommends lowering the voting age to 16 on the grounds that “when young people are faced with a genuine opportunity to involve themselves in a meaningful process that offers them a real chance of influence, they do so with enthusiasm and with responsibility”.³⁸ They stress that few people are interested in areas from which they have been specifically excluded, and the importance of involving young people in politics from a young age, in order to “sow the seeds of democracy and empowerment that will create a basis for more engagement later in life”.

However, there is a difference of opinion over the effect that the vote would have in increasing engagement and giving young people more political power. The Youth Citizenship Commission reported that the vote was not key to the political engagement of 16 and 17 year olds³⁹, an argument which is further discussed below.

Promoting intergenerational justice

The number of people of state pensionable age is projected to increase to almost 15 million by 2031 and the numbers in the oldest age bands will increase the fastest, with those aged 75 and over rising by 76 per cent over the next twenty-five years – from 4.7 million in 2006 to 8.2 million by 2031.⁴⁰ EUROSTAT statistics indicate that we will see a 44.5 percentage increase in the 65-79 year olds and a 24.3 percent decline in 15 to 24 year olds in Europe by year 2050⁴¹. This will have an obvious impact on the political sphere, and is already impacting on the age profile of the electorate:

Per cent casting a ballot by age in UK General Elections					
	<30	30-44	45-64	65+	Oldest/Youngest ratio
General Election 1974 ⁴²	82	88	92	89	1.1 : 1
General Election 2001	39	57	69	71	1.8 : 1

Source: Wattenberg, M. P. (2008) *Is voting for young people?* New York: Pearson Education pp. 104 – 107.

Children’s Rights Alliance for England Response to Youth Citizenship Commission “Old enough to make a mark? Should the voting age be lowered to 16? Final Responses”, June 2009.⁴²

Demos’ Open Left publication “The Politics of Perpetual Renewal” suggested that the demographic shift towards an older populace is likely to impact voting outcomes this year.⁴³ The campaign group ‘Votes at 16’ argues that “Lowering the voting age to 16 would help to redress this imbalance”⁴⁴, as the shift in demographics might could lead to policymaking which favours this older, larger cohort of voters.

In itself, demographic change is no argument to change the voting age; voting rights are not allocated according to an even spread of age, gender or any other factor. However, the demographic imbalance and the far-reaching implications of intergenerational political issues such as climate change and national debt, which will disproportionately impact on the next generation, provides a compelling argument in favour of tipping the political scales in their favour.

Voting as a human right

The right to vote is enshrined in several key international rights documents, but none specify a specific age minimum or limitation,

instead leaving individual nation states to decide age limitations⁴⁵. For example, the European Convention of Human rights prohibits discrimination and protects the right to free elections, under conditions which will “ensure the free expression of the opinion of the people in the choice of the legislature”⁴⁶. Notably, the application of this Article has been successfully challenged over the voting rights of British prisoners⁴⁷, whose right to vote was confirmed because of their “significant” number. At the time of the legal challenge there were 48,000 prisoners in the UK; as of May 2008 there were 900,000 disenfranchised 16 and 17 year olds, clearly a group also significant in number.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child uniquely prescribes that “the views of the child be “given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child”⁴⁸. Whether denying 16 and 17 year olds the vote can be considered a violation of their human rights is debatable but there are clear parallels with the case of British prisoners. Although the UK government has yet to implement this ruling, an important legal precedent may well have been set for British teenagers.

An international trend towards lowering the voting age

The following countries have lowered their age of electoral majority to 16;

Austria: 1 July 2007⁴⁹

Germany: Seven out of sixteen of the constituent states have lowered the voting age to 16 years.⁵⁰

Sweden: 16-year olds can vote for parochial church elections, but the voting age for general elections is 18 years.⁵¹

Norway: 16 year olds were allowed to vote in local elections as an experiment.⁵²

Switzerland: The Canton Glarus has lowered the voting age to 16 for local and regional elections.⁵³

Ecuador: 28 September 2008

Brazil: 5 October 1988⁵⁴

Nicaragua: November 1984⁵⁵

In Germany, the voting age was lowered to 16⁵⁶ in several regions, on the grounds that “The reduction of the voting age ... should occur because empirical investigations have shown that young people between the ages of 16 and 18 are already mature enough politically, but also have a strong interest in politics.”⁵⁷

In May 2009 a Motion calling for an investigation into the benefits and disadvantages of reducing the voting age to 16 in all member countries of the Council of Europe was presented.⁵⁸ It referred to the changes in Germany and Switzerland allowing 16 and 17 year olds to vote at local elections in some of the constituent states, and the “very promising” evidence from elections in these countries. It also suggested that the UK, Finland, Norway and the Czech Republic are also considering lowering their voting ages to 16.⁵⁹

This international movement shows that the wide support for the move outside of this country, but there is also mounting pressure from regions *within* the United Kingdom.

Devolution has increased pressure for change

Scotland and Wales have both shown significant parliamentary support for lowering the voting age to 16. It is Scottish Government policy that all elections over which the government has power should have a voting age of 16⁶⁰. However, the effect of this is limited, since the 1998 Scotland Act reserves power over the franchise for the UK government. Nevertheless, in 2008 the Health Board (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill was introduced to the Scottish Parliament, which included a provision allowing 16 and 17 year olds to vote for Elected Health Boards – an echo of the 19th century reforms allowing women to vote for School Boards. The Scottish reform will be implemented for the first time in 2010.

In Wales, two Welsh Assembly Members, Jenny Randerson and Eleanor Burnham, proposed a motion to lower the voting age in 2007, 90 years exactly after Parliament gave women the right to vote. The motion was passed with a majority of 44 to 4 votes, but

the devolved Assembly does not have the power to implement this change, so no definitive action was possible.

To ignore the strong political will for change to the voting age in Wales and Scotland could lead to tension between the devolved assemblies and Westminster.

Combating age discrimination

Ideas about the capabilities of groups of people – both old and young – evolve. Ageism is now a legally proscribed behaviour in the workplace. Karon Monaghan QC has argued:⁶¹

Just as it was increasingly recognised that negative distinctions based on the grounds connected with sexual orientation were morally repugnant, so, with increasing consensus internationally on the unacceptability of distinctions based on...age, it is likely that distinctions based on age...will soon be regarded as ‘suspect’.

The debate about giving voting rights to younger age groups has some parallels with historical gender discrimination on this issue. In particular, arguments against extending suffrage to women frequently stressed the innocence and naivety of women⁶². While clearly not all age groups are not able to vote, the history of women’s suffrage does illustrate the way social norms about who is capable of voting can shift over time. However, there is one important limitation to this parallel as Mark Harper MP observes;

“Women, when they were not able to vote, were never going to become men. All being well, 16-year-olds will become 18-year-olds, and will therefore get the vote. Whatever else 16-year-olds are, they are not the heirs to the suffragettes.”⁶³

ARGUMENTS AGAINST REFORM

16 and 17 year olds are not mature enough

As discussed above, our judgement of maturity and the capacity levels of teenagers is one the ways of determining the right voting

age. Next, we consider this idea in light of public opinion on the voting age and evidence on brain development.

Surveys indicate that (beyond young age groups) the general public is not in favour of lowering the voting age.

The campaign to lower the voting age to 16 does not seem to be supported by public opinion; the mixed nature of the data on public attitudes means there is no conclusive evidence base showing that the public believe 16 and 17 year olds are mature enough to vote. This was the conclusion reached by the Youth Citizenship Commission in 2009.⁶⁴

The Electoral Commission also argued that the vote should not be given to 16 and 17 year olds, because ICM polling⁶⁵ they commissioned showed that the general public believed the right to vote should only be given to those aged 18 and older⁶⁶, and they regarded this as a proxy for assessment of the maturity levels of different ages. The following two tables show the level of support for the status quo across different age groups, although should be noted that this data is at least 6 years old;

Table 5: 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?								
Age of respondent	15-19	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	All
Lower to 16	35%	33%	38%	27%	19%	11%	5%	22%
Keep at 18	54%	67%	62%	73%	80%	88%	94%	78%

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Age of Electoral Majority - November 2003



AGE	% in favour of keeping voting age at 18 years	% in favour of lowering to 16 years	% Don't Know
15 years	52%	48%	-%
16 years	48%	35%	17%
17 years	47%	27%	26%
18 years	69%	29%	2%
19 years	70%	30%	-%
15-16 years	50%	42%	8%
15-17 years	49%	37%	14%
15-19 years	54%	35%	11%
18+	78%	22%	*%

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ICM found the reasons cited by those who want the status quo to remain include a lack of sufficient life experience (33%), followed by immaturity at 16 (30%).⁶⁹

Furthermore, Chan and Clayton analysed data from the British Household Panel Survey between 1991 and 2001, and find that 16 and 17 year olds are less interested and knowledgeable about politics, and less consistent in their views (at any one point) and stable (over time).⁷⁰ They argue that 16 and 17 year olds are relatively less politically mature, and this suggests they should not be given the vote. However they accept that this relatively lower maturity level may still be “enough” to give them vote.⁷¹

Scientific analysis of maturity

Giedd et al.⁷² suggest that the prefrontal cortex of the brain, crucial for weighing moral dilemmas and controlling our impulses, continues to undergo major change during teenage years and into adulthood.⁷³

It has been argued that teenagers frequently make poor decisions that seem obvious to adults⁷⁴, and observed that their brains appear profoundly different to adult brains on an MRI scan⁷⁵. Geidd, of the US National Institutes of Health states "[It's] not that the teens are stupid or incapable... It's sort of unfair to expect them to have adult levels of organisational skills or decision-making before their brain

is finished being built."⁷⁶ This swell of scientific data leads Richard Dawkins and R Elisabeth Cornwell to conclude "The brain just isn't ready to vote at 16".⁷⁷

However, there is no way to assess what level of brain development correlates with the level of maturity we deem sufficient to vote, limiting the usefulness of this type of evidence. Furthermore, to judge a group's ability to vote on the basis of neurological development would be akin to a type of competency or literacy test for the vote; no other group of people over the age of 18 is restricted from voting on the basis of brain development or indeed loss of brain function, with the exception of those defined in arcane language as 'lunatics' (those compulsorily held in psychiatric hospital, for example, are not eligible to vote).

The comparison between voting rights and other rights is flawed

The 2004 Electoral Commission report stated correctly that "the existence of rights and responsibilities at one particular age does not necessarily demonstrate that other rights and responsibilities should also accrue at that age."⁷⁸ It is difficult to argue that the rights of 16 year olds in other spheres are all equally applicable to the political arena. Indeed, the rights of 16 year olds to marry and join the armed forces still require parental consent. And, though the law allows 17 year olds to drive, insurance companies charge significantly more expensive rates to these young drivers.⁷⁹

On 23 January 2002, Tony Blair, then Prime Minister, made it clear that he did not favour a reduction in the voting age on the basis of comparison across age differentiated rights:⁸⁰

Matthew Green (Ludlow): The Prime Minister will know that at 16 young people are considered old enough to marry, to have children, to pay taxes and to join the armed forces, yet they are not allowed to vote until they are 18. Does he consider that those things are a lesser responsibility than voting? Will he meet me and a group of young people from a range of youth organisations to discuss reducing the voting age to 16?

The Prime Minister: I am not sure that we would always want 16-year-olds to do all the things they can do. I am afraid that I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman on the voting age. I think that it should remain as it is.

Acquiring the habit of *not* voting

If voting is a habit (as research by Franklin, 2004, Green and Schachar in 200 and Plutzer, 2002. suggests⁸¹) that is established in the first few elections one votes in, then encouraging 16 and 17 year olds who are especially relatively uninterested in politics⁸² could lead to the habit of not voting being ingrained.⁸³ Work by Chan and Clayton suggests that the teenage years are a time of “political awakening”⁸⁴ and awarding the vote to age groups who do not appear to have gone through this could cement habits that continue into adulthood.

Lowering the voting age will not solve the problem of youth disengagement

The “Youth Citizenship Commission” which published a report looking at young people’s engagement in politics in June 2009⁸⁵ stressed that giving the vote to 16 and 17 year olds was not “the key component of any strategy for better engagement of young people”. However it came to mixed conclusions on the voting issue, stating it was a “valid issue for consideration” but one which had no conclusive evidence on which to base a conclusion.⁸⁶

Instead, the Commission stressed the importance of citizenship education focusing on political literacy, to improve knowledge and improve the odds of future engagement for young people. It also criticised the fact that initiatives for young people to participate in local government and their communities were not well-publicised and coordinated, and recommended the introduction of policy scrutiny panels made up of young people, as well as assessment of policy in terms of its impact on the young.⁸⁷

International voting ages are not comparable

The international norm for the age of suffrage is still 18, putting the onus on those seeking to change the status quo to make a case for it⁸⁸. There are some variations to this age limit, and there does seem to be a discernable international move towards lowering it.

However, the Electoral Commission's report of 2004 rightly states that "the situation in other countries should only ever set the backdrop to the debate and should not be the conclusive argument for either change or the status quo."⁸⁹

The Electoral Commission report does not consider all international deviations from 18 in depth, but notes that the voting age of 20 in Japan is harmonised with the age at which the transition into adulthood is culturally recognised in the country.⁹⁰ Cultural norms about the age of majority are specific to each country. While the UK can learn from the effects of international experiments, they do not provide sufficient grounds for British reform alone.

The Government has rejected the Human Rights argument

In the Youth Citizenship Commission report on voting age⁹¹, the Government considered all international agreements where voting rights are enshrined and argued in each instance that no violation of rights is occurring by denying the vote to the under 18 population. For example, with regards to the right to vote enshrined in ECHR it stated "To be in breach of this treaty, the [voting] age that has been set would have to be unjustified (for example, if the voting age was higher than 18, that would be out of line with the general age that you are now considered to be an adult, 18 years). It is justifiable to have the voting age set at either 16 or 18, but the Government is not in breach of this convention by choosing the age of 18."⁹²

The Government has also stated that "Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child does not directly relate to the right to vote. However, the Government does not agree that having a restriction on the voting age is unreasonable. The Government considers it is not practical for children of all ages to vote and therefore the most appropriate age should be selected. The most appropriate age chosen by the Government is 18 years."⁹³

INTERNATIONAL EVIDENCE ON LOWERING THE VOTING AGE

A good deal of the debate in the UK over lowering the voting age focuses on the effect it might have on issues such as turnout, the outcome of elections and the engagement of young people themselves. In itself, this question of course far from sufficient: it would be hard to argue that certain ethnic minorities should be denied the vote simply because turn-out rates in that group were deemed to be unacceptably low. But it is a question worth addressing - and looking at the effect of extending the vote to 16 and 17 year olds in other countries could provide an indication of the possible effect in the UK.

Austria

Austria lowered its voting age in 2007. Though turnout figures separated by age are not collected in Austria, research by SORA and ISA⁹⁴ gives an insight into the effects of this change. They found that more than three quarters of the first-time voters in the 2008 general election followed political issues more than once a week, and more than two thirds of the 16 to 18 year old electorate stated they were interested in the election campaigning. This is despite only 20% of SORA's survey respondents saying they trusted major political actors, and criticisms from the group that politicians were not reflecting youth-specific issues in their election campaigns. The turnout in the newly-enfranchised group was estimated to be the same as the general electorate in 2008, around 73%, and the research team found no meaningful bias on the basis of age group. Compared to older voters, 16 and 17 year olds were more likely to vote for the Greens and freedom party (FPÖ).

Germany

The first election held with a voting age of 16 in the region of Lower Saxony was in September 1996, a year after the legislative change. City turnouts were impressive, in the city of Hanover for example the municipal election saw a turnout of 56.5% among 16 and 17 year olds compared with 49% among 18 to 24 year olds, and an overall turnout of 57%.⁹⁵ The left-leaning SPD received the smallest share of their vote in Lower Saxony (21.1%) compared to the Greens (27.4%) and centre-right CDU (37.3%).

This can be compared to the results of the Saxony-Anhalt municipal elections in 1999, where, across all the main cities, the turnout rate of the 16 to 18 year old group was around 33%, higher than the 18 to 21 year old age group (around 32%) and the 21 to 25 group (24%). However it was lower than overall turnout of 38%.⁹⁶ In terms of broader impact, the Electoral Commission were advised that, despite no significant change in strategic direction of policy, there was “a feeling that some groups of 16 and 17 year olds were getting more engaged in local politics”.⁹⁷

By 2004, eight years after the first age changes, only one of the six Bundesländer that had lowered their age minimum (Hesse) returned to an age threshold of 18.⁹⁸

Isle of Man

The Isle of Man lowered the voting age from 18 to 16 years in 2006. In the run up to the following election, 689 young people aged 16 and 17 years registered to vote; around a third of the eligible group, compared an overall registration rate of 80%. In the 2006 election 57.6 per cent of the 689 newly registered 16 and 17 year olds voted, compared with an overall turnout of 64.8 per cent of registered electors⁹⁹.

WHAT ARE THE POLITICAL VIEWS OF BRITISH 16 AND 17 YEAR OLDS IN 2010?

New analysis undertaken by Ipsos/MORI for Demos casts fresh light on the political attitudes of 16 and 17 year-olds in the UK today.

The statistics should be read alongside the Ipsos MORI data tables which can be downloaded from the Demos website to accompany this paper. Those tables are based on interviews carried out by telephone between January 2009 and February 2010 for the Ipsos MORI monthly Political Monitor. Data are aggregated across this 14-month period and then weighted to match the profile of the population. All interviews were with people aged 16-17 at the time of interview. The total sample size is 594. Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of “don’t know” categories, or multiple answers. Voting intentions should be regarded as useful indicators of the political mood rather than predictions of a future electoral result.

Compared to those aged over 18, this group of non-voters tend to be more positive about the performance of political leaders and more inclined to support Labour and, to a lesser extent, the Liberal Democrats than older citizens. They hold similar opinions about the prospect of Britain’s economic recovery to other age groups. For 16 and 17 year olds, questions about voting were prefaced with the statement ‘If you were old enough to vote...’.

When asked, ‘how would you vote if there was a general election tomorrow?’, 41 per cent of 16/17 year olds said they would vote Labour, 30 per cent Conservative and 21 per cent Liberal Democrat. This contrasts to the 18+ population, where 36 per cent plumped for the Conservatives and 31 and 19 per cent chose Labour and the Lib Democrats, respectively.

When asked ‘How likely will you be to vote in an immediate General Election on a scale of 1-10 (10 certain, 1 certain not to)?’, 19 per cent

of 16/17 year olds answered that they were certain to vote, the mean score being 6.56. These statistics compare to 52 per cent of adults (18+) who would be absolutely certain to vote. Slightly fewer 16-17 year olds answered that they certainly would *not* vote than those over the age of 18: seven per cent, compared to nine per cent. The certainty of voting also increased with age, rising from a mean of 6.82 18-34 years, to 7.70 for 35-54 yrs, 8.51 for 55+ and 8.61 for 75+.

16 – 17 year old boys were both more slightly likely to be certain to vote (21 per cent) and certain not to vote (9 per cent) than girls (16 per cent and 6 per cent respectively).

Satisfaction with the government is higher amongst 16 and 17 year olds. When asked, ‘Are you satisfied with the way the government is running the country?’, equal proportions are satisfied as dissatisfied (46 per cent). This compares to 23 per cent of adults (18+) who said they were satisfied and 70 per cent dissatisfied. Dissatisfaction with the government increased with age, peaking with 55-64 year olds, where 76 per cent said they were dissatisfied.

When asked ‘Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way Gordon Brown is doing his job?’ a slightly higher proportion of 16-17yr olds were dissatisfied than satisfied (48 per cent to 45 per cent). Again, adults are more dissatisfied than 16-17 year olds (31 per cent satisfied and 62 per cent dissatisfied).

When asked ‘Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way David Cameron is doing his job as leader of the conservative party?’ 58 per cent of 16-17 year olds were satisfied, 23 per cent dissatisfied whilst 20 per cent said they did not know. Again, the adults had a higher proportion of dissatisfaction, 37 per cent, with 46 per cent satisfied, but also a fairly high proportion who didn’t know, 17 per cent.

When asked ‘do you think the general economic condition of the country will improve, stay the same or get worse of the next twelve months, opinions across the age ranges was remarkably consistent with 36 per cent of 16-17 year olds believing it will improve and 29 and 35 per cent believing that it will stay the same or get worse

respectively. These trends are almost identical for adults over the age of 18.

CONCLUSION

Despite the detailed deliberations of numerous independent commissions, any decision to change the voting age will inevitably be a political one, based on the implications for British democracy. In this respect, the decision to enfranchise more people should be seen as a progressive statement crediting 16 and 17 year olds with the political awareness and maturity to vote.

Power in a democracy should be in the hands of the many, not the few. Eight decades ago, women were entrusted with the vote for British parliamentary elections, on a par with men. Four decades ago, the right of those aged 18 and over to choose their government was recognised. Today it is time to enfranchise a group that includes citizens who pay income tax, who shoulder the responsibilities of company directors, who are husbands and wives, and who fight - and die - for their country.

There are of course serious arguments against lowering the voting age to 16, as indeed there have been to many extensions of the franchise. In particular we should be wary of overstating the positive impact on youth disengagement such a move might have. But these arguments are no longer strong enough to counteract the claim of 16 and 17-year olds to play their part in choosing our governors. Changing demographics and pressing political questions of inter-generational justice have rightly pushed this issue up the agenda. The politics of such a reform will be difficult: most adults are currently opposed to an extension of the franchise. But the views of the enfranchised should not trump the legitimate claims of a group who are currently excluded from the formal political process.

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⁹⁴ SORA, ISA and Dr Ulrike Kozeluh “Post election study – voting with 16: Main results for the national elections in Austria 2008” http://www.sora.at/images/doku/sora_isa_kozeluh_voting_with_16_summary.pdf accessed 31st March 2010

⁹⁵ The Electoral Commission “An Audit of Political Engagement”, 2004

⁹⁶ The Electoral Commission “An Audit of Political Engagement”, 2004

⁹⁷ The Electoral Commission “An Audit of Political Engagement”, 2004

⁹⁸ The Electoral Commission “An Audit of Political Engagement”, 2004

⁹⁹ Youth Citizenship Commission “Old enough to make a mark? Should the voting age be lowered to 16? Final Responses”, June 2009