

General Election 2010

Constitution Unit guide: Votes at 16

Manifesto pledges

The UK last reduced the voting age in 1969, from 21 to 18. Minimum voting ages have been falling worldwide. The Liberal Democrats pledge to reduce the voting age to 16. Labour has promised to provide for a free vote in Parliament on votes at 16, but only following improved citizenship education. It is important to consider the effect on turnout, as well as the wider principles involved.

Votes at 16 in other electoral systems

- The typical voting age worldwide has been 18 since the 1970s.
- Votes at 16 has existed in some German municipal elections since the 1990s. Recently, the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey each lowered their voting age to 16. In 2007, Austria became the first state in the EU to lower the national voting age to 16.

Votes at 16 in the UK

- Public opinion on the minimum voting age is unclear, with results both for and against, even among 16-17 year-olds.
- The available evidence suggests that lowering voting age decreases overall turnout in the short-term. The older an individual is the more likely they are to vote. However, 16-17 year-olds would form a relatively small proportion of the electorate, so the short-term effect on turnout would be very small.
- The post-war trend has been towards lower turnout, especially amongst younger voters. The long-term effect of votes at 16 on turnout is uncertain. Research suggests that voting behaviour is carried forward, so that voting, or not voting, is habit-forming. If turnout is higher among 16-17 year-olds than among other young people, as it has been in Germany and Austria, this may have a beneficial long-term effect, unless the initial thrill of enfranchisement peters out.
- There is insufficient evidence that any particular political party would be favoured.
- There is disagreement about whether 16-17 year-olds are sufficiently responsible and politically aware, and ignorance is a major factor in deterring young people from voting. Effective citizenship education could be key. The fact that 16 is the minimum age for other social and civic activities, including fulltime employment and paying income tax, supports votes at 16. However, many of these rights and duties only have an impact later in life, and the more public ones usually start at 18.
- There have been serious proposals for votes at 16 since 1999, but official reports have failed to recommend it. Support amongst MPs has been growing.

The approach to votes at 16 need not be all or nothing. It could apply only to certain elections or be trialled in pilot schemes. The fundamental issue for young people is that their views are considered properly by policy-makers. If young people believe their vote will be effective, turnout could be increased.

Recent official reports which considered votes at 16 are:

- Youth Citizenship Commission, *Old Enough to Make a Mark? Should the Voting Age be Lowered to 16? Final Responses* <http://www.ycc.uk.net/publications/YCC%20-%20Final%20Responses%20-%20June%202009.pdf>
- The Electoral Commission, *Age of Electoral Majority: Report and Recommendations* http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/63749/Age-of-electoral-majority.pdf