

The case for lowering the voting age to 16

*The majority of people in Britain think that Labour's potential policy of giving 16-year-olds the vote is a bad idea. But the experience of Scotland, Brazil, Austria and other countries where the voting age is 16 shows that the concerns many have are misplaced, and in fact this policy could produce more democratically engaged citizens in later life, argues **Laura Serra**.*

On the election campaign trail, Labour leader Keir Starmer announced his support for lowering the legal voting age from 18 to 16 – a move which suggests the policy may likely appear in the party's manifesto. The Labour party had been considering the policy – which already exists in Scotland and Wales for local and devolved parliamentary elections – for over a year. In his statement, Starmer said that anyone who can work and pay tax should also be allowed to vote.

Yet a [recent poll](#) suggests that the majority of the population opposes such a policy and believes it to be motivated by self-interest rather than by what would be good for the country. Young voters notoriously [skew Labour](#), so lowering the voting age is seen as an effort to increase Labour's vote-share at future elections – a move reminiscent of how the Blair governments' efforts to expand access to higher education contributed to the creation of a generation of [Labour-voting graduates](#).

The Conservative party had its own share of gerrymandering accusations in January 2024, as the Government scrapped the 15-year overseas residency limit for allowing British expatriates the right to vote at UK elections. That move is believed to affect up to 3 million [possible voters](#) – twice as high as the [projected figure](#) of voters aged 16-18 – and is likely to mostly benefit older voters (who tend to skew Conservative) living abroad after retirement, while also being criticised by Labour for allegedly making it easier for “wealthy donors who have not lived in the UK for decades” to contribute. But despite the strategic reasons why Labour might be keener than others to lower the voting age, the arguments in favour of the policy consistently outweigh those against it.

The young are into politics: the case of Scotland

The year 2018 saw the establishment of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on the Votes at 16, which a year later released [a report](#) featuring the views of MPs, research agencies, and academics on the matter. The consensus across all testimonies was that opposition to lowering the youth vote is often based on the wrong premises: that young people do not know enough about politics, and that they are too young to have an “adult opinion”. But the 18 years old benchmark for adulthood is rather arbitrary – as evidenced by the lower age at which young people become [eligible to do things](#) that we consider the trappings of adulthood like leave full-time education, have consensual sexual relations, get married, open a bank account, or join the armed forces. And the notion that young people do not know enough about or are not interested enough in politics is simply factually inaccurate.

One does not have to look too far for examples of young people being highly engaged with the political systems they live under. At the [2014 Scottish independence referendum](#), turnout across 16- and 17-year-olds amounted to 75 per cent – 21 percentage points above the 18-24 age group – and over 97 per cent of these newly enfranchised voters reported the intention of continuing to vote in the future. The interest displayed in taking ownership of Scotland’s future makes the fact that these youth were denied the same opportunity at the EU referendum seem particularly unfair. This latter point highlights a further issue with preventing people aged 16-18 from voting in the UK more broadly: as the policy has been implemented in Scotland and Wales but not in England and Northern Ireland, young voters across Britain are not currently enjoying the same democratic rights and opportunities, which inevitably exacerbates [political inequality](#).

A further point of contention around lowering the youth vote is that young people have distinctive preferences that are at odds with those of the rest of the population – but this too does not hold true in reality. Continuing with the example of the Scottish referendum, young voters were expected to overwhelmingly support independence, yet over [54 per cent](#) of people aged 16-29 voted against it – a figure that is closer to the preferences of the over 60s than of the middle-aged. Similarly, at the 2022 Brazilian presidential election, voters aged 16-24 [displayed preferences](#) close to those of all other age groups. In Austria, where people aged 16 and over can also vote in all national

elections, young voters are not drastically different from the rest of the population, and turnout [across the youngest](#) is particularly high.

Voting younger creates more engaged voters

But the most crucial argument in favour of lowering the voting age does not pertain to young people's projected preferences or behaviours – both of which are aspects that should not affect anyone's voting rights. Rather, it pertains to the importance of one's [formative years](#) for the development of democratic norms and behaviours. Between 16- and 18-years of age, young people experience much of the critical transition from late adolescence to early adulthood. Helping them think about politics and democracy at a time when they are most concerned with finding their place in society and the world should be a prerequisite of any democratic nation.

In their contribution to the [APPG report](#) on the vote at 16, Prof Michael Bruter and Dr Sarah Harrison of the LSE Electoral Psychology Observatory, contend that not only is the first election crucial for establishing future patterns of participation, but also that limiting the right to vote to those aged 18 and over may actually impede efforts to maximise participation in one's first vote. As they note in the report, "the vote at 18 means one's first general election typically takes place between ages 18 and 23, whilst with the vote at 16, it will be between ages 16 and 21". In the latter age period, young people are more likely to still live with their parents and go to school, both of which are environments that can foster participation at the first elections because they provide guidance on the political system, local candidates, and voting process that someone who has never voted before is inevitably less familiar with.

Those aged 18 to 23, on the other hand, have likely left their parental homes and possibly their hometowns too, and might therefore not be acquainted with local issues and candidates, or with voting registration systems and requirements. In this view, lowering the voting age would provide young people with the opportunity to experience their first vote at a time when they are most likely to benefit from increased momentum and support.

Considering the amount of evidence in favour of lowering the voting age and the positive effect it has had in places where the legal voting age is 16, such as [Brazil](#) and [Austria](#), it is somewhat surprising that the British public continues to lean towards opposing the

policy. If the Labour party does go through with its plans of extending the franchise in this way, Britons might finally be exposed to the full range of arguments associated with this debate, most of which point to support for the measure, and may finally be convinced of why it would be a fundamentally positive policy.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Image credit: on Shutterstock