

Granting 16 and 17 years olds the right to vote is not a panacea for youth engagement in politics, but it is necessary for democracy

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The voting age for UK general elections is 18, meaning that 16 and 17 year olds aren't eligible to vote, despite being adults for the majority of a five year parliament. Research has shown that it would be an effective tool in narrowing the UK's turnout gap between old and young – the widest in the OECD. Here, **Michael Bruter** and **Sarah Harrison** share research which shows that a lowered voting age has worked where it has been tried, and that its introduction would force politicians to listen to the views of younger people.*



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With its “Inside the Mind of a Voter” project, our ECREP team at LSE (www.ecrep.org) runs the largest existing project in the field of electoral psychology. Our comparative project covers about 20 countries and uses panel study surveys (where we “follow” the same respondents over multiple years), interviews, experiments and more to understand what voting represent to people and also how electoral arrangements (such as voting in person or from home, using a paper ballot or electronically, etc) affect voters’ emotions, satisfaction and choice. As part of our work, we also focus on specific voter categories, and one crucial such group is young voters.

It is amazing how often political commentators – and sometimes politicians themselves – seem to think that young people are the “problem” of modern democracies. Of course, everybody knows that young people are less likely to participate in elections than older voter categories but that fact alone should not give people a license to make rather bold assumptions about why this is, let alone transform the symptom of a political crisis into its very cause. Our research conclusions are pretty straightforward: our political systems actually have the means to bring young people back to the polling booth if they have the will, and one way to do that is by lowering the voting age to 16. This will not only be a positive move, but may well be necessary to the sustainability of our democratic system.

The debate on the vote at 16 is sometimes paradoxical. Not many people are in favour, including amongst young voters who might arguably occasionally resent their younger brothers and being given such a crucial right younger

than they had it themselves. The arguments against it are well known and repeated ad libitum: “young people don’t want to vote, if you give them the right to vote at 16 you’ll just increase abstention”, “young people do not have a clue about real life, they are not mature enough to vote”, “young people are so easy to manipulate, this will be godsend for extremes and populists”, “young people will just vote like their parents” and so on.

What few people seem to realise is that those arguments seem to mirror almost word for word those that were used against female suffrage in 1918 in the UK or 1945 in France. Similarly, just as was the case then, those arguments are plainly mistaken and we now have enough empirical evidence to know that they are.

Vote at 16: existing cases

Increasingly, throughout the world, advanced democracies are moving towards lowering the voting age to 16. In Europe, Austria has been the main pioneer of a universal vote at 16 since 2007, but many other countries allow young people to vote at 16 in local elections (Malta, Estonia, many German lander, Israel, Scottish Parliament as well as, famously, the 2014 independence referendum). The voting age is also now 16 in Jersey, Guernsey, and the Isle of Man since the late 2000s, and in many Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua, etc) while Norway allows 17 year olds to vote and Bosnia 16 year olds who work.

There is a reason why none of those countries have looked back after thus lowering the voting age. That reason is that it works and that young people aged 16 or 17 are more likely to turnout to vote than 18-24 year olds. An ICM survey that was taken during the 2014 Scottish independence referendum [showed that the turnout among 16-17 year olds](#) was 75% while it was only 54% amongst 18-24 year olds and 72% amongst 25-34 year olds. This confirms findings shared on [Democratic Audit](#) from Austria and Norway which confirm that turnout amongst first time voters aged 16 and 17 significantly exceeds that of “older” first time voters aged 18-21.

Why does voting at 16 make democracy stronger?

That lowering the voting age to 16 leads to more of those people voting than older first time voters is not the only story, what it also and more importantly means is that this will lead to a long term increase in electoral participation. Indeed, our ECREP research has found that people who participate in the first two elections of their lives are likely to become chronic participants, while those who do not are likely to become chronic abstentionists. It is therefore absolutely crucial to bring young people into the polling booth in the first elections when they are eligible to vote because this will determine their behaviour throughout their future civic life.

There are many reasons why bringing young people to the polling booth at 16 or 17 is easier than at 18 or 19.

First of all, technically, young people aged 16 and 17 are far more likely to live with their family and be at school, which both represent crucial educative influences in the discovery of one’s citizenship. By contrast, as young people age further, they are more likely to live on their own, away from their families, and increasingly likely to be out of the school system.

Moreover, technically, the very likeliness to move away from the parental home also means that young people are more likely not to be in the place where they are electorally registered once election time comes. Even if they are, they are less likely to be aware of local political issues and dynamics which political scientist know to be a crucial factor when it comes to feeling “internally efficacious”, that is feeling apt to make informed and relevant political decisions through an election.

Perhaps most important of all, however, is the reason that makes voting at 16 right that nobody ever mentions. In a recent work that some colleagues and ourselves have jointly conducted on youth participation in Europe, we find that the main reason why many young people stay away from electoral participation is that they feel that political parties do not address them. The trouble is that they are right. Currently, it is indeed typically far more “electorally beneficial” to political parties to address, for example, elderly voters rather than young ones as they make up for a much larger share of the actual electorate. This creates a dreadful vicious circle whereby political parties fail to

speak to the concerns of young voters because they do not represent enough votes, and even more young people then abstaining because political parties do not speak of what matters to them. By allowing young voters to vote from the age of 16, the pool of young votes would be made mechanically larger, and maybe, at last, political parties would be forced to take youth issues and concerns into account. That is, possibly, the greatest revolution that the vote at 16 can achieve.

Conclusion

Allowing 16 year olds to vote is not a panacea, but it is, clearly, an essential step in rejuvenating democracy by “creating” long term voters by winning the battle to encourage young people to vote in the first elections of their lives at a time of their lives when they are more available – both physically and intellectually – to make it to the polling booth, and encouraging the political discourse to stop largely ignoring young voters and their concerns by mechanically increasing their weight in the electorate.

Of course, this must come with some sense of education, but here again, it is crucial to realise that our research has found that directive education or using “abstention guilt” with young people is counter-productive. What is crucial, instead, is to bring political debates, the “public sphere” to them, for instance by developing electoral debates at school, encouraging young people to address young people directly in electoral campaigns, and making competing programmes readily comparable, for instance through voting advice applications.

What is perhaps more important, however, and is indeed the object of our next ECREP research venture, is to realise that many young people are excited at the idea of voting for the first time and that as a result, it is quite critical to make their first election special. This is the object of a research project that our team will be starting in coming weeks and where we will collaborate with Electoral Commissions worldwide to pilot new ways to make this first vote a unique and exciting discovery. At stakes is no less than the survival, legitimacy, and rejuvenation of our democratic systems.

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To find out more about the Research initiative in electoral psychology and electoral ergonomics, [click here](#).

Note: this post represents the views of the authors, and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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