

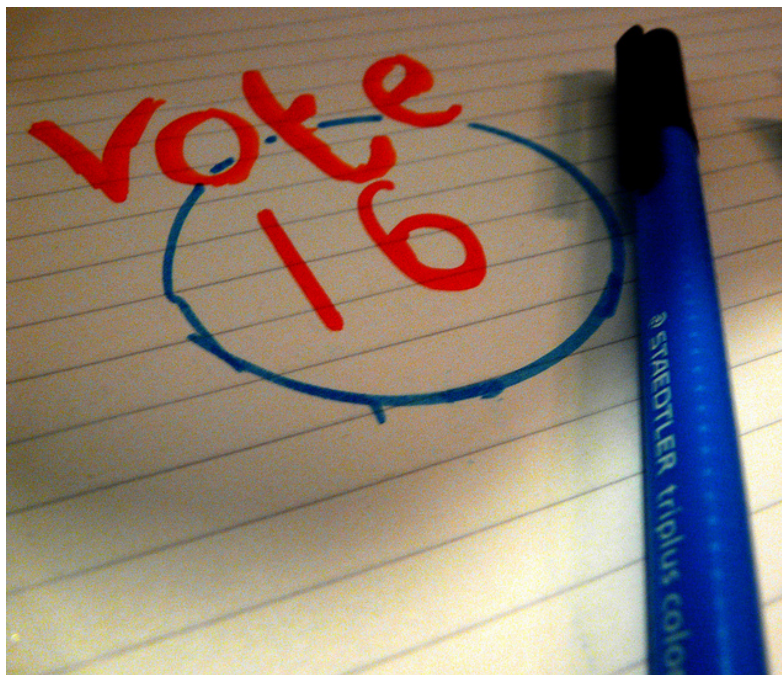
There is still a very long way to go before votes at 16 at general elections becomes a reality

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The negotiations between the Scottish and UK governments over the terms of the Scottish independence referendum have resulted in a deal [widely trumpeted as allowing 16 year olds to vote](#) when the ballot takes place, probably in Autumn 2014. Unsurprisingly, this move has re-awakened the wider debate about lowering the voting age, with some arguing that it almost inevitably paves the way for votes at 16 in all UK elections. Indeed, when the issue was debated on BBC Radio 4's Today programme this morning, Natascha Engel MP, an enthusiastic supporter of lowering the voting age, was effectively accused of supporting the proposal to vary the franchise for the Scottish independence referendum as a means of lowering the voting age by stealth.



Votes at 16 (Credit, Elzoh CC BY-SA 2.0)

Personally, I am deeply ambivalent about lowering the voting age. But the profile of 'votes at 16' as a political reform issue never ceases to amaze me. Given that [only 44% of 18-24 year olds voted in 2010](#) (up from 37% in 2005), it seems less than obvious that there is really that much demand for lowering the voting age. The idea that 'votes at 16' will help address high levels of political disengagement among younger voters is baffling. Yet, there is even a tendency for 'votes at 16' to be proffered as a solution to popular discontent with politics more generally. Lowering the voting age was one of the most frequently heard demands during the period of the MPs' expenses crisis, when debates about constitutional reform which had lain dormant during the 2000s were briefly awoken. Indeed, the case for lowering the voting age might be the prime example of a more general law of political reform debate in the UK: the level of interest in a specific constitutional reform proposal is inversely proportional to its likely impact on the political system.

So, it is important to be clear about what is being discussed in the case of the Scottish independence referendum. It is not 'votes at 16'. The Scottish government's proposal, which has apparently been accepted by the UK government, relates to 'attainers'. These are 16-17 year olds who are entitled to appear on the electoral register by virtue of the fact that their 18th birthday falls within the period for which the current register will be valid. In practice,

just about all attainers who appear on the register will be 17 year olds. The December 2011 local government register for the UK (used for council, devolved, mayoral, police and crime commissioner and European elections) included 485,935 attainers. Nationally, it is estimated that only [about half of eligible attainers are registered](#).

In Scotland, a total of 44,341 attainers appeared on the December 2011 local government register, which provides a pretty reasonable indication of how many under-18s would likely to be eligible to vote in the referendum. With a total electorate of just over 4 million, attainers will make up about 1% of those eligible to vote. Given the virtual certainty of a low turnout among 17 year olds, this lowering of the voting age is extremely unlikely to make any difference to the outcome, unless it turns out to be exceptionally close and 17 year olds are either very strongly 'for' or 'against' Scottish independence.

The case for attainers being permitted to vote could therefore be seen as largely symbolic. However, it is also consistent with SNP policy on lowering the voting age. The Scottish government has already permitted attainers to vote in health board and crofting commission elections. In this sense, what is proposed for the referendum is an extension of decisions already made under devolved government in Scotland. Clearly, though, the symbolism of the decision does impact on the wider debate about the qualifying age for voting. Pressure will clearly follow for attainers to be able to vote in Scottish Parliament elections.

However, bringing about votes at 16 would require more than gradually granting attainers the right to vote in different types of election. The electoral register would need to be compiled differently, to start with. The introduction of individual elector registration, which will rely significantly on the use of other governmental databases, may offer the potential better to identify and even enrol voters still at school.

Yet, it is far from clear that existing electoral law would enable all 16 year olds to be registered in this way, or that the law could be varied under devolved arrangements. More importantly, any decision to lower the voting age for general elections (and probably all devolved and local elections as well) would need to be made by the UK Parliament. Even with attainers being permitted to vote in the Scottish independence referendum, it is difficult to see MPs and Peers supporting a lowering of the voting age for general elections anytime soon.

Among the world's electoral democracies, votes at 18 is very much the norm, and UK parliamentarians are virtually certain to argue the case for sticking with that norm. Data compiled by ACE, the electoral knowledge network, show that of the 229 countries and dependent territories for which information is available, 202 (88%) have a minimum voting age of 18. Only 11 states (5%) worldwide have votes at 16 or 17 (intriguingly, these 11 include Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man, all of which lowered the voting age to 16 during the 2000s). Of the 27 members of the EU and the 34 members of the OECD, only Austria has a voting age under 18. There are 16 cases (7%) where the voting age is between 19 and 21, with these overwhelmingly being found in Asia and Africa.

In short, the decision to allow attainers to vote in the Scottish independence referendum is perhaps surprising, but we should not regard it as 'votes at 16' and neither should we assume that it will make much difference to the outcome of the ballot. And, as for voters at 16, there is still a very long way to go indeed for those who support lowering the voting age at general elections.

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