

A referendum on lowering the voting age would generate a wider national debate about youth participation in democracy

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*A number of countries allow their citizens to vote at 16 in national or local elections, including Brazil, Argentina, Austria, Norway and Germany. In the latest post from our series on [youth participation in democracy](#), **Craig Berry** suggests the UK should also consider lowering the voting age. Holding a referendum on this issue would, he argues, focus attention on youth disengagement and initiate a wider conversation about the need to involve young people in democracy.*



Is it time the UK followed other countries and gave younger citizens the vote? Credit: [Irish Labour Party](#), CC BY-ND 2.0

Young people are far less likely to vote than other age groups. In the 2010 general election, only 44 per cent of 18-24 year-olds voted, compared to an overall turnout rate of 65 per cent. Turnout among 25-34 year-olds was also significantly lower than the overall figure. It is of course too simplistic to say there is an automatic – or any – correlation between low turnout and the economic woes that today's young people are experiencing. Age cohorts do not vote in blocs, and to suggest otherwise would be to ignore [evidence](#) that members of different generations care about each other, perhaps just as much as they do fellow members of their own age cohort.

Equally, however, this does not mean that it does not matter that fewer young people are expressing their democratic preferences. Crucially, population ageing means that, even if they were, they would still be 'out-voted' by other cohorts. This is a very recent (and intensifying) trend that may be helping to undermine an 'unwritten rule' of representative democracy that those whose lives are affected for longest by the outcomes of the democratic process

have the greatest influence at the ballot box. I believe lowering the voting age to 16, or even merely holding a referendum on this issue, may be part of the answer.

Voting matters

There is little evidence that young people are any [more apathetic about politics](#) than any other age group. A sense of powerlessness, of not being able to enact change through the ballot box, is a more cogent explanation than contentment for non-voting. Yet that does not make it okay, because representative democracy is a numbers game. Formal electoral processes are not the only way to exercise influence in a liberal democracy, but they are the most important. And it is no good retorting that non-voters have *chosen* not to vote (even though that is largely correct) because large-scale non-cooperation will surely, before long, start to threaten the fundamental legitimacy of democracy.

I base this argument on the under-observed reality that there has never existed a representative democracy, in any large society, without a pyramid-shaped age distribution, that is, a society where the young outnumber the old. The people who will probably be affected for longest, and at a crucial life-stage, by the outcomes of the democratic process have the most influence at the ballot box. This does *not* mean that all young people vote (or even think) in the same way, but it does mean that those seeking elected office have to consider the resonance of their positions and the potential impact of their policies on this group. It also makes young people a key target market for the media through which public debate is conducted.

We will very soon experience, if we are not already, representative democracy in a society with a very different age distribution. In 1991 the median voter was aged 44, and ten years later they were aged 45. At the 2010 general election, the median voter was aged 46, and by 2021 this will have risen to 47. Twenty years later, the median voter will be 50 years old. But these figures do not take into account voter turnout; the median *actual* voter was 49 in 2010 and, if current turnout rates persist, will be 52 as soon as 2021 (see Berry, 2012 for the full analysis). Crossing our fingers in hope that democracy will retain widespread support in these demographic circumstances is not sufficient. Clearly we cannot and should not seek to reverse the increase in life expectancy that lies behind population ageing, but we can seek to mitigate the impact of ageing by protecting the status of young people in formal democratic processes.

Voting at 16 matters

Innovative methods of voting have been utilised by electoral authorities in the UK, albeit seemingly with mixed success in terms of increasing turnout. But such innovations have not been judged over a long enough timeframe, and have been limited in nature. Voting by post, text message and online should be available at every election, and heavily promoted, and elections should ideally take place over more than a single weekday. This is not about simply making it easier to vote – with the connotation being that anyone too lazy to vote by the traditional method does not deserve to vote – but rather recognising that traditional methods of voting are out-of-step with the lifestyles and working practices of many of today's young people. Voting should not be easy, but we have to acknowledge that it has become more difficult for some groups than others.

One option that requires further consideration is that of lowering the voting age to 16. This is ostensibly a different kind of 'solution' to those discussed above, in that it seeks to increase the number of young people in the electorate, rather than increase turnout among the existing electorate. On this basis, however, lowering the voting age is not particularly useful. At the 2010 general election, the median potential voter would have been a year younger, but assuming 16 and 17 year-olds voted at the same rate as those aged 18-24, the median actual voter would have been no younger.

There are three main objections to lowering the voting age. Firstly, that voting at 16 should not be classed as a human right because most internationally recognised rights frameworks (rightly) treat people aged under-18 as children. Secondly, that 16 and 17 year-olds lack the maturity to exercise their vote responsibly. Both are valid

objections, to some extent, although I believe both are wrong. Voting should be among the *first* rights that we bestow upon our fellow citizens, not the *last*.

The third main objection is that 16 and 17 year-olds are not likely to vote, so we would risk entrenching the habit of non-voting. This argument, however, is not particularly sophisticated. In fact, evidence from Norway and Austria tells us 16 and 17 year-old first-time voters are [more likely to vote than older first-time voters](#), and people that vote in the first election they are eligible to vote in are [more likely to vote in the future](#). In contrast to the conventional wisdom, while by 18 disaffection may have taken root among young people, a positive inclination to vote may be more evident among 16 and 17 year-olds, and therefore lowering the voting age would lead to higher turnout among all young people, as it enables a habit of voting to form.

Show of hands?

Inevitably, we cannot escape the fact that allowing 16 year-olds to vote is a contentious issue. In contrast to the enfranchisement of women, there is as yet no consensus that the ability to vote is a basic right for 16 year-olds. As such, as long as opinion remains divided, a referendum (in which 16 and 17 year-olds would be included) would be a useful way to settle the issue. It is worth noting that the voting age in the Scottish independence referendum will be 16.

It is entirely possible, or even probable, that UK voters would choose *not* to lower the voting age. But this does not mean the referendum would have been a futile exercise. Given that extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year-olds would not have a large impact on electoral demographics, the proposition should be considered in terms of its impact on the tendency to vote among young people in general. As such, a referendum could have an instrumental value beyond the actual plebiscite. The referendum would surely generate a national conversation (and front-page coverage) about the political participation of young people, the kind of conversation currently limited to the academy, a handful of non-governmental organisations and, to some extent, young people themselves.



[Read all posts in our series on youth participation.](#)

POLICY PROPOSAL

A UK-wide referendum on lowering the voting age to 16, in which 16 and 17 year-olds are entitled to vote.

This post is part of a series on youth participation based on the Political Studies Association project, [Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission](#). For further details, please contact [Dr Andy Mycock](#). An electronic copy of the Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission: Young People and Politics volume can be downloaded [here](#).

Note: This post represents the views of the author, and does not give the position of the LSE or Democratic Audit. Please read our [comments policy](#) before responding. Shortlink for this post: buff.ly/QBhiTK

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