

Should the UK lower the voting age to 16?

A Democratic Audit collection – edited by Richard Berry and Sean Kippin



Foreword

Dr Andrew Mycock

The proposition supporting the lowering of the voting age for all public elections across the United Kingdom has gained considerable political momentum over the past decade or so, largely due to the concerted campaigning of some leading youth organisations together with an increasing number of young people and politicians. With the majority of mainstream political parties now supporting the introduction of ‘votes at 16’, it is a proposal whose time appears to have come. That 16 and 17 year-olds will be able to vote on the constitutional future of Scotland in September 2014 suggests the ‘genie is out of the bottle’ and the move towards a universal lowering of the voting age to 16 across the UK is imminent.

Such a view should however be tempered by a number of issues that might compromise the adoption of votes at 16. First, the Conservatives appear steadfastly opposed to its introduction and are unlikely to adopt the cause if they form the next government in 2015. Second, two noteworthy UK government-sponsored independent commissions on lowering the voting age over the past decade – [The Russell Commission of 2004](#) and the [Youth Citizenship Commission of 2008-9](#) - have both found against the proposition. Both commissions raised important questions about the increasingly fractured age limits for a range of rights and responsibilities and also questioned whether ‘votes at 16’ would induce greater youth political literacy and participation. Finally, there is evidence of [widespread opposition](#) to the move from adults to lowering the voting age to 16. Moreover, the last sizeable survey of the views of young people themselves by [the Youth Citizenship Commission in 2009](#) suggested only a slight majority supported votes at 16.

It is clear that the issue of whether or not to lower the voting age cannot be addressed in isolation from debates about the much-needed reform of British political culture to address the concerns and aspirations of young people. The passage of the Representation of the People Act in 1969 that saw the legal voting age lowered from 21 to 18 reflected changing attitudes during the immediate post-war period towards young people and also acknowledged a wider transformation in how people understood the rights, roles and responsibilities of young adults. The challenges facing young people in the 21st century highlight the need to embrace and encourage debate about the appropriateness of ‘votes at 16’ as part of a wider consideration of changing terms of youth and adult citizenship.

With this in mind, the Politics Studies Association and Democratic Audit have initiated a series of blogs that are linked to the [‘Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission: Young People and Politics’](#) project. One contributor, Dr Craig Berry, has called for [a referendum on lowering the voting age](#) to further stimulate a national conversation about the role and contribution of young people in our polity. We hope that political parties of all hues might

take up this call. Until then, we offer this collection of opinion pieces that seek to extend the terms of reference informing debates about the lowering the voting age and encourage a more holistic consideration of the complexities of youth citizenship reform.

About this collection

As Scotland prepares to allow 16 and 17 year olds to vote in its upcoming independence referendum, this collection reproduces posts from the Democratic Audit blog about the ongoing debate on the UK's voting age, featuring views both in favour and against lowering the age to 16.

Many of the posts were also published in, or are responses to, the [Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission](#) report published by the Political Studies Association, edited by **Andy Mycock** and **Jonathan Tonge**.

We would welcome further contributions to this debate. If you would like to share your views please get in touch with us on democraticaudit@lse.ac.uk.

Democratic Audit is an independent research organisation, established as a not-for-profit company, and based at the London School of Economics Public Policy Group. Our core objectives are to advance education, enhance democratic engagement and to undertake and promote research into, the quality and effectiveness of UK democracy. We produced our most recent audit of UK democracy in 2012, and manage a blog with publishing daily posts with new research and opinion from democracy experts and practitioners. www.democraticaudit.com



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Introduction: It is time to decide whether to enfranchise 16 and 17 year olds

Richard Berry & Sean Kippin

Few could find disagreement with the principle that democracies should allow all citizens of sufficient maturity the opportunity to vote on their representatives. Opinion, however, is more divided on the issue of when young people reach that appropriate of maturity. The history of British democracy has repeatedly seen the lowering of the minimum voting age. Only those over the age of 21 could vote until as late as 1970, when the franchise was extended to those aged 18 and above. When women were initially granted the right to vote in 1918, only those aged 30 or over could participate in elections.

There is now a growing sentiment that the voting age in the UK should be lowered again, to 16 years old. This has become the consensus position of several major political parties, including Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party. Indeed, 16 and 17 year olds will even be entitled to vote in the upcoming referendum on Scottish independence, a change that has predictably reignited the debate in the rest of the UK. 16 and 17 year olds can already vote in elections for some British territories, specifically the Isle of Mann and Channel Islands.

At Democratic Audit, we believe that enfranchising 16 and 17 year olds is the right thing to do. We know that lowering the voting age will not, on its own, solve the wider problem of youth disengagement from politics. But, as Benjamin Bowman argues in this collection, it can be an important part of that effort.

We support the change because it means enfranchising people while they are still members of settled communities, helping them to pick up the habit of voting at an early age. We also believe granting 16 and 17 year olds the right to vote means fewer 18 and 19 year olds will miss out on casting a vote due to the timing of elections. Most significantly, we believe the evidence is clear that 16 and 17 year olds are mature enough to participate in our democracy, and a great many of them wish to do so - with the piece by Markus Wagner and Eva Zeglovits in this collection particularly encouraging in this regard.

However, our main objective is not simply to provide a platform for the most articulate proponents of a reform we'd be happy to see. Rather, we seek to promote a more enlightened debate about the proposal.

All too often, it seems, some opponents of lowering the voting age focus on picking apart arguments made by votes at 16 campaigners, rather than making a case for why 18 should remain the age of enfranchisement or highlighting the risks of moving to 16. We have also been disappointed by some opponents' reliance on dated opinion polls showing a majority

of people are content with votes at 18, as a reason not to pursue this discussion. Likewise, the same opponents frequently resort to uninspiring arguments about the age at which purchasing cigarettes, or leaving school, become legal, without engaging with the question as to whether young people, and society as a whole, would benefit or suffer from expanding the franchise. Merely producing a shopping list of rights and pointing out the inconsistency of the ages at which they are gained does little to get to the bottom of the issue.

That is why we are pleased to include thoughtful posts here by Dan Degerman and Andy Mycock & Jonathan Tonge, which engage positively with the debate in constructive ways. Degerman, for instance, seeks to answer the question of whether 16 and 17 year olds can be authentically considered to be 'autonomous' in his persuasive case against lowering the voting age. Likewise, it is refreshing to see a critic of votes at 16, Andrew Russell, supporting calls for a referendum on the voting age: this would be a true test of voters' wishes, preferably conducted after a rigorous public debate.

There is no silver bullet to the problem of youth disengagement from democracy, but lowering the voting age would be a welcome step towards this most worthy of goals. We would consider its best application as part of a wider package of progressive reforms, including the moving of polling days to the weekend, enhanced and improved voter information, easier access to voting, and reformed and enhanced citizenship education. But votes at 16 is an important starting point: its implementation would represent a bold and radical reform that sent the message that we, as a society, value the opinions of young people.

We hope that this collection of well-reasoned and thought-through contributions on both sides of this argument will hope to raise the level of debate on the best age for enfranchisement, and be of interest to any individuals with an interest in the subject, regardless of which side of the fence they sit on.

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Votes at 16 will not solve the problem of youth disengagement overnight, but it will help us to address the issue

Sarah Champion MP

There are 1.5 million 16 to 17-year-olds in the UK and they are missing out on the vote. There are so many things a person can do when they become 16. They can leave school to enter work, give full consent to medical treatment, consent to sexual relationships and even get married, if they choose to, with parental permission. Sixteen-year-olds may also join the armed forces, change their name by deed poll, obtain tax credits and welfare benefits in their own right, become a member of a trade union or co-operative society, and even become the director of a company. On top of all that, 16-year-olds in work are required to pay income tax and national insurance contributions, yet those 16-year-olds paying taxes are not allowed a say in how they are spent.

Moving away from the status quo is difficult, as history recognises. In 1918, votes for women was not a popular cause, but the minority who knew it was right paved the way for millions of British women, who have gone on to not only cast their vote, but regard doing so as the norm. Tracing history further back, much the same could be said of the Chartist movement, which fought for the vote for the working classes. Once again, at the time, that idea was regarded with animosity and was resisted, but society quickly came to see the opening up of the vote as fair and just. The time is right to open the democratic system even further, and to include 16 and 17-year-olds among the group of people who are able to vote. It would be a bold and pioneering move that would really show how far we have come as a country.

I have heard from many 16 and 17-year-olds throughout the country on why securing the vote is so important to them, and particularly from the young people of the Rotherham youth cabinet, who came to my office recently to share their thoughts on voting at 16. At the meeting, Oliver Blake, who was previously our Member of the Youth Parliament, said:

“I feel that the major issue preventing people from supporting the Votes at 16 campaign is that people say you’re not mature enough. I don’t feel that argument is valid. You have people at all ages who don’t use their vote wisely; you can see this by the number of people voting for extremist parties or joke candidates, but you don’t exclude them from using their vote. I want to be able to vote because I want a say in my future, and I know I’ll use that vote responsibly.”

Rotherham’s current Member of Youth Parliament, Ashley Gregory, expressed his desire to help choose his future by voting now. He believes that issues of direct relevance to young

people, such as university tuition fees and education, demonstrate his case. At our meeting, he said:

“I find it difficult to hear MPs having conversations about what the level of tuition fees will be, how higher education is funded or even what curriculum we study in school without being...a legitimate part of that conversation. These are decisions that affect me, but I’m not allowed a voice on them.”

The arguments in favour of voting at 16 are varied, but each in its own right is strong, from the argument that allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote empowers them to engage with the political system, to the argument that young people voting would lead to a fairer and more inclusive youth policy. Furthermore, there is the argument that young people should not be expected to contribute to society through taxation as members of the armed forces, or by parenting children, without having a say in how that society is governed. Another persuasive argument is that the low turnout of younger people at elections might be dealt with by engaging them earlier in the political process. Taken individually, each of those arguments is forceful, but collectively they make a robust case for reform.

I recognise that introducing voting at 16 is a bold and radical proposal, but it is an opportunity to invigorate a new generation of politically active and engaged citizens, and that would create a more open and fair political system. Due to new technologies, young people are more informed than ever before, and more able to seek out information and to campaign on issues that affect them.

In the information age, when anyone is able to find out about an issue at the touch of a button, it is not surprising that more young people than ever are expressing a desire to engage with the political system. There is, however, a flipside to that. While we must celebrate the fact that many young people are choosing to engage actively with politics, we must also be cautious, because there are problems in the system that need fixing. Those problems will not be fixed overnight, but voting at 16 might help to address them.

Opening up democracy to young people is an important way of confronting the democratic deficit faced in the UK. Electoral turnout in the UK has been on a downward trend since 1950, when 84% of the population turned out to vote; turnout was only 65% in the most recent general election. Membership of our political parties has fallen; the Conservative party has gone from being 3 million strong in 1950 to having only 100,000 members today. At the most recent elections, only 44% of those aged between 18 and 24 voted. Rather than turn our backs on the problem, we must confront it.

We see in Scotland the impact that allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in the referendum is having on their political engagement. Young people are often featured on the news or in discussion programmes, debating their opinions on Scottish independence. It inspires me to see those young people discussing the issues and taking a stance. The validity of their position is not for me or anyone else to judge, but their engagement with the debate is

brilliant to see, and it can teach us lessons about how an inclusive politics is an attractive and fair politics.

This argument applies more broadly. At the heart of the issue is the notion of civil liberties. The debate is not about whom a 16 or 17-year-old votes for, but about recognising their maturity and providing them with a vote, and about a society building them up to use that vote to the best of their ability. Ultimately, this should not be for anyone except 16 and 17-year-olds themselves to decide on. If they feel that they are mature enough to have a vote, we as politicians and as a society should trust our young people enough to allow them to exercise it. I have read that public opinion is against the votes at 16 campaign, but it is not public opinion that matters so much as the opinion of 16 and 17-year-olds. It is their opinion, rather than those of others, that we should listen to and act on. Young people are rightly calling for the right to vote.

The Votes at 16 Coalition, led by the British Youth Council, has been campaigning for votes at 16 for 10 years, backed by 16 and 17-year-olds across the country. As recently as November 2013, the UK Youth Parliament voted to make the issue of votes at 16 its national campaign, after balloting some 478,000 young people nationally. The campaign was then chosen in the Youth Parliament's annual debate in the House of Commons. Members of the Youth Parliament are democratically elected by young people in their constituency, so the fact that votes at 16 was voted to be their priority campaign shows just how important the issue is for young people nationally.

The strength of feeling is clear, and it is represented not only by other young people across the country but by young people's organisations. London Youth, the National Union of Students, the Scottish Youth Parliament and the British Youth Council are only a small sample of the young people's organisations that are actively speaking out in support of the campaign.

Last year, Newham college held a discussion group on voting at 16, to which students of all ages and backgrounds contributed. That debate found, once again, that the majority of students were in favour of reducing the voting age to 16. I am told that much of the discussion focused on the right level of maturity required to vote. While some students argued that 16 was too young, many argued that people matured at different rates, so having the option to vote younger was important.

It appears that, if you ask 16 and 17-year-olds whether they should be allowed to vote, the majority will consistently reply that they should. Opponents of voting at 16 express concerns about undue influence over a 16-year-old's vote, especially from parents and peers. That should not be a reason to turn down the opportunity for 16 and 17-year-olds to vote, but an argument for improving the information and support available to young people in the lead-up to their first vote. If young people overwhelmingly argue that they want to vote, turning it down due to the impact of their parents seems unfair, unreasonable and, to be quite honest, patronising.

Toni Paxford, a member of Rotherham's youth cabinet, told me that, for her, the issue was not necessarily the signal that getting the vote would send, but the signal sent by not being given it. She told me of a friend who spends most of her spare time volunteering for charity, as well as of her own experiences raising £3,000 independently for local charities. She argued that by not giving 16-year-olds the vote, society fails to recognise the important contributions that young people can make, and that the failure to recognise those contributions would bring about a culture of apathy among young people.

That point brings me to the contributions made to our society by 16 and 17-year-olds. Toni's example is one of an incredible volunteering commitment, but such contributions to society come via other routes as well. Sixteen-year-olds can legally become parents, but they raise their children in a society in which they cannot have a say. They can legally go to work and contribute to our economy but are not allowed a say in what our economic policy should be. Perhaps most starkly of all, we let 16-year-olds join our armed forces and thus represent our country, but do not respect them enough to give them a say in our defence policy.

It is not fair or right to allow that set of conflicting messages to continue. We cannot expect 16 and 17-year-olds to contribute to our society through various means—economically, physically, intellectually or socially—in a capacity where we recognise them as an adult, but then give them the democratic rights of a child. That conflict is already being recognised in a number of countries, such as Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Argentina. We must not allow ourselves to fall behind: we have been pioneers of voting reform in the UK in the past, and I hope that we are open-minded enough now to continue that trend. It is high time that we recognised the clash within our expectations of 16-year-olds. We trust our young people to contribute to society in many ways, so we should start to give them their democratic rights.

If people counter the campaign for votes at 16 with arguments that 16 and 17-year-olds are not mature or responsible enough to vote, I will argue that they should look to the many mature and responsible ways in which 16 and 17-year-olds are already legally entitled and expected to contribute to our society. Allowing voting at 16 would send so many positive signals to our young people. It would say, "We value your voice. We value your contribution. We believe you are responsible."

A persistent refusal by this Government to permit voting at 16 sends a message to 16 and 17-year-olds that their views on society are not valid. That is not and should not be the case. Our 16 and 17-year-olds will form the next generation of creative thinkers, business leaders, scientists and engineers. We will and do expect them to contribute to our society, both now and in future. Our message to them should be that we expect them to contribute to a society that appreciates them, that welcomes their opinions and that is willing to act to represent their views. If we cannot act to bring that about, it should be no surprise if our young people become alienated from the democratic system.

Already, the political system serves to alienate young people. The average age of an MP is 50, and less than a quarter of MPs are women. We cannot expect young people to engage in politics if it is seen as unfamiliar to and unrepresentative of them. I do not believe that granting votes at 16 is the final or only step needed to engage young people politically, but I believe that it would be a really positive start to the process. We must show young people that we value both their contributions to society and their opinions about how things should be done.

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Voter registration levels for the Scottish independence referendum are already showing the potential benefits of lowering the voting age to 16

Kyle Thornton MSYP

On the 18th September this year, for the first time in UK political history, 16 and 17 year olds (in Scotland), will have the right to vote in the Scottish independence referendum. This extension of the franchise is something that the Scottish Youth Parliament believe can only enhance democracy through greater engagement with young people. I will argue that votes at 16 provides benefits in registration and engagement that simply cannot be replicated within the 18-24 age group alone and that by successful engagement at 16 and 17, we can then increase overall turnout.

By the extension of the franchise, we have learned a great deal already, especially in terms of registration. The Scottish Youth Parliament, when deciding to take a neutral stance on the question of independence, made a very clear commitment to dedicate our work up until September on registration and engagement. While the success of engagement will find its true measurement on turnout, we can see that in the lead up to the referendum organisations, such as ourselves, have had a great deal of success with registration. In March 2014, the Scottish Government reported that over 80% of 16 and 17 year old voters in Scotland had registered to vote, which when compared to the UK wide figure for 18-25 year olds of 55% shows that there is a clear improvement in registration with 16 and 17 year old electors. The question is then posed, why is this?

It is true that increased media attention on this referendum will have helped boost registration and also that this is the first time 16 and 17 year olds can vote which will also have an effect. However from our experience, as an organisation that has worked to register both 16 and 17 year olds and 18-24 year olds, we have found the ability to register younger voters is much improved. The primary reason is that it is much easier to engage with 16 and 17 year olds as we can find “captive audiences” in schools and colleges with 75% of young people staying on past the age of compulsory education in Scotland.

With the support of education professionals, we have been able to deliver impartial education to young people and convince the majority of them that while they may be undecided on how to vote, they need to register to have that choice at all. This has demonstrated to us that the extension of the franchise to all elections and referenda across the UK could have a significant positive impact as the registration of electors in this age group would prove much easier.

However, the ability to improve registration is not the only benefit that the education system brings to improving engagement in the 16-17 year old age group. Using the idea of “captive audience”, neutral organisations like ourselves are able to run engagement sessions (which we call Democracy Days) which educate on the basic facts, provides space for the parties to ‘make their pitch’ and give young people the ability to question politicians, engage in issues they care about and give thought to their own political beliefs. Indeed, the only sentiment we try to impart on these days is that voting is important no matter how you vote and for the sake of the health of our democracy, we should all be agreed on this principle.

Whilst I cannot tell you the turnout of 16 and 17 year olds yet, ScotCen research has shown that over 66% of newly enfranchised voters intend to vote in the referendum. While the importance of this decision will, we would imagine, increase turnout, I also argue that it is the non-party political nature of this plebiscite which is also going to boost turnout. It shows that when you give young people a clear choice of pathways, they will turn out to support their chosen course. It also, I believe, indicates that if the body politic moved to a more inclusive type of politics, we could see improved turnouts in general.

The main lessons that we have learned in engaging young voters is that by developing the ability and approach to systematically engage with a group that traditional politics works to disengage, we are able to see greater registration, and its early signs show that we will also see greater turnout. It is also clear from our work that we are able to have much greater access to 16 and 17 year old electors than those 18-24 years old. Looking towards the future, I hope that this ‘cohort’ of electors will have generally higher levels of engagement in elections going forward as they will have taken the crucial first steps of registering to vote and actually casting a ballot. My message to those voters is that they have two responsibilities in this referendum: firstly, to decide the future of the country; and secondly, to show that 16 and 17 year olds, when registered and engaged, will turn out and vote like any other group. By focusing on meaningful engagement, we can boost our democracy by extending this to all 16 and 17 year olds.

Votes at 16 is no magic bullet to our troubled democracy but the referendum on independence in Scotland has shown very clearly that not only are 16 and 17 year olds *more* interested in the democratic process than their 18-24 year old counterparts but that it is much easier for ‘electoral professionals’ such as registration officers and youth workers to engage with them. If we can get our 16 and 17 year olds interested, we have a much better chance of creating voters for life.

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Votes at 16 should be part of the systemic reform needed to counter youth abstention from democratic institutions

Benjamin Bowman

I would like to pose a question beyond the traditional nexus of young people's rights and hopes to increase their turnout. Why do we want young people to vote at all?

In a [previous article](#) on votes at 16 I suggested that votes for 16 and 17-year-olds must be part of a broader move towards welcoming young people as valued and equal citizens in UK democracy. Systemic reform has been discussed in this series by [Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge](#), who challenged that we must reform our political institutions before extending the Vote to 16 or else risk entrenching disillusionment, this time among a younger electorate. Here, I argue the case for votes at 16 as a part of reform, rather than a promise for afterwards.

Young absence or young abstention?

Young people are absent from institutional politics in the UK. In more precise terms, the UK could be said to have the worst record for the marginalization of young people of comparable countries in the EU-15: not only do young people in the UK participate less in elections and other traditional processes for political action (with two notable exceptions: petitioning and volunteer work), but there is also a significant [generational gap](#) between older citizens who continue to vote, contact MPs, attend demonstrations, and so on, and younger citizens who tend not to engage by traditional methods and remain absent as they get older.

In 2008, Shakuntala Banaji reflected on a case study of young responses to the Iraq war under the Blair government, and [asked](#) what could be done, if anything, to prevent the discovery that some politicians and governments are unresponsive to citizens' civic and political engagement from turning young people away from democratic action to abstention or, in the contemporary case, the extreme right.

Banaji's suggestion is echoed more recently by James Sloam, who wrote that one result of the economic crisis, during which the interests of the young were considered [insignificant or even expendable](#) by the Con/Lib coalition, might be that young people are turned away from an institutional politics that they feel rejects them as worthy of representation.

The key term here is *turned away*. Young people don't vote as much, to be sure. But that does not mean young people don't 'do politics'. The marginalization of young people in representative democracy is a complex subject which coexists with a new framework for doing politics. The hallmark of young people's politics is [diverse participatory acts](#), and new norms of political activity among young people place elections as just one of many ways to

be political. Given the way youth abstention from elections has concentrated so much recent public focus on the role of young citizens in democracy and the incipient crisis of non-voting, we might consider whether abstention has, indeed, been a very effective way to hold our democratic system to account for its failings.

Placing votes at 16 in the political toolbox

Between the worrying truth that the UK is facing a democratic crisis due to the growing young absence from politics, and the optimism we might have about a new diversity of participatory political acts, we can locate a need to reform our democratic system in such a way that we sponsor and encourage healthy democratic action in diverse forms. This should include reform to support young people's right to democratic action.

A reversal of current policies contributing to the criminalization of young public protest is one place we could start; greater access to valued, direct engagement with political institutions and elites – such as meeting local councillors – might be an option. The driving force behind systemic reform to counter young abstention from democratic institutions must be that young citizens have the right to be represented in our democracy and the right to hold it to account if they are not.

As such, votes at 16 would place elections as an instrument for representation and oversight firmly into the toolbox of diverse methods for action. A recent study from the University of Vienna that examined votes at 16 in Austria – where it is already law – concluded that extended suffrage was no miracle cure for poor turnout, but resulted in something perhaps more interesting: 16 and 17-year-olds showed remarkably similar levels of knowledge and motivation at the ballot box, as well as comparable decision making on the ballot, to older generations. Although young people are not monolithic, and assuming we support elections in principle, this is deeply encouraging for votes at 16. The vote lives.

Votes now

Experience in Austria could be applicable in the UK, too. A rich body of research since the late 1990s indicates that young people in the UK remain supportive of elections in principle despite deep cynicism their efficacy in practice. Extending the vote to 16 and 17-year-olds now, as part of the systemic reform Mycock and Tonge discuss, would put elections firmly back into the toolbox for political action. Suffrage could be a headline reform that indicated to young citizens that their voices and their oversight are necessary to our democratic system.

More importantly, the vote can be made more secure among a diverse range of tools for democratic action that must also include direct and participatory methods like public demonstration, petitioning and civil society as political action and not just obedient citizenship. Finally, and as is perhaps most vital, the vote at 16 would put democratic oversight for systemic reform to a greater extent into the control of the citizens to which that reform is responsible. If reform of the political system will make democratic

institutions more representative of and accountable to the young, we should commit to better representation and accountability now. Votes at 16 can be part of that.

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The Austrian experience shows that there is little risk and much to gain from giving 16-year-olds the vote

Markus Wagner & Eva Zeglovits

On 24 January, the Labour Party's shadow justice secretary Sadiq Khan called for the voting age in all elections and referendums in the UK to be lowered to 16. There are, he said, three good reasons for such a reform: it is a right that 16-year-olds deserve to have; it would stimulate political engagement; and it would lead to higher turnout in the longer term. These are not arguments that we need to debate from a purely theoretical standpoint: in Austria voting at 16 was introduced for all elections in 2008. So, what does the Austrian experience tell us about the validity of Khan's standpoint?

Khan's first argument is that at 16 Britons have many of the rights and duties of other citizens, including paying tax and National Insurance if they are working. They are also mature and interested enough to take meaningful decisions in elections. So, it is only right for them to be able to vote as well.

We do not want to pass judgement on the moral or legal right of citizens under 18 to take part in elections. However, what we can say is that in Austria there is good evidence that at 16 citizens are just as interested and motivated to participate in politics as other citizens under 25. There have been some suggestions that citizens under 18 are not yet adult and mature enough to participate meaningfully, but in Austria there is no substantive evidence that this is the case. Despite their youth, the level of political knowledge among those under 18 is also comparable to that of slightly older Austrians. Evidence from other countries where those under 18 (such as from the UK) do not have the right to vote is not useful here as having the right to vote may change the way young citizens think about politics. Indeed, in Austria we have found that political interest among young people aged 16 and 17 increased after they were granted the right to vote.

Second, Khan says that lowering the voting age would 're-energise political debate and engagement in the UK' and 'encourage young people to get more involved in mainstream politics'. These are ambitious claims for what is, in the end, a rather minor political reform. We would not go so far as to claim that the nature of politics in Austria has changed in any fundamental – or even minor – way as a result of the reform. For example, it is not obvious that party campaigns at elections take young voters' needs or preferences more into account. There has also been no noticeable uptick in youth participation in politics in general. Here, Khan's rather grand claims are wishful thinking.

And, finally, this reform might lead to higher turnout in the long term as schools could provide necessary information and encouragement, leading to higher voting rates among young voters. Here, Khan is on firm ground: current political science research does show that voting is a habit that is acquired early on in life, and it is a habit that is rarely broken

once it is there. Those who start out voting are likely to do so again, but those who fail to vote at their first election are less likely to pick up the habit later on.

However, for this to be a reason to lower the voting age, citizens under 18 would have to be more likely to vote than their peers just over 18. For Austria, we know that in some regional elections 16 and 17 year olds' turnout exceeds turnout of older first time voters by 8 to 10 percentage points. But preliminary evidence indicates that the difference was less pronounced in the 2013 federal elections, and this means the reform would be less likely to lead to significant long-term changes in overall turnout levels.

Yet, Khan is right to stress the need for measures to accompany a lowered voting age, for instance increased citizenship education and the provision of voting booths. In Austria, there have been several measures to encourage those in school to go out to vote. However, as people get used to the fact that 16 year olds have the right to vote, the effort and attention paid to first time voters seems to diminish. Schools always play a role in fostering political interest; what we have found is that this role becomes even more important when young people have the right to vote. What is even more essential is that young voters are reached out to even if they have left school already: turnout is already unequal across social groups, so we have to take care to address in particular those who are least likely to be interested in politics and to turn out to vote.

Politicians should not over-sell the benefits of lowering the voting age. Yet it is also a reform that carries few dangers and can motivate schools to reach out to and motivate young people. So, more important than whether the voting age is lowered is the question of *how* this is done and what measures accompany the reform.

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

Craig Berry

Young people are far less likely to vote than other age groups. 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 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.

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16 and 17 year olds can be part of our democracy even if they do not have the vote

Andy Mycock & Jonathan Tonge

Gordon Brown established the Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC) as Prime Minister in 2008, and the Labour Party's laudable concern with youth disengagement has continued in Opposition. In 2013, Labour established the '[People's Politics Inquiry](#)', designed to examine aspects of political culture, democratic participation and how to reconnect people to parliament, as part of an attempt to address Britain's 'flat-lining democracy'.

Usefully, the Inquiry does not seek refuge in denial of the challenges in reconnecting with young citizens and it supports the YCC proposition to develop alternative modes of political discussion, such as encouraging political debate and decision-making through social media. Labour's Inquiry is not however sufficient in addressing the need to revitalise traditional forms of engagement. This is, in part, because the development of Labour's youth citizenship policy appears to have been pre-empted by the party's determination to lower the voting age.

In his 2013 [party conference speech](#), the Labour Party leader, Ed Miliband, expressed his desire to 'give a voice' to young people by giving the vote to 16 and 17 year olds and 'make them part of our democracy'. Miliband's support for lowering the voting-age was rightly grounded in a belief that voting in elections is important – a merciful rejection of over-publicised [Russell Brand](#)-esque inanities concerning a precious right for which many people died. Many citizens who get into the habit of voting early in life may well continue to do so as they get older. But while there are some serious arguments for lowering the voting age in an ageing society, it is not a panacea to issues of youth engagement and could actually prove more damaging in the long term to youth political activism.

The primary drawback with the proposition to lower the voting age is that it is a response to the symptoms of political disengagement – declining turnout – rather than the causes. Adjustment of the voting age, whatever its merits or deficiencies, will not redress the numerous issues which impair civic engagement amongst young people. The YCC final report noted that young people do not feel politicians or policy-makers take them or their concerns seriously. Political parties develop few youth-centric policies in elections that might resonate with younger voters – or fulfil such promises once in power. Young people feel elected politicians are often inaccessible to them and are poor at communicating policy in terms they are familiar. Moreover, there are few young politicians that younger voters can emphasise with and the political culture that drives local and national democracy is often perceived as infantile and insular. It is clear that democratic participation is hindered by issues of trust and efficacy of politicians and the political system.

Moreover, Miliband's focus on possession of the vote as the key determinant of democratic citizenship would suggest that those under the legal voting age – regardless of whether it is 16 or 18 – are not part of 'our democracy'. This is a deeply segregated approach that appears to simply seek to shift the 'glass ceiling' of full citizenship downwards without recognition that ages of responsibility do not coalesce around the age of 16. Proponents of 'votes at 16' regularly cite issues of marriage, taxation, and army service as evidence of the right to vote. Such claims are open to contention in terms of universality across the UK and overlook a wider age inconsistencies with regards to citizenship rights. Furthermore, the YCC undertook an audit of the ages of responsibility and noted successive governments had encouraged an upward trajectory. For example, young people between the ages of 16 and 18 are now compelled to continue in education or training, a state-imposed restriction not applicable to older citizens. It appears rather at odds to deny potential young voters unfettered access to the rights and freedoms of full citizenship but argue they are politically mature enough to vote.

Some proponents of 'votes at 16' appear to believe that structural reform in terms of voter eligibility will transform how government and political parties engage with and represent young people (see chapter four by Adonis and Tyndall). By expanding the electorate, politicians will radically alter their attitudes and actions towards young voters, encouraging a shift with regards to policy focus towards younger voters and more young people standing for election. Such optimism is laudable but speculative, based on assumptions that political elites will voluntarily reform established forms of practice and representation due to moderate expansion of the youth electoral constituency. It is not explained why political parties and politicians have typically overlooked or sought to engage with the large group of 18-24 year-old voters.

The points raised above do not preclude the possibility of lowering the voting age at some point in the future. But the enhancement of youth political engagement to encourage life-long modes of participation requires a more sophisticated review of the quality as well as the quantity of participation. Supporters of 'votes at 16' rightly seek to enhance our democracy but fail to acknowledge that focus on the reform of the franchise places the responsibility for decline in democratic participation squarely on the shoulders of the electorate. The detrimental impact of an under-reformed political system and culture that has become increasingly insular, self-selecting, and unrepresentative is clearly a significant contribution to political disengagement. Suggestions that young people should be compelled to vote in their first eligible elections, as recently proposed by the IPPR think-tank, similarly seek to address the symptoms not the causes of youth political disengagement.

There are lessons to be learnt from other countries where evidence suggests that lowering the voting age to 16 has little negative impact on overall turnout levels, with newly-enfranchised young voters voting in similar numbers as their older counterparts. The benefits can be short-term though. For example, the experience of Brazil suggests that disillusionment amongst 16 and 17 year-old voters can quickly set in if the political system

and its actors are not prepared to reform their attitudes and behaviour. This has seen youth turnout decline, even though voting is compulsory (after the age of 18). More worryingly, evidence from Norway suggests that youth political literacy and engagement beyond elections is not significantly enhanced when the voting age is lowered. The failure to undertake reform of our political institutions, culture and policy frameworks to represent young people more proportionally before lowering the voting age could further diminish the legitimacy of elections and the wider democratic process in the UK in the long-term.

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We don't need to lower the voting age to ensure MPs listen to the views of young people

Mark Harper MP

My arguments for opposing the extension of the voting age to children — those below the age of majority — have nothing to do with [Sarah Champion's](#) straw-man arguments about people's competence, intelligence or ability to reach a rational decision. My point is simple. We have to have a voting age, and some people will be on one side of that cut-off point and some people will be on the other. I think there is general agreement about that. The real question is where we set the age. My view is that the right age is the age at which we decide that someone moves from being a child to being an adult. That is the right cut-off point at which someone should be able to vote and make a serious decision about who governs their country.

One argument put forward by those who favour votes at 16 is to allege that in a range of policy areas 16-year-olds have certain rights. Proponents tend to set out half the story but forget to fill in the missing pieces. In England and Wales it is perfectly true to say that 16-year-olds can get married, but there is a significant qualification, namely that they have to have permission from their parents. We do not accept, therefore, that 16-year-olds are capable of making that important, life-changing decision; we say that they must have parental consent.

When it comes to joining the armed forces, there are again two important qualifications. First, although 16-year-olds can join Her Majesty's armed forces, they cannot do so without the consent of their parents. We do not accept that 16-year-olds should be able to join the armed forces purely on their own say-so; we insist that their parents' consent to that decision. Secondly, we do not deploy 16-year-olds in theatres of armed conflict. We make a clear decision, following on from the UN convention about child soldiers, that we do not deploy young people in conflict zones until they attain the age of 18.

I accept that there are some things that people can do at the age of 16. The age of sexual consent is 16, although there are two scenarios in which we do not accept that someone under 18 is able to make a sensible decision. In a case under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 of abuse of a position of trust, we make a distinction between those aged 16 or 17, and those aged 18 or over. We make a similar distinction about whether someone is able to consent to be in pornography. We say that they are unable to do so until they are 18, for sensible reasons of child protection that I very much support.

On the school leaving age the trend on that issue is in the opposite direction. We are now mandating education or training until age 18, although I recognise that that applies in England and not in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. The age limit for purchasing tobacco has changed, for sensible reasons. Personally, I have no problem with adults

smoking. I do not think it is a pleasant habit, but I think that adults should be free to make the decision to smoke, although I would not do so myself. However, we think that we should protect children from tobacco, and we do not allow them to purchase it until they are 18. It would be a bit odd to say to children, “We don’t think you’re able to make a decision about smoking tobacco until you’re an adult, but we do think you’re able to vote for representatives who will make decisions about legislation.”

We do not let people gamble until they are 18, with the exception of playing the national lottery and buying certain scratchcards. Many film classifications still have an 18 certificate. We accept that there are many items of subject matter in films, videos and DVDs that we should not allow children to watch. Since I have been in Parliament, there has been an interesting debate — again, one of its proponents was someone who thinks that we should lower the voting age — after which the Houses of Parliament passed the Sunbeds (Regulation) Act 2010, in which we decided that those under 18 years of age were not capable of exercising a decision whether to have a tan or not. That may or may not be a sensible decision — I did not feel particularly strongly one way or the other — but I find it slightly odd that the same people who pass legislation saying that someone must be an adult to make such decisions think that we should lower the voting age. That is not very intellectually consistent.

The reason why I have focused on these age categories is that if we do not set the voting age at 18 — the age at which we suggest that children become adults — I am slightly concerned about where we will set it. I am concerned that once we move it to 16, there are no good reasons why we should not make it 14 or 10, for example. We say that 10 is the age of criminal responsibility, at which people may be held accountable for their actions, so why not 10, 12 or 14? I have met plenty of 14-year-olds in my constituency who are perfectly capable of listening to facts and arguments, making very good arguments themselves and making up their own minds. By [Sarah Champion’s](#) argument, there is no logical reason why I should not give them the vote. If we move away from 18, there is no obvious place to stop, which I think is a good reason for sticking where we are today.

In 2004, the Electoral Commission published the results of a review that it had carried out on the age of electoral majority; the review took 12 months and was pretty extensive, and it was set up under the previous Government. Having carried out that research, the Commission concluded that the minimum voting age should stay at 18. That conclusion was based on international comparisons; on the minimum age limits and maturity, and on research that the Commission had carried out among the public, which suggested there was strong support for keeping the minimum voting age at 18 and which also showed that young people themselves were divided on the question.

The Commission also referred to voter turnout, although I have to say that the argument about voter turnout is not my strongest argument; just because people between the age of 18 and 25 turn out to vote at very low levels, that is not in itself an argument against reducing the voting age. Having said that, it is an odd argument that lowering the voting

age will engage more people, because there is no evidence that suggests that 16 to 18-year-olds would turn out to vote in higher numbers than those aged between 18 and 25.

The Commission recommended that the candidacy age should be brought into line with the voting age and thus be reduced from 21 to 18. That is a very sensible proposal. It seems to me that if someone is able to vote and make a decision about who their representatives are, they ought to be able to stand to be one of those representatives themselves. The House has debated the issue previously and I know that a number of younger people have been elected to local authorities, although no one under the age of 21 has been elected to the House of Commons. As I say, the suggestion seems perfectly sensible, but it prompts a question. If someone believes in reducing the voting age to 16, do they also believe that 16 to 18-year-olds ought to be able to be candidates at elections?

There is an obvious difference between enfranchising women and reducing the voting age. Unless something horrible happens, a 16-year-old will become an 18-year-old in due course and will then be able to vote. Women, who were unable to vote were never going to be anything other than women and therefore were never going to be able to vote. So giving the vote to women is qualitatively different from giving the vote to children, because a 16-year-old may not be able to vote today but will of course be able to vote in two years' time.

As an MP, I visit youth projects and schools. I visit schools right down to primary schools, where I talk to very young children, and right up to secondary schools, including sixth forms, where there are students who are old enough to vote today. I treat all the young people I meet with great respect. First, I respect them in themselves; we debate and have arguments. Secondly, I am of course very well aware as an elected MP that if I am talking to a 13-year-old today, in five years' time that person will indeed be casting a vote. When I was first elected to the House in 2005 and I went round schools, I was very clear that in 2010, when I would be seeking re-election, any 13-year-olds to whom I spoke would indeed have a vote and would be able to make a decision on my future.

Consequently, I just do not follow the argument that just because someone is not entitled to vote today that we pay no attention to their views, because we only pay attention to people who can vote. I pay attention to the views of all my constituents. Some of my constituents — for example, Jehovah's Witnesses — do not vote because they choose not to, but I still listen to their views and take their arguments seriously. About 30% of my constituents chose not to vote at the last general election, but when people come to me to state their views on something, I never engage in a conversation with them about whether they are likely to vote for me. I treat everyone's views with great respect, so the idea that we do not listen to young people and we do not pay attention to what they think — that we do not think about tuition fees, education or similar things just because young people under the age of 18 are not able to vote — does not hold water.

We have to set the line somewhere, and I think that the right place to set it is the age of majority — the age of 18 — when we basically decide that children become adults. That is where I think the line is best left. I do not think that that means that we do not engage with children in debates and arguments in schools and colleges; I and all other MPs do engage with children in that way perfectly well. If we treat young people with respect and engage them in the argument, they will have more respect for us than if we just agree with something that some of them think.

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16 and 17 year olds are not fully autonomous, and therefore should not be allowed to vote

Dan Degerman

In September of this year, the Scottish people will take a decision regarding the future of their nation and its relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom. While nationalists and unionists are currently entangled in a fierce battle for their desired result, until recently, the shape of the electorate itself was a key point in the debate.

The question of who should be allowed to vote in a democratic referendum may seem anachronistic to citizens of a society where seemingly everyone, regardless of sex, race or class has equal political say. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that the UK denies some of its citizens right to formal participation. The voting rights of individuals with mental disorders are constrained, and incarcerated convicts are denied the right completely. Significantly, individuals under the age of 18 are systematically disenfranchised.

The basis of this practice is the supposition that minors lack the somewhat opaque capacities necessary to manage the complexities of democratic participation. The generally accepted purpose of voting in democratic referenda is to legitimize governmental power. By authorizing a government through the electoral process, citizens express their consent to its power. Legitimate consent, however, can only be given by self-governing individuals. Thus, put differently, the consensus has been that minors lack the autonomy requisite to be able to grant legitimate political consent.

In the autumn of 2013, parliament passed into law the *Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Act 2013*, which lowered the age of electoral majority for the referendum to 16, potentially setting precedence for decreasing the voting age in future elections. Some of the voices in favour of this reform argued that it was justified because it would raise voter participation. Obviously increasing the size of the electorate is certain to raise absolute participation numbers. Yet, this fact is irrelevant because it fails to demonstrate that adolescents have a right to vote. Others attempted to assert this right. Youth interest groups have argued that since 16 year-olds are allowed to express consent in some situations, such as sexual relations, they should be permitted to consent in political elections as well. It should hardly be necessary –although it evidently is – to point out that ability in one sphere of social life need not imply any rights in another.

The stronger arguments for voting-age reform relies on scientific evidence. There is some neuroscientific research which suggests that by the time adolescents are 16, their brain is sufficiently developed to support adult-like reasoning capabilities. Such arguments reflect the growing importance of neuroscience in the political and legal discourse. However, they fail to prove that adolescents are autonomous. Coarse neurobiological maturity

demonstrates only that adolescents have the potential to become – not that they are – autonomous.

Autonomy is itself difficult to define. However, scholars generally agree that self-rule requires both positive capacities, such as particular cognitive capabilities; and negative freedoms, such as freedom from coercion. Beyond this there is little consensus. However, since we are interested in a specifically democratic form of autonomy, we can turn to actual democratic and legal conventions for two minimal criteria with which a useful conception of autonomy must correspond: 1) Democratic sensibilities demand that a majority of persons in a society either do or can reach the threshold necessary for democratic participation. 2) Legal and cultural praxes suggest that autonomy is not an all-or-nothing matter, but that it may obtain in different degrees. For example, in Scotland, a child under 12 cannot be prosecuted for a criminal offence; the drinking age is 18; and the age of sexual consent is 16.

To consider whether adolescents should have the right to vote, we must find a construct of autonomy that conforms to these criteria. Given the aforementioned proliferation of neuroscience in politics, it would also be preferable if it were compatible with scientific evidence. One construct that appears to rise to the challenge is the self-maintenance model of autonomy, developed by Professor Alvaro Moreno Bergareche and colleagues at the University of the Basque Country.

In this view, autonomy is the adaptive self-maintenance of identity through interaction with the environment. A person's engagement with the environment generates an increasing number of physical and mental constraints, such as abilities, desires, values and beliefs. Identity is the totality of these constraints at a given point in a person's life. As someone engages with their environment, they simultaneously change their environment. Consequently, the feedback from the environment to the person changes, which engenders new constraints or alters old ones by strengthening or weakening them, leading to yet more changes in the environment. A more complex system, with a large number of strong constraints, will be a more autonomous system, since any single action will have less of an impact on the identity of the system. Complexity, in effect, makes it easier to self-maintain identity.

This conception acknowledges that humans are intrinsically social beings that exist in the context of intricate cultural structures. These structures demand complex, extrinsic behaviour of the humans within them in exchange for protection and care they provide. We become autonomous within these societies through social interactions with other humans and in relation to the social responsibilities we have. Therefore, any questions regarding particular thresholds of autonomy, such as voting age, must be answered in the context of a given society.

In light of this construct, in evaluating whether people are autonomous, we must take into account three factors: biological maturity, social interaction and time. It may be the case

that the neurobiological maturity of the average 16-year old is identical to that of an 18-year old. However, a 16-year-old lacks access to a range of important opportunities for social interactions that an 18-year-old has. For example, particular levels of schooling or work experience, legal ownership of particular items, the right to drink, the right to drive, and parental emancipation. Let us call such items *technologies of autonomy*: social artefacts that enable individuals to generate new and culturally particular constraints and to effectively maintain and develop an identity within their environment. Since adolescents are denied access to the social resources that might permit their biological potential to germinate, they cannot be autonomous. Therefore, they do not have a right to vote.

The British 19th century legal scholar, James Fitzjames Stephen once wrote that “power precedes liberty.” Rights, as he saw it, were only useful insofar as people had the capability to exercise them effectively. This seems to hold true for the right to vote as well. The act of voting is meaningless unless it is carried out by individuals who have the power to govern their own actions. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the government to empower voters to render decisions that are in the voters’ own interest. However, in the contemporary British discourse, this responsibility seems to have been replaced by a focus on granting people rights that they have not been taught how to use.

The case for lowering the voting age is less persuasive now than at any point in the last 50 years

Andrew Russell

Craig Berry's call for a referendum on the lowering of the minimum age of voting seems irresistible, since it would bring the entire topic of youth engagement with politics into the mainstream and ensure an informed and reasoned debate.

A curious feature of the current debate, exemplified in a recent article by former Labour minister Lord Adonis, is that proponents of lowering the voting age tend to essentialise the age of 16 as some accepted landmark of adulthood at the very time when evidence suggests that if it ever was such a landmark it longer can be considered the case. Law changes around childhood protection and social change mean the case for reducing the minimum age of voting in the UK is less persuasive now that at any point in the last half century.

Independent lives?

Lord Adonis asserted that:

“Given that 16 year olds are judged old enough to leave home, to marry, to lead an independent life, and even join the Army, it is hard to argue in the modern age that they shouldn't also have the vote.”

This familiar argument holds little water. The rights that young people can accrue at 16 are minimal, irrelevant and diminishing.

Sex: the age of consent is now 16 for all forms of consensual sex in the UK (provided that it does not involve a person in a “position of trust” over a 16-19 year old). I fail to see the connection between lifestyle matters and voting rights, nevertheless the sexual age of consent is perhaps the only example of the age-restrictions in UK law being relaxed in recent years. In almost every other regard the movement has been in the other direction.

Leaving home: the law allows for 16 year old to leave home but not in a way that allows them to be considered independent. Empirically, very few 16-17 year olds do leave home – in fact 90% still lived in parental homes in 2012 according to the ONS.

Furthermore only someone aged 18 or over can legally sign a tenancy agreement and local authorities must legally provide shelter for those under 18s presenting as homeless after the Law Lords judgement (G. vs Southwark 2009). A cynic might wonder whether such protective rights for vulnerable people under 18 can really be sustained once they are afforded the trappings of full citizenship such as voting rights.

Education: In the 1980s 16-17 year olds chose to stay in education in unprecedented numbers while the drive to expand access to Higher Education, and the economic crash of 2008 exacerbated this tendency. In fact according to the official figures, 92% of 16-17 year-olds now stay on.

The new English law raising the participation age means that young people have to stay in education or training tied to formal educational qualifications until aged 18 from 2015.

Taxation: The 'no taxation without representation' mantra is often used to support votes at 16. Our research for the Electoral Commission found that in 2001 thanks to relatively high tax thresholds and poor youth wages, only around 9% of 16-17 year olds actually earned enough to qualify to pay income tax, raising the participation age (education-leaving age) will reduce the proportion of economically-active and tax-paying 16 and 17 year olds further. And of course the Boston Tea Party was organized in protest against the type of indirect taxation that all consumers from 8-80 are subject to.

Marriage: Those under 18 need parental permission to marry in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (although not in Scotland). Under 18s can enlist in the UK armed forces – but again need parental permission to do so. Arguing that rights that require 'parental permission' justify extending the franchise seems rather bizarre.

Moreover the practice of young marriage is thankfully now the preserve of the super-religious only. The proportion of 16-17 year olds marrying in the UK has fallen dramatically in the past five decades. ONS statistics show that while in 1959 184 boys and 3,973 girls had married at the age of 16, by 2009 only 18 boys and 88 girls married at 16.

The Armed Forces: The UK's signature on the Protocol of the UN Convention of the Human Rights of the Child means that 16-17 year olds are kept out of active service. The argument that young people can fight and die for their country before they can vote in the UK is untrue. Recruitment at 16 (with parental permission) continues – with an obligation to serve until age 22 – but this seems a very good argument for raising the age at which people can enlist rather than one for reducing the voting age.

Child Protection: Just like the protection for homeless young people mentioned above, there are countless examples of law changes being made in recent years to protect vulnerable children and young people. In every case the protective rights run to the age of 18. It is precisely because these young people are not yet recognized as full citizens that this protection has been afforded. Enfranchising 16 and 17 year olds might imperil these hard-earned rights. In recent years the UK has legislated so that the age at which one can legally buy tobacco, fireworks, have a tattoo, or visit a tanning booth has been raised to 18. These increased age thresholds, explicitly recognizing the need to protect young people make it hard to argue that 18 is not the recognized age of adulthood.

Turnout and engagement

I do not accept the routinised arguments that asking 16 year olds to wait two years before being allowed to vote is the equivalent to historical obstacles to working class and female suffrage.

Neither do I care for the birthday lottery argument another familiar argument (infrequent General Elections mean some electors will have to wait until far too long to vote) which seems to disregard the ability to vote in national elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, for elected Mayors, the Greater London Authority, the European Parliament, local councils, Police and Crime Commissioners (not to mention by-elections).

It seems to me that the effect on turnout is probably the weakest of all arguments in favour of changing or keeping the current voting entitlements. Nevertheless turnout issues do need looking at with more care than simply asserting that changing the law will improve youth engagement.

Although it's frequently said that lowering the voting age in Austria has improved turnout in the youngest sections of society the evidence is mixed at best. Even in a research paper that supports the law change, Wagner et al. (2009) found that the average intention of turning out for 2009 European Parliament elections was lower for under 18s (59.1%) than for any other part of the electorate (62.4 for 18-24s and 73.8% for those over 30).

Elsewhere the story is even less convincing. As Jo Saglie states there is no evidence of increased political interest and engagement among 16 and 17 year olds in Norway when a lower voting age was trialled in local elections. Nearer to home the reduction of the voting age in the Isle of Man was disastrous. A hastily introduced reform with an apparently compromised public awareness campaign saw only just over one-third of eligible 16-17 year olds registered to vote in the Tynwald elections of 2006, and barely one-half of those actually voted.

Finally, some contemporary campaigners for votes at 16 have rather let the cat out of the bag by arguing that such a move would increase the chances of young people voting since in Sarah Birch's words "more of them live with their parents and attend school". So while some proponents argue 16 year olds should be enfranchised not because they are independent, others argue they should be enfranchised because they are not!

I think that you need a very good reason to make a fundamental change to voting rights – particular one like changing the age of majority which would be virtually impossible to undo once introduced. The so-called independence of 16 year olds simply isn't good enough.