


Votes at 16: what the UK can learn from Austria, Norway and the Crown dependencies

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By Democratic Audit UK

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Implementing the proposal in Ed Miliband's party conference speech to lower the voting age would make Britain one of only a few countries to allow 16 year olds to vote. In this post, Democratic Audit asks leading democracy experts to share findings from nations that have introduced this change, focusing especially on Austria, Norway and, from closer to home, a number of the UK's Crown dependencies.

Professor John Wall, Departments of Philosophy, Religion, and Childhood Studies, Rutgers University

Labour leader Ed Miliband's call to lower the UK voting age to 16 represents another step in a scattered but growing global movement to expand child and youth suffrage in modern democracies. Several countries now permit votes at 16 in national elections, including Brazil, Austria, Cuba, Nicaragua, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Guernsey, Jersey, the Isle of Man, and parts of Norway; and other countries for local elections, including Germany and Israel. Approximately 30 nations have separate children's parliaments in which minors from 6 to 17 elect representatives, propose policy changes, and in some cases control parts of budgets. The widest-ranging proposal, considered but shelved by the German parliament in 2008, was for suffrage to be granted to all citizens at birth, but exercised by a parent or guardian until deciding when to pass it on to each child. In addition, it should not be forgotten that the UK voting age was only lowered from 21 to 18 in 1969.



The main argument for lowering the voting age is that persons under 18 constitute a third of humanity yet lack representation in matters deeply affecting their lives. Lacking enfranchisement contributes to minors constituting most society's poorest and least protected members. Research has shown in the US that 16 and 17 year olds are equally knowledgeable and competent to vote as young adults. Children's parliaments have proven that children as young as 6 can be engaged, thoughtful, and effective voters. Like women and the poor in history, children may only appear unready to vote because they have so far lacked the opportunity to do so. From these perspectives, Miliband's proposal continues a long historical struggle to democratize democracy.

Sarah Birch, Professor of Comparative Politics, University of Glasgow

Following Ed Miliband's announcement that he believes the voting age should be lowered to 16, there has been speculation as to the likely effects of this proposal on turnout. The experience of other countries suggests that 16 and 17 year olds may actually be more likely to vote than 18 year olds, as more of them live with their parents and attend school.



When the voting age was reduced to 16 in Austria, turnout rates of 16 and 17 year olds were found to be comparable to those of the electorate at large. Moreover, turnout was found to decrease with age from 16 to 20, with older teenagers exhibiting less civic appetite than their juniors. In a trial that

involved reducing the voting age in local elections to 16 in a selection of Norwegian municipalities, turnout among 16 and 17 year olds was also higher than is generally the case for first-time voters. (See further discussion below.)

Reducing the voting age to 16 could thus help to alleviate youth abstention. Furthermore, research shows that if people vote in the first election for which they are eligible, they are more likely to continue voting throughout their lives. Increasing turnout among younger voters could have a 'booster effect' on overall turnout levels in the medium to long term.

Stephen Williams, Member of Parliament for Bristol West

If Parliament had accepted [my proposals](#) in 2005 the UK would have set an example to the world. That's no longer the case. One EU member state, Austria, has allowed 16 year olds to vote since 2007. Most German states, Lander and cities allow 16 year olds to vote. The Burgermeister of Hannover, Bristol's twin city, has to appeal to 16 year olds as well as 46 year olds. Brazil, one of the world's largest democracies, has long allowed sixteen year olds to vote. Neighbouring Argentina has recently followed their example.



But it's here in the British Isles that the most relevant change has taken place. In 2006 the Isle of Man lowered the voting age. Jersey and Guernsey followed in 2007. The Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly want to give their sixteen year olds the vote but need Westminster approval. Most compelling of all is the recent agreement by the UK government to allow the Scottish Parliament the right to set the franchise for the referendum on Scotland's future with the UK, in 2014. So British citizens are already voting for their elected representatives in the Crown dependencies. Scots teens north of the border could hold the key to the future of the United Kingdom. The genie is now out of the bottle. It is time to trust all British 16 year olds with the franchise.

Eva Zeglovits, Department of Methods in the Social Sciences, University of Vienna and member of the demand side team in the Austrian National Election Study

Austria lowered the voting age to 16 for all elections and referenda in 2007. Evidence from Austria can help to check if arguments used in the debate on lowering the voting age hold true in reality, in particular turnout and the quality of the vote choice of newly enfranchised teenagers. Opponents doubt if 16 and 17 year olds are mature enough to be given the right to vote. Lack of political interest and knowledge, they argue, will lead to low turnout and an ill-qualified vote choice. On the other hand supporters presume that 16 and 17 year olds could be prepared for their first election by their parents and schools, and thus expect high turnout and a well informed vote choice.



Results from Austria show, that turnout of 16 and 17 year olds is in fact higher than turnout of older first time voters, and it is nearly as high as overall turnout. Moreover, although teenage voters are still less interested than adult voters, they are able to make an informed choice. The congruence between attitudes and the vote choice of teenage voters is comparable to adult voters. Austrian teenage voters

seem to be mature enough to participate and to make a meaningful vote choice. In all, evidence from Austria by now encourages the supporters of the lowering of the voting age. Future elections will show if this is just a novelty effect or if the trends will be stable in the long run.

Dr Jo Saglie, [Institute for Social Research](#), Oslo

At the 2011 local elections in Norway, the voting age was lowered from 18 to 16, as a trial in 21 municipalities. 58 per cent of the enfranchised 16 and 17 year olds voted. This was somewhat lower than the overall turnout level of 63 per cent in these municipalities, but much higher than the turnout among regular first-time voters (aged 18–21), which was 46 per cent. Two factors explain the high turnout. First, 16 and 17 year olds are more easily mobilised than their slightly older peers. They still go to school, live at home, and have not moved out of their local community. Second, the selected municipalities made considerable efforts to mobilise their young voters – this was also a prestige project.



A stated purpose of the trial was to increase the political interest and engagement among the participating 16 and 17 year olds, but research indicates that there was no such effect. Political maturity is an issue in the voting age debate in Norway, but may not be decisive. As political maturity gradually increases with age among adolescents, any age limit is to some extent arbitrary. Thus, the debate in Norway has also focused on normative and constitutional issues – such as consistency in age limits.

Democratic Audit also featured an [earlier post](#) in which experts debated the merits of the proposal to lower the voting age in the UK.

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