

Votes at 16: democracy experts respond to Ed Miliband's proposal

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By Democratic Audit UK

2013-9-27

Ed Miliband used his speech to the Labour Party conference this week to [announce his support](#) for lowering the voting age to 16 for all UK elections. This follows the decision to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in the Scottish independence referendum. In this post, Democratic Audit asks leading experts and practitioners to respond to Miliband's proposal.

Dr Sonja C. Grover, Faculty of Education, Lakehead University, Ontario

A peculiar thing about the arguments generally advanced in opposition to lowering the voting age to sixteen is that they are decidedly undemocratic arguments. They usually reduce to the proposition that children of age sixteen or older but under eighteen are incompetent to claim their inherent right to the vote; that inherent right to suffrage being affirmed, for instance, in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights at Article 21(3) which refers to “universal and equal suffrage.” The end result is that while adults of particular identifiable groups denied suffrage historically have been permitted to struggle for the vote based on a claim to an inherent human rights entitlement, the issue of the vote at age sixteen has been deftly but erroneously transformed by opponents into a mere domestic social policy issue.



Thus there is a stark, legally insupportable failure to acknowledge the true nature of the struggle for the vote at sixteen as a fundamental human rights matter that impacts the degree to which society is prepared to recognize and respect children's human dignity. We are left then with a two tier system incompatible with democratic principles; one in which those with the political and economic power and the vote (namely adults) are able to deny children aged sixteen and older a fundamental human right based on nothing more than a pretence; a purported concern for strengthening democracy while in fact acting so as to weaken its underlying values.

Andrew Mycock, Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of Huddersfield

Ed Miliband's announcement that Labour will seek to lower the voting age to 16, if elected in 2015, is a symptom-led policy presented as a panacea to embedded structural problems in our democracy. Extending the franchise to 16 year olds is often presented as a fundamental human right. If this is true, the vast majority of democratic states are guilty of contravening international conventions. 'Votes at 16' is framed as recognition of the political maturity of young citizens and their potential to enrich democratic politics. However [research](#) suggests many young people feel they lack knowledge and experience in their schools and communities to participate fully in mainstream politics.



The age of responsibility does not coalesce around the age of 16. Young people need parental permission to marry or join the army. There is no minimum age for paying income and many other taxes. Indeed Labour pushed up age of responsibility when in power. Lowering the voting age to 16

would create a 'two-tier' citizenship where the very youngest voters are denied the universal rights of adulthood and might be considered 'second class' citizens. Labour party need to recognise they are a causal factor in youth democratic disengagement, isolating young people from representation and policy-making within the party and prioritising the concerns of older voters. A substantial change in the culture of politics is required before lowering the voting age is considered.

Yasmin Rufo, Young Mayor of Ealing

Given Ed Miliband's pledge on allowing 16 and 17 year olds to vote, Scotland's referendum, the changes to school leaving age and political education being a top priority, there is no better time than now to implement votes at 16. Now that the government has raised the school leaving age to 18, 16 and 17 year olds, through the encouragement of teachers and peers will be more likely to go out and vote. Looking at previous elections, it is clear that if you vote the first time that you are allowed to then you are more likely to regularly vote.



By getting more young people involved in politics through citizenship and political education we should see an increase in the number of young people interested in politics and wanting to pursue a potential career. The average age of an MP is 50 and there are only 147 female MPs (out of 650). Hence it is vital that the government looks to see how best to engage young people. As Ed Miliband said in his speech, 'let us hear the voices of people that haven't been heard for a long time, and change politics'.

Stuart Wilks-Heeg, Senior Lecturer in Social Policy, University of Liverpool

While the campaign for "votes at 16" now has real traction, the momentum behind it is puzzling, for at least four reasons. First, young people are not generally passionate about their right to vote. Less than half of 18-24 year olds voted at the last three general elections. These figures are hardly surprising given that around 4 in 10 are not even registered. Second, there is little evidence of widespread public support for votes at 16. A recent poll found 60% of the public were against lowering the voting age, with even a majority of 18-24 year olds opposed. Third, Britain is not out of line with international norms. The qualifying age to vote is 18 in all but a few democracies. A handful of states have lowered the voting age over the last decade or so, but there is no sign of a general shift internationally towards votes as 16.



Finally, even the cynical argument that political parties support votes at 16 for reasons of partisan advantage doesn't really hold water. If we make the highly questionable assumptions that a clear majority of 16-17 year olds would register to vote, cast a ballot and support a single political party, the numbers involved would still be too small to make a difference anywhere other than in the most marginal constituencies. I once proposed, in jest, that the level of popular interest in any particular constitutional reform option tends to be inversely proportional to its likely impact on the political system. "Votes at 16" feels like the paradigmatic case.

Vivian Hamilton, Associate Professor of Law, William and Mary School of Law



Democratic legitimacy requires the presumptive electoral inclusion of members of the political community. Democratic systems may nonetheless legitimately impose competence-related electoral qualifications. Age-based line drawing with respect to the development-related attainment of electoral competence is a practical necessity, but the state owes its citizens its best effort (some effort) to first ascertain a principled yet pragmatic conception of electoral competence, then to assess young people's attainment of it, and finally to draw the voting-age line in a manner consistent with that assessment. I argue for a [cognitive-process-driven conception](#) of electoral competence. It requires "adultlike" rather than "mature" reasoning processes, because there is no universal state of maturity attained by all, or even most, adults.

Cognitive capacity improves more or less linearly throughout childhood and reaches adultlike levels by mid-adolescence. By ages 15 or 16, adolescents are as able as adults to acquire, retain, and retrieve relevant information and apply to it reasoning processes that lead to justifiable conclusions. But while they have adultlike abilities to think and reach rational judgments, adolescents' capacities are more susceptible to being confounded by the real-world contexts in which they make decisions. When they must either make decisions quickly or under pressure, or when they are highly emotional or stressed, adolescents' performance suffers.

Elections, however, are a decision-making domain in which adolescents' cognitive-processing abilities would almost certainly remain uncompromised. Elections unfold over a period of time, giving voters the opportunity to deliberate and evaluate options without undue pressure. Many sources of information are readily available, which serve as scaffolding or heuristics to help voters evaluate their choices. And voting itself is done anonymously and in private, which diminishes the concern that adolescents' choices will be unduly pressured or influenced by their peers or others. Young people reliably attain electoral competence by age 16. Thus, labeling them incompetent is error and can no longer justify their continued exclusion.

Ruth Fox, Director, Hansard Society



A principal argument of those campaigning for votes at 16 is that it will rejuvenate youth political engagement and electoral turnout. This is bafflingly illogical. Young people who already have the vote are increasingly unlikely to use it. At the last general election only 44% of 18-24 year olds voted and in the [Hansard Society's](#) latest Audit of Political Engagement only 12% of them say they are 'certain to vote' at the next election; a decline of 16 percentage points in the last decade.

Politicians need to explain what exactly is going to be different about politics, parties and voting that is going to persuade 16 and 17 year olds to engage and participate when their 18 and 19 year old brothers and sisters don't.

And it's worrying when politicians try and sell an instrumental approach to voting; that the vote will give 16 and 17 year olds a voice so they can get the outcome they want. It's very rare for an individual vote to have such an impact; down that road lies disappointment. There needs to be

renewed emphasis on voting as a social duty and civic responsibility with other forms of engagement and participation providing a more effective platform for young people to have a say and make a real difference.

Professor Patrick Dunleavy, Co-Director, Democratic Audit

The calls to extend the franchise to the 1.5 million 16 and 17 year olds across the UK are likely to become irresistible after the Scottish independence referendum. Every genuine democrat should welcome this change and advocate for it to come swiftly. People below 18 years old can work, must pay tax, and can join the army, claim benefits, have sex, smoke, get married or leave home without their parents' permission. To stop them being able to vote for two more years is arbitrary and not based on any wider concept of adulthood.



Critics of Miliband's proposal will claim 16 year olds are not interested enough in politics to have the vote. Many of those who opposed female suffrage made similar arguments in the early 20th Century. In fact, extending the franchise will create an opportunity to get young people interested in politics, especially while they are still at school or college and part of a settled local community – which political science research shows is absolutely key for political participation. This is a unique opportunity to get young people engaged in political life before they become itinerant students at university or private rental tenants who often move house yearly.

We now have fixed five-year parliaments, so stopping young people voting until they are 18 means many will not get the chance to vote for their government until they are 23 years old. We must try to get people into the habit of engaging with democracy much earlier. Lowering the voting age to 16 is a key first step, but we need to do a lot more to make politics accessible and attractive to all younger folk.

Philip Cowley, Professor of Parliamentary Government, University of Nottingham and member of the government's Youth Citizenship Commission in 2008-09

Much of the commentary on Ed Miliband's speech has labelled his announcements as popular (even, in some cases, populist). If so, votes at 16 is the exception. A recent poll found just 1 in 5 people supported the move.



Whatever else it is, it's not popular, even amongst 16 and 17 year olds. The aim, we are told, is to reinvigorate democracy. But several years ago the Hansard Society investigated what the British thought about their constitution. They found just one part of it that the majority of the public both understood and approved of. That was a voting age of 18. So it is a very strange way to reinvigorate democracy, by taking the only bit that people like and understand, and changing it against majority opinion.

One problem is that the pro-16 campaign is full of myths. Take the claim that if people are allowed to serve in the military it is wrong to deny them the vote. It's a powerful, emotive, argument. But we only allow people to join the armed forces below the age of 18 with parental permission, and then we don't allow them to serve on the frontline until they are 18. The same applies to many of the other myths about direct tax (paid by very few 16 and 17 year olds) or marriage (only with parental permission in England and Wales). If anything, we have been raising the age at which we allow young people to

do things, from buying cigarettes or fireworks to gambling. It's difficult to understand politicians who think that 16 year olds are not to be trusted with fireworks but the vote is just fine.

In follow-up to this post Democratic Audit is featuring [further analysis](#) considering lessons for the UK from other countries that have lowered the voting age to 16.

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