

Votes at 16: Seeking a more enlightened debate on youth disengagement from politics

 democraticaudit.com/2014/07/16/votes-at-16-seeking-a-more-enlightened-debate-on-youth-disengagement-with-politics/

By Democratic Audit UK

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*Democratic Audit recently produced an collection of pieces which addressed the question of whether it is right to re-examine the UK's minimum voting age. The aim of the publication was to heighten the level of debate around the issue, an aim which one of the contributors, **Andrew Mycock**, shares. Here, he argues that one of the most encouraging things about the contributions is the consensus amongst their authors that, regardless of their views of the specific issue of votes at 16, it alone is not a panacea to youth disengagement, and that a wider package of progressive reforms is needed.*

[Click here to read our new e-collection: 'Should the UK lower the voting age to 16?'](#)

The recent announcement by the [Japanese Diet](#) that it will enact a law to lower the legal voting from 20 to 18 years of age from 2018 was significant but largely overlooked by campaigners of votes at 16 in the UK. The reform was notable because Japan was one of the last democratic states that had resisted the global post-Second World War trend to lower the age of enfranchisement to 18. Prior to the war, the voting age in most democratic states was 21. The post-war period has been marked by an informal consensus whereby 18 is seen by most states as appropriate age for young people to be allowed to exercise their democratic rights to vote in state-sponsored elections and referendums.

The decision by the UK government to lower the voting age to 18 in 1969 was pivotal, with many established Western democracies quickly following this bold step. 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.

Recent calls in the UK to lower the voting age to 16 have often been framed in similar terms, rightly drawing our attention to the wider redefinition of 21st century youth citizenship. Supporters of votes at 16 have been typically argued there is an urgent need to correlate the political rights of 16 and 17 year-old citizens with a range of social and economic rights. They have also drawn attention to the political maturity of young people and the potential for lowering the age of enfranchisement to encourage lifelong political participation and literacy that might redress widespread popular democratic disengagement. There is merit in these claims and this is reflected in the groundswell supporting the proposition



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that has brought together many political parties, youth organisations and a growing number of young people.

However debates about voting age in 2014 differ in important ways from those that took place in the late 1960s and contemporary arguments presented by proponents need to reflect this. The lowering of the voting age in 1969 did not create a situation whereby younger voters would be restricted from realising a significant range of citizenship rights. In 2014, lowering the voting age would create a 'two-tiered' citizenship or whereby young voters could be viewed as 'second class' citizens by politicians and simply become disengaged at an earlier age. Moreover evidence from those states that have lowered the voting age for all or some elections to 16 is not conclusive, particularly in terms of aiding long-term political literacy and engagement.

What is often overlooked by those supporting or opposing votes at 16 is their agreement that the proposition alone is not a panacea to problem of youth democratic disengagement and activism. The introduction of a wider package of progressive reforms to enhance youth political literacy, skills and experience in schools and local communities prior to enfranchisement (at 18 or 16) is widely supported. They agree also on the need for political parties and institutions to reform the political culture that shapes British democracy to ensure it is more responsive to and representative of young people.

This consensus is important and must underpin the promotion of more enlightened debate about the role and contribution of young people in British politics. This has been the central aim of the editors of Democratic Audit and members of the Political Studies Association who have developed a series of blogs linked to [the 'Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission: Young People and Politics' project](#). The [on-going inquiry](#) by the Youth Select Committee on the lowering voting is another important initiative seeks to discuss the best ways to engage young people with the political process.

The publication of a [special edited collection](#) by Richard Berry and Sean Kippin of contributions by politicians, academics and campaigners considering whether the UK should lower the voting to 16 further enriches debate. Craig Berry's call within the volume 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 provides common ground for supporters and opponents of the proposition. This would mirror the government in the [Republic of Ireland's](#) commitment in July 2013 to hold a referendum on lowering the voting to 16 before the end of its term in office in 2016. I hope that political parties of all hues in the UK might take up this call too.

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