

New Democratic Audit e-collection: Should the UK lower the voting age to 16?

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By Democratic Audit UK

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Today Democratic Audit releases a new e-collection of pieces which debate the merits of whether to lower the UK's age of enfranchisement from 18 to 16. Featuring expert contributions from campaigners, academics, and politicians, our aim is to heighten the level debate on this proposal. In introducing the report, the co-editors of the report, **Richard Berry** and **Sean Kippin** put the case for the change, and argue that a better standard of debate is sorely required.

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



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 level 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, our primary aim is to promote a more enlightened debate about the proposal.

All too often, it seems, the 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 these 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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[Click here to see to Democratic Audit's new e-collection, *Should the UK lower the voting age to 16?*](#)

Note: this piece represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. The shortened URL for this post is: <http://buff.ly/1qSP0Bg>

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