



BRIEFING PAPER

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Voting age

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Summary

This note considers the issue of lowering the voting age and gives a brief overview of discussions on the voting age in Parliament since 2000.

UK Parliamentary elections

The voting age for UK Parliamentary elections remains at 18 for the whole of the UK and changes to the Parliamentary franchise are a reserved matter for the UK Parliament.

Under current legislation, a person must be 18 or over to vote in all elections in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Local and devolved elections

Responsibility for the administration of elections in Scotland and Wales is now devolved, this includes control over the voting age for the local government franchise. Elections in Northern Ireland are an excepted matter and remain the responsibility of UK ministers in Westminster.

Scotland

Scotland has already lowered the voting age to 16 for local elections. This followed the extension of the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds for the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. The law has subsequently been changed in Scotland to lower the voting age to 16. This applies to elections to the Scottish Parliament and local government elections in Scotland.

Wales

The [Wales Act 2017](#) received Royal Assent on 31 January 2017 and gives the NAW and the Welsh Government legislative competence for the administration of Assembly and local government elections in Wales, including the franchise for those elections. It is expected that the voting age will be reduced to 16 for the next Assembly and local elections.

Party policy

The Labour Party, the SNP, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party all support voting at 16 for all elections.

Historically the Conservative Party has been opposed to reducing the voting age and the Government currently has no plans to lower the voting age for local elections in England or for Parliamentary elections.

However, a number of senior Conservatives, such as Ruth Davidson and Justine Greening, now support votes at 16 and in Scotland the reduction of the voting age for local government and Scottish Parliamentary elections was passed with the support of the Scottish Conservatives.

During the 2010-15 Parliament, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee produced a report on voter engagement.

The committee did not take a view one way or the other but the report, published in November 2014, called on the Coalition Government to lead a national discussion on reducing the voting age and to allow the House of Commons a free vote on the issue.

1. Current position

At a UK Parliamentary election, you must be 18 years of age or older on polling day and appear on the electoral register to vote.

The Parliamentary franchise, the entitlement to vote in UK Parliamentary elections, is reserved to the UK Government. The voting age for UK Parliamentary elections was last lowered in 1969, when it was reduced from 21 to 18.

For local government elections in England, Wales and Northern Ireland the same age restriction applies.

In Scotland, you must be 16 years of age or older on polling day and appear on the electoral register in order to vote in local government elections.

Elections to the devolved administrations use the local government franchise. It means that currently, 16- and 17-year-olds can vote in Scottish Parliament elections, but in Wales and Northern Ireland voters must be 18 years or older on polling day in order to vote in Assembly elections.

Overview

It is not currently Government policy to change the voting age for local government elections in England or for UK Parliamentary elections.

Responsibility for the franchise for local elections and elections to devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales is devolved.

Scotland has already reduced voting age for local and Scottish Parliament elections to 16. Wales has consulted on the issue and is expected to also reduce voting age for local and devolved elections to 16.

Elections in Northern Ireland are an excepted matter and remain the responsibility of UK ministers in Westminster.

Party positions

Historically the Conservative Party has generally opposed reducing the voting age. It officially opposed the measure that was in the *Representation of the People Act 1969* that reduced the voting age from 21 to 18. During the committee stage debate on clause 1, the clause that would lower the age, and amendment was moved to lower the age to 20 years of age. Conservative Members were given a free vote but Labour Members were whipped to vote for 18. Quintin Hogg, the Conservative spokesman, gave his position:

The question is where one must draw the line, a question which is posed in the knowledge that one must draw the line somewhere, and that it must essentially be a question of degree, and not of principle, not of philosophy, but of practical judgment.¹

¹ HC Deb 26 November 1968, c430

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The amendment was rejected by 275 to 121.

The age limit of 20 had been agreed by the Speaker's Conference on electoral reform in 1968, but the Labour Government introduced the 18-year voting age after considering a separate recommendation from the Latey Committee that the age of majority should be reduced from 21 to 18.²

The current Government have made it clear on a several occasions that it has no plan to lower the voting age.³

However, some prominent Conservative politicians, such as Ruth Davidson, Justine Greening and Nicky Morgan support the lowering of the voting age to 16. Writing in a 2016 pamphlet published by the Tory Reform Group, Ruth Davidson spoke of the engagement of 16- and 17-year-olds during the referendum on Scottish independence:

Those in favour of the status quo argue that while the referendum offered a clear, unambiguous choice, parliamentary elections present a more muddled, multi-layered decision which require a more mature electorate.

But having watched and debated in front of 16- and 17-year-olds throughout the referendum, I have found myself unable to agree. My position has changed. We deem 16-year olds adult enough to join the army, to have sex, get married, leave home and work full-time. The evidence of the referendum suggests that, clearly, they are old enough to vote too.⁴

In July 2018, the Electoral Reform Society published a new pamphlet on the case for votes at 16 backed by the Tory Reform Group. The pamphlet was timed to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the *Equal Franchise Act 1928* and contains contributions from some leading Conservative politicians.⁵ Nick Morgan MP writes:

We cannot now have elections in different parts of the United Kingdom where 16- and 17-year-olds can vote and then other elections where they cannot.

But the most patronising argument, which I suspect has been recycled from the time of the Suffragettes, and which really doesn't stack up, is that 16- and 17-year-olds aren't mature enough to vote. Making such a sweeping generalisation on the basis of no evidence whatsoever should be given no air time.⁶

Sir Peter Bottomley makes a similar point:

When I listen to students and apprentices at colleges in my constituency, or to interns in my office, I do not think they are too young to vote. They are impressive and sensible. They are capable of making reasoned judgments.⁷

Of the major political parties in the House of Commons, lowering the voting age is now party policy for the Labour Party, the Scottish National

² Conclusions on review of the law relating to parliamentary elections, Cmnd 3717, July 1968

³ See for example, [PQ 148932, 1 June 2018](#)

⁴ Tory Reform Group, *Giving 16 and 17 Year Olds the Vote: The Tory Case*, 2016

⁵ ERS press release, [Conservatives ramp up calls for PM to back votes at 16](#), 10 July 2018

⁶ ERS, [Civic Duty The Conservative Case for Votes at 16 & 17](#), p12

⁷ *Ibid*, p15

Party and the Liberal Democrats. The Greens also support the proposal, as do several of the political parties in Northern Ireland.

The Liberal Democrats adopted the policy of reducing the voting age to 16 in their 2001 manifesto and this was reiterated in 2005.⁸ In July 2007, the Liberal Democrats published a paper, *Real Democracy for Britain*, which included 20 proposals to strengthen Britain's democracy; one of those proposals was to lower the voting age to 16.⁹ Their manifesto for the 2010 General Election again included a commitment to votes at 16, although this was not included in the Coalition Agreement agreed with the Conservative Party.

Early in 2014 Sadiq Khan, speaking as Labour's shadow Justice spokesman, committed the Labour Party to lowering the voting age if it won the 2015 General Election. He linked it to increased citizenship education to ensure young people had a better understanding of democratic processes:

We need to improve the quality of citizenship education across the board, helping raise the understanding of our democracy and how it works, and aligning this with the ability to vote from the age of... This isn't about politicising the classroom - it's about educating our young people to give them the tools they need to play an active role in shaping the public policy of the future.¹⁰

Scotland

In the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, 16- and 17-year-olds were able to vote. The Edinburgh agreement, between the UK Government and the Scottish Government, enabled the Scottish Parliament to legislate for the referendum. Both Governments agreed that the local government franchise should form the basis of the referendum franchise and that the Scottish Parliament should be able to determine the exact franchise. After a consultation, the Scottish Government decided to extend the franchise on a temporary basis to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote.

Following the referendum and the promise of devolution of further powers, the Scottish Parliament was given the power, by means of a section 30 order under the Scotland Act 1998, to legislate to reduce the voting age in time for elections to the Parliament in 2016.

The *Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Act 2015* received Royal Assent on 24 July 2015. The first Scottish Parliament election in which 16- and 17-year-olds could vote were held in May 2016 and the first local government election in May 2017.

There is more information in Section 3.

Wales

⁸ *The Liberal Democrats: the real alternative*, 2005

⁹ *The Liberal Democrats: Real Democracy*, 2007

¹⁰ *Independent*, Giving the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds is radical, but it's also right; Society deems them responsible enough to pay taxes and get married, so why shouldn't they have a democratic stake in the way the country is run? By Sadiq Khan, 12 February 2014

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The *Wales Act 2017* made provisions for the devolution of the local government franchise and electoral arrangements for the National Assembly for Wales. These were transferred formally in April 2018.

The Welsh Government supports the lowering of the voting age for local government elections. It has recently consulted on local government electoral reform in Wales.

The consultation points out that the franchise for elections to the Assembly is linked to the local government franchise. Extending the local government register to include 16- and 17-year-olds would, without changes to the current legislation, apply automatically to voting at Assembly elections. The Welsh Government has said “It will, of course, be for the Assembly to determine, if it so wishes, to remain affixed to the local government register.”

The Presiding Officer of the National Assembly for Wales established an independent Expert Panel on Electoral Reform to examine the number of Assembly Members, the voting system to be used for Assembly elections and the voting age for Assembly elections. The Expert Panel concluded that the minimum age for Assembly elections should also be reduced to 16.

There is more detail in Section 4.

Northern Ireland

Elections in Northern Ireland are an excepted matter and remain the responsibility of UK ministers in Westminster.

In November 2012, the Northern Ireland Assembly supported a Private Members' Business motion from Sinn Féin in favour of lowering the voting age to 16.¹¹ The motion was opposed by the Democratic Unionist Party. Sinn Féin supports lowering the voting age to 16 across the whole island of Ireland.¹²

¹¹ [Northern Ireland Assembly Official report, 6 November 2012](#)

¹² [Lower voting age to 16 across Ireland - Kelly, 11 August 2017](#)

2. Calls for change

Summary

In recent years there has been pressure for a reduction in the voting age from 18 to 16.

Supporters of votes at 16 point out that 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, and say it is illogical to deny such people the right to vote.

Opponents argue that some of these arguments are not fully thought through. Joining the army and marriage below the age of 18 requires parental permission. The age at which you can legally purchase cigarettes, alcohol and fireworks is 18 and the Government recently announced proposals to ban anyone under 18 buying acids. Opponents question whether 16- and 17-year-olds can be trusted with the vote if they cannot be trusted to do these other things.¹³

The Expert Panel established by the National Assembly for Wales to consider electoral reform for Assembly elections (see Section 4) considered how lower voting age would fit with the ages at which other rights and responsibilities arise.

The panel concluded:

that the reality is that there is no single age at which a young person takes on all the responsibilities and rights of an adult citizen. While comparisons between the ages at which young people acquire rights and responsibilities, or start to exercise those rights and responsibilities, may be relevant, we do not find them compelling in making the case for or against a reduction in the voting age.¹⁴

2.1 Children and Young People's Unit - 2002

The Labour Government's Children and Young People's Unit produced a report entitled *Yvote?Ynot?* in July 2002 which examined the reasons for falling turnout amongst young people.¹⁵ This acknowledged calls for a reduction in the voting age, but stated that it was not the Labour Government's policy to reduce it:

As far as lowering the voting age is concerned, it is clearly necessary to decide at what minimum age most people are sufficiently politically aware, mature, and independent to make up their minds and choose between the various candidates standing for election. On balance, Government takes the view that there is more likely to be a higher percentage of people aged 18 who are able to do this than at 16. In addition, 18 years of age is the most common minimum age for voting throughout the world and in the European Union. When this issue was last debated in the House of Commons in December 1999, during the passage of the Representation of the People Act 2000, an amendment to lower

¹³ LSE, *Votes at 16: democracy experts respond to Ed Miliband's proposal*, September 2013, Democratic Audit summary of expert opinion gathered after Ed Miliband announced the Labour Party supported lowering the voting age to 16.

¹⁴ *The report of the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform*, December 2017, p187

¹⁵ *Young people and politics: a report on the yvote?/ynot? project*. Children and Young People's Unit. 2002

the minimum age of voting from 18 to 16 was rejected by an overwhelming majority. Nevertheless, the Government's mind is not closed on the issue and it would welcome public debate about the merits or otherwise of lowering the voting age.¹⁶

2.2 Votes at 16 campaign -2003

The *Votes at 16* campaign was launched in January 2003 by a coalition of political parties, pressure groups and charities. An article in the *Guardian* gave further details:

Votes at 16 is supported by Barnardos, the Children's Society, YMCA England, National Youth Agency, National Children's Bureau, Children's Rights Alliance for England, Liberal Democrats Youth and Students, SNP, London Young Labour, Plaid Cymru, National Union of Students, Article 12, Charter 88, UK Youth Parliament, Children's Parliament in Scotland, British Youth Council, Care Leaver's Association, National Black Youth Forum, Electoral Reform Society and the Carnegie Young People's Initiative.¹⁷

The aims of the campaign are given on its [website](#):

We want our political system to recognise the abilities of 16-year olds. To properly include us in our society and show us the trust and respect that society expects of us by giving us the right to vote.

There are over 1.5 million 16- and 17-year-olds in the UK denied the vote. We are a campaign made up of young people, organisations and network of politicians across the UK.

We're ready for Votes at 16 because it will:

- engage 16- and 17-year-olds at the ballot who hold many responsibilities in our society
- empower 16- and 17-year-olds, through a democratic right, to influence decisions that will define their future
- inspire young people to get involved in our democracy.

The UK Youth Parliament is a supporter of the Votes at 16 campaign and calls for the reduction in voting age in its manifesto.¹⁸

2.3 Electoral Commission review of the voting age - 2003

The Electoral Commission was established in 2001. One of the Commission's statutory roles is to reports on how well elections were run and make recommendations to improve future elections.

The Electoral Commission conducted a review of the voting age with a period of public consultation over the summer of 2003. The review reflected growing calls from a wide range of organisations to consider lowering the voting age in order to promote participation in democracy and to address the issue of disengagement particularly amongst the young.

¹⁶ Ibid, p 53

¹⁷ [New coalition bids for votes at 16](#), *Guardian*, 28 January 2003

¹⁸ [UK Youth Parliament manifesto](#)

The Commission published its findings in April 2004.¹⁹ Although most responses to its consultation paper supported a voting age of 16, more general opinion polling had suggested strong support for keeping to the present minimum. The Commission therefore recommended that:

The minimum age for all levels of voting in public elections in the UK should remain at 18 years for the time being.²⁰

However, the Commission qualified its recommendation:

...circumstances may change the context significantly over the next few years. In particular, citizenship teaching may improve the social awareness and responsibility of young people. There may also (perhaps partly in response to this) be a wider debate about the general age of majority that can better inform consideration of individual age-based rights. We propose further research on the social and political awareness of those around age 18 with a view to undertaking a further review of the minimum age for electoral participation in the future.

The Electoral Commission would therefore expect to undertake a further formal review of the minimum voting age within five to seven years of this report. We would encourage the Government to consider in the meantime initiating a wider review of the age of majority, given the length of time that has passed since the last one.²¹

This role of making recommendations on electoral matters was previously undertaken by the Home Office. The Howarth Working Party on Electoral Procedures was the Home Office review of the 1997 General Election. It did not consider voting age:

We have no specific remit to consider franchise issues, which cannot be considered to be electoral procedures. We have not therefore looked at question of voting age, nor of registration of overseas voters.²²

2.4 The Power report - 2006

The Power Commission was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust to find out what was happening to British democracy and why people were disengaged from politics. The Commission drew up a set of proposals and recommendations to increase political participation and presented these in a final report, *Power to the People*, published in February 2006.²³ Recommendation 16 was to lower the voting and candidacy age to 16 (with the exception of candidacy for the House of Lords).

The Power Commission explained its recommendation:

Our own experience and evidence suggests that just as with the wider population, when young people are faced with a genuine opportunity to involve themselves in a meaningful process that offers them a real chance of influence, they do so with

¹⁹ *Age of electoral majority: report and recommendations*, Electoral Commission, April 2004

²⁰ *Ibid*, p5

²¹ *Ibid*, p5

²² For background on the Howarth working party see Research Paper [99/94](#), *The Representation of the People Bill*

²³ *Power to the People*, Power Commission, February 2006.

enthusiasm and with responsibility. We recognise that few people take an interest in a sphere of life or an area from which they have been deliberately excluded. Reducing the voting age to sixteen would obviously be one way of reducing the extent of such exclusion for many thousands of young people, and of increasing the likelihood of their taking an interest, and taking part, in political and democratic debate.²⁴

The report outlined the need to include young people in the political process as early as possible in order to create a basis for greater political engagement in later life.²⁵

In response to the suggestion that reducing the age of voting could have an effect on the turnout at elections the Power report rejected this argument:

We have also heard the claim that reducing the voting age to 16 will drive down turnout figures as the youngest age groups have the lowest turnouts. This argument suggests that a significant reform should be rejected on the grounds that its results may embarrass politicians and reinforce the widespread view that the party and electoral system are disliked. This cannot be accepted by the Commission as an adequate reason to reject reform.²⁶

Citizenship education became a statutory subject within the National Curriculum in 2002 for key stages 3 and 4 in England. Citizenship education was introduced in part as a response to a widely held belief that the public were becoming less and less interested in politics and issues of governance, and more distrustful of political institutions and politicians.²⁷

The authors of the *Power* report believed that citizenship education was likely to be weakened because of the gap between key stage 4 and voting. Those leaving school at 16 might have to wait 6 or 8 years before they can cast their vote:

It is worth remembering that we enlist 16 years olds into the armed forces and expect them to pay taxes if they are earning so they should be able to participate in the selection of those who govern them. We believe that any reform to encourage young people to engage politically will be very severely limited in its effectiveness while the current constitutional, party and electoral arrangements remain in force.²⁸

2.5 Youth Citizenship Commission - 2007

On 3 July 2007 Prime Minister Gordon Brown delivered a statement to the House of Commons on Constitutional Reform.²⁹ He said that as part of wider debate on citizenship, the voting age should be considered:

²⁴ Ibid, p199

²⁵ Ibid, p199-201

²⁶ Ibid,p199-201

²⁷ House of Commons Standard Note, [SN/PC/4125](#), *The Political Process and Citizenship Education*, 17 August 2006

²⁸ *Power to the People*, Power Commission, February 2006, pp201

²⁹ [HC Deb 3 July 2007 c815-833](#)

Although the voting age has been 18 since 1969, it is right...to examine, and hear from young people themselves, whether lowering that age would increase participation.³⁰

The Green Paper, *The Governance of Britain*, stated that there would be a Youth Citizenship Commission which would, amongst other things, consider the voting age.³¹

The Youth Citizenship Commission published its recommendations following a consultation. It did not recommend a reduction in the voting age, acknowledging that while the issue was a valid one for consideration, the evidence it heard was based on a small sample and not necessarily representative. The Chair of the YCC, Professor Jonathan Tonge, summarised the Commission's findings in his foreword to the report:

It was important to the Commission that our response to the consultation was made on an evidential basis. Arguments and feelings were strong on both sides. The majority of respondents favoured a change: over 300 of the responses were in favour of lowering the voting age to 16. However, this is a relatively small and not necessarily representative sample of the population. A majority of 16- and 17-year-olds were in favour of lowering the voting age in our segmented survey; whilst all categories from the age of 18 upwards were opposed to change.

We have found that there is a real evidence gap on this issue. Nevertheless, we make what we hope are constructive recommendations based on the evidence that we have, although we realise that these may not completely satisfy campaigners one way or the other on this issue.

Most importantly, we think that while enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year-olds is a valid issue for consideration, it is not the key component of any strategy for better engagement of young people.

2.6 Political and Constitutional Reform Committee - 2014

In the 2010-15 Parliament, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, a predecessor committee to Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, produced a report on voter engagement.

The Committee did not take a view one way or the other but the report, published in November 2014, called on the Coalition Government to lead a national discussion on reducing the voting age and to allow the House of Commons a free vote on the issue:

We have received a significant amount of evidence that extending the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds could have a positive impact not just on voter engagement for young people, but also on voter engagement overall in the medium to long term. We as a Committee take no view on whether the franchise should be extended, but recommend that Parliament leads a national discussion on this matter and that a motion on the issue is

³⁰ [HC Deb 3 July 2007 c819](#)

³¹ [The Governance of Britain, CM 7170 July 2007](#)

brought forward in 2015 to allow the House of Commons a free vote on its view, with a view to the introduction of legislation if appropriate.³²

A previous report on electoral law and administration by the Home Affairs Committee in 1998 found briefly considered the franchise but found that, “no great concern was expressed in the evidence we have received over the extent of the franchise, i.e. who should be entitled to vote in UK elections.”³³ It did however, make recommendations about overseas voters and double registration.

2.7 The UK Youth Parliament

At the 2016 Youth Parliament’s (UKYP) sitting in the House of Commons, MYPs voted in favour of making “Votes for 16- and 17-year-olds in all public elections” UK Youth Parliament’s national campaign for 2017.³⁴

This was repeated at the 2017 sitting and votes for 16- and 17-year-olds was again made the national campaign for 2018.³⁵

The UKYP has been campaigning for a number of years for the voting age to be reduced. In its 2011/12 manifesto it stated, “We believe that 16- and 17-year-olds are long overdue the right to vote in public elections in the UK”.³⁶

It argues, in common with many supporters, that 16- and 17-year-olds 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 and say it is illogical to deny such people the right to vote.

³² [Voter engagement in the UK](#), Political and Constitutional Reform Committee fourth report 2014-15, November 2014, p78

³³ Home Affairs Committee, *Electoral Law and Administration*, HC 768 1997-98, October 1998

³⁴ [United Kingdom Youth Parliament Debate, 11 November 2016, c63](#)

³⁵ [UK Youth Parliament campaigns](#)

³⁶ [UK Youth Parliament manifesto 2011/12](#)

3. Votes at 16 in Scotland

Summary

In the referendum on Scottish independence, held on 18 September 2014, 16- and 17-year-olds were able to vote.

This followed an agreement between the Scottish and UK Governments to allow for a legally binding referendum to be held in Scotland on the question of independence. In that agreement, the governments agreed that it would be a matter for the Scottish Parliament to determine the voting eligibility in the referendum.

The Scottish Parliament passed the required legislation, the *Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Act 2013*, which made provisions to register 16- and 17-year-olds and allow them to vote.

Following the referendum, agreement was reached on devolving further powers to the Scottish Parliament. This included the power to permanently reduce the voting age in Scotland for all devolved and local elections.

The *Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Act 2013* was passed by the Scottish Parliament and it received Royal Assent on 7 August 2013. The first elections that 16- and 17-year-olds could vote in were the Scottish Parliament elections, held in May 2016.

3.1 Referendum on independence for Scotland

In the referendum on Scottish independence, held in September 2014, 16- and 17-year-olds could vote if they had registered. Section 2(1) of the *Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Act 2013* set out the franchise for the referendum.³⁷

This followed a memorandum of agreement between the Scottish and UK governments. The memorandum made provision for a Section 30 Order that enabled the Scottish Parliament to legislate for the referendum, including the franchise to be used.³⁸

Both governments agreed that all those entitled to vote in Scottish Parliament and local government elections in Scotland should be able to vote in the referendum and that extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds was a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

The Scottish Government's consultation on the referendum had set out a proposal to extend the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds to vote and the subsequent *Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Bill* made provisions for this.

³⁷ [Scottish Independence Referendum \(Franchise\) Act 2013](#)

³⁸ [Agreement between the UK Government and the Scottish Government on a referendum on independence for Scotland, 15 October 2012](#)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, David Mundell, made a statement in the UK Parliament on the referendum agreement and gave further details about the franchise:

Although both Governments agree that the basis of the franchise will be that for the Scottish Parliament elections, the Scottish Government have proposed to extend the franchise to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote. It will be for them to make the case for that change and to deal with the technical issues that may arise. There is, of course, a range of opinions in this House about changes to the voting age. However, having agreed the principle that the Scottish Parliament should have the legal power to legislate for the referendum—that it should be a referendum “made in Scotland”—the Government accept that it should be for the Scottish Parliament to determine the franchise. I fully expect that the Scottish Government’s proposals will be debated robustly in the Scottish Parliament. Any decision taken by the Scottish Parliament for the referendum will not affect the voting age for parliamentary and local government elections anywhere in the United Kingdom.³⁹

Sir Gerald Howarth (Conservative) suggested that this would create a precedent for other elections but David Mundell said that the UK Government had no plans to change the voting age.⁴⁰ Ann McKechin (Labour) sought assurances that 16- and 17-year-olds would be able to register to vote in the same way as adults over the age of eighteen and the Minister drew attention to some of the difficulties that would arise from extending the franchise for the referendum:

As the hon. Lady knows, that is one of the significant complexities that the Scottish Government will face if they bring forward their proposals to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote. If they use the current electoral register, they will essentially allow only those who are 16 years and 10 months old to vote. If they wish all 16- and 17-year-olds to vote, they will have to create their own register, and that carries with it significant complexities.⁴¹

To be able to vote in the referendum on Scottish independence a person had to be on the electoral register for local government elections in Scotland and be aged 16 or over.

The 2013 Franchise Act made provision for a separate electoral register for young voters. Each Electoral Registration Officer in Scotland was required to create and maintain a Register of Young Voters (RYV) and a form was sent out to households to ascertain whether anyone resident there was eligible to be on the RYV.

The *Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Bill* was first introduced in the Scottish Parliament on 11 March 2013 and the Bill received Royal Assent on 7 August 2013. A page on the Scottish Parliament’s website gives details of the proceedings on the Bill and links to the debates.⁴²

The final number of 16- and 17-year-olds registered to vote in Scotland, as of 18 September 2014, was 109,533; accounting for 2.6% of the

³⁹ HC Deb 15 October 2012 c65

⁴⁰ HC Deb 15 October 2012 c68

⁴¹ HC Deb 15 October 2012 c71

⁴² [Scottish Independence Referendum \(Franchise\) Bill: stages of the Bill](#)

total referendum electorate and equivalent to around 89% of all 16- to 17-year-olds resident in Scotland.⁴³

3.2 Scotland in the UK: an enduring settlement

Following the independence referendum result, the UK Government announced the establishment of the Smith Commission. This was to convene all five of Scotland's main political parties in discussions aimed at reaching an agreement on which additional powers should be devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

Although the running of local elections in Scotland was devolved, the franchise for those elections had been reserved by the *Scotland Act 1998*.

This Commission published its report in November 2014 and recommended that the Scottish Parliament should have the power to make provisions for the conduct of its own elections, including extend the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds, allowing them to vote in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election.⁴⁴

On 22 January 2015 the Government published a Command Paper, *Scotland in the United Kingdom: An enduring settlement* which took forward the Smith Commission Agreement.⁴⁵

However, the UK Government had already taken the first steps to transfer the power to alter the franchise for Scottish elections to the Scottish Parliament (see 3.3 below).

3.3 Reducing the voting age for Scottish Parliament elections

On 15 December 2014, David Cameron, then Prime Minister, confirmed that Scotland would be given the power to permanently reduce the voting age for local and Scottish Parliament elections.⁴⁶

A Section 30 Order, under the *Scotland Act 1998*, gave the Scottish Parliament the power to extend the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds in time for elections to the Scottish Parliament in 2016, and for local government elections in Scotland in 2017. The Order transferring the power took effect on 20 March 2015.

The *Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill* was introduced in the Parliament on 2 April 2015.⁴⁷

The [Policy Memorandum](#) published by the Scottish Government to accompany the Bill stated that the voting age would be lowered for any

⁴³ [Scottish Independence Referendum 2014](#), Library Research Paper 14/50

⁴⁴ Smith Commission, *Report of the Smith Commission for further devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament*, 27 November 2014

⁴⁵ *Scotland in the United Kingdom: An enduring settlement*, Cm

⁴⁶ [David Cameron accepts Scottish Parliament votes at 16](#), *BBC News*, 15 December 2014

⁴⁷ See the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) briefing, *Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill*

other poll which used the Scottish local government franchise (for example, elections for membership of a National Park authority). Arrangements would also be put in place “in relation to the registration of 14 and 15-year olds to ensure that they are able to vote in those elections as soon as they attain the age of 16”.⁴⁸

On 18 June 2015, the *Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill* was passed and received Royal Assent on 24 July 2015.⁴⁹ The first election in which 16- and 17-year-olds could vote were the Scottish Parliament election on 5 May 2016.

In Scotland, the Scottish Conservatives opposed the inclusion of 16- and 17-year-olds in the referendum on Scottish independence held in 2014. However, when the Scottish Parliament debated legislation to permanently reduce the voting age for local government and Scottish Parliamentary elections the Scottish Conservatives supported the move and the Bill was passed without a vote.⁵⁰

Ruth Davidson announced that she supported lowering the voting age. Writing in September 2015 she said:

In the weeks following the [Scottish independence] referendum, the debate has inevitably shifted onto whether the franchise should now be extended to all other elections. Those in favour of the status quo argue that while the referendum offered a clear, unambiguous choice, parliamentary elections present a more muddled, multi-layered decision which require a more mature electorate.

But having watched and debated in front of 16- and 17-year-olds throughout the referendum, I have found myself unable to agree. My position has changed. We deem 16-year olds adult enough to join the army, to have sex, get married, leave home and work full-time. The evidence of the referendum suggests that, clearly, they are old enough to vote too.⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age): Policy Memorandum*, 2 April 2015

⁴⁹ *Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Act 2015*

⁵⁰ See the Stage 1 debate on the *Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill*

⁵¹ *Giving 16- and 17-year-olds the vote: the Tory case*, Tory Reform Group, 27 September 2015

4. Proposals in Wales

From 1 April 2018, powers have been devolved to the National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Government for the conduct and administration of local and Assembly elections. This includes the power to alter the franchise for Assembly and local government elections.

The Welsh Government has previously voiced support for the lowering of the voting age. The National Assembly for Wales voted in 2013 expressing support for the votes at 16.

Background

In 2015 a package of reforms was set out in the St David's Day Agreement between the main political parties in Wales.

The Secretary of State for Wales, Stephen Crabb, outlined the main recommendations in the Agreement relating to elections:

The National Assembly should have the power to lower the voting age to 16 for Assembly elections. The Assembly already has the power to lower the voting age to 16 for a referendum on devolving income tax powers.

All powers relating to Assembly and local government elections should be devolved. This includes deciding the electoral system, the number of constituencies, their boundaries, the timing of elections and the conduct of the elections themselves.⁵²

The process culminated with the passing of the *Wales Act 2017*.⁵³

The National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Government have consulted separately on electoral arrangements. Both are considering the franchise.

The Assembly has consulted on its own electoral arrangements and has already confirmed it intends to legislate to change its name to the Welsh Parliament. The Welsh Government has already said it supports votes at 16 and included the issue in a wider consultation on local government reform.

4.1 Local government franchise

In July 2017, the Welsh Government issued a consultation on local government reform in Wales.⁵⁴ It covered cooperation between councils and voluntary mergers, the role of councillors, the role of community councils, and electoral arrangements.

As part of the consideration of electoral arrangements the Welsh Government was seeking opinions on a number of measures. This included reducing the voting age. Other measures included considering

⁵² [Landmark funding announcement and new powers for Wales in St David's Day Agreement](#), Wales Office press release, 27 February 2015

⁵³ The background of the process that led to the Wales Act is outlined in the [Library briefing produced in for Second Reading](#) of the *Wales Bill 2016-17*

⁵⁴ Welsh Government, *White Paper: Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed*, 31 January 2017

an alternative voting method for election to councils and a single electoral register for the whole of Wales.

The summary of responses was published in July 2017.⁵⁵ Of the responses received relating to voting age, 25 of the 28 responses (89%) supported lowering the voting age to 16. The main reason cited by the summary was that it is a positive thing to promote interest and participation in young people, and would “serve to breathe new life into politics”⁵⁶

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, Mark Drakeford, then announced a second consultation specifically on electoral reform for local government in Wales.⁵⁷ The consultation asked respondents to state whether they agreed with the Welsh Government that the voting age should be reduced. In the consultation the Welsh Government argued that 16- and 17-year-olds are in a position to be well informed and engaged in politics:

The case for enabling 16-year-olds to vote has been well-rehearsed. With most of the 16- and 17-year-old cohort these days being in school, it makes them far more exposed to political education of some sort than was the case in previous generations. Use of social media and electronic media sites is high amongst this age group and discussion of major political events is common.

Citizenship and political education are important parts of the curriculum and learners currently have the opportunity to study politics and current affairs through Personal and Social Education, Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) and the new Welsh Baccalaureate.⁵⁸

The consultation responses to all the aspects of electoral reform are still being considered but the Welsh Government have, on several occasions, has committed to introducing legislation to reduce the voting age for local government elections.

4.2 Franchise for National Assembly/Welsh Parliament elections

In 2013 the National Assembly for Wales voted in favour of lowering the voting age. This was before the new powers giving responsibility for its own elections were transferred. The vote came about as an amendment to a motion tabled by the Labour administration on “promoting open, transparent and accountable local democracy and the importance of encouraging greater diversity in Local Government.”

Amendment 7 to the motion, tabled by Aled Roberts of the Liberal Democrats added to following to the motion:

Regrets that around 77,000 16 and 17 year olds in Wales are currently denied the vote and believes that democratic

⁵⁵ Welsh Government, *White Paper - Summary of Response Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed*, July 2017

⁵⁶ Ibid, p50

⁵⁷ Welsh Government, *Written Statement - Consultation on Electoral Reform*, 18 July 2017

⁵⁸ Welsh Government, *Consultation document: Electoral Reform in Local Government in Wales*, July 2017

accountability would be strengthened by allowing 16 and 17 year olds to vote in elections to local councils.

The amendment was carried 41 votes to 5, with 7 abstentions. The final motion was carried 42 votes to 0 with 12 abstentions, with only Conservative AMs abstaining.

Following the passing of the *Wales Act 2017*, and in anticipation of the power to take control of its own elections, the National Assembly Llywydd and Assembly Commission set up an [Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform](#).

The Panel's final report was published on 12 December 2017. It has recommended that the minimum voting age for Assembly/Welsh Parliament elections should be reduced to 16.

The franchise for National Assembly for Wales elections is currently tied to the local government franchise. The Expert Panel noted that any legislation brought forward by the Welsh Government in relation to the local election franchise is likely to sever the automatic link with the Assembly franchise. In its view the Assembly should, as a matter of principle, determine its own franchise in legislation for future elections to the Welsh Parliament.

The Expert Panel considered the extent to which there is coherence or consistency in the age thresholds for different rights and responsibilities which apply in the UK. It concluded that the reality is that there is no single age at which a young person takes on all the responsibilities and rights of an adult citizen.

It also considered the available research on the potential impact on turnout. It noted that studies were limited. In Austria, where 16- and 17-year-olds can vote in all elections, this age group was more likely to turn out than those aged 18 to 21 but less likely than older voters. This is similar to the experience so far in Scotland (see Section 5.2).

The Expert panel concluded that 16- and 17-year-olds were most likely to engage with the democratic process if the extension of the right to vote was combined with a targeted information campaign:

As few places have reduced the minimum voting age to 16, evidence allowing these arguments to be tested remains limited. However, what evidence there is tends to support the expectation that 16- and 17-year-olds are indeed more likely to vote than 18 to 24-year-olds, if their enfranchisement is part of a package that also includes the provision of information tailored specifically for this age group.⁵⁹

The Expert Panel also considered whether extending the franchise to include 16- and 17-year-olds could harm public confidence in the Assembly, if there were insufficient public support for such a change.

An Assembly consultation for young people in 2014-15 showed over half the respondents favoured lowering the voting age but opinion polls about lowering the voting age have tended to show limited support in

⁵⁹ National Assembly for Wales, *The report of the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform*, December 2017

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older age groups.⁶⁰ However, the Expert Panel noted that the issue is not of high importance to those adults surveyed. The Panel noted that scrutiny of any proposals brought forward by the Welsh Government or the Assembly would raise the profile of the issue in the near future.

⁶⁰ NAW research briefing, *Lowering the Voting Age to Sixteen*, 23 January 2018

5. Number of 16- and 17-year-olds in the UK

According to the 2016 mid-year population estimates from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) there are nearly 1.5 million 16- and 17-year-olds in the UK. This represents around 2.8% of the population aged 16 and over.

POPULATION OF THE UK				
The mid-2016 population estimate for the UK and the 2017 General Election electorate				
	Population aged 16 and 17	Population aged 18 and over	2017 GE electorate	Population aged 16 and over
United Kingdom	1,490,000	51,768,000	46,826,000	53,258,000
England	1,256,000	43,483,000	39,297,000	44,739,000
Scotland	116,000	4,373,000	3,988,000	4,489,000
Wales	71,000	2,485,000	2,298,000	2,556,000
Northern Ireland	48,000	1,427,000	1,243,000	1,474,000

Note: The 2017 General Election electorate is not necessarily the number of unique electors. People may be legally recorded on more than one register, for example students and others with second addresses. **Sources:** ONS, [Population estimates for the UK: mid-year 2016](#); HOCL, [General Election 2017](#).

Not all 16- and 17-year-olds would be eligible to register to vote if the voting age requirement was reduced.

To register to vote for elections to the UK Parliament a person must be a British, Irish or a qualifying Commonwealth citizen resident in the UK, and not be subject to any other legal incapacity to vote. Citizens of another EU country resident in the UK may register to vote in local government and devolved bodies' administrations but are ineligible to vote in UK Parliamentary elections.

Analysis of the Labour Force Survey suggests that based on current nationality and age criteria there are an estimated 47.7 million people eligible to register to vote in Parliamentary elections.⁶¹ If the voting age were to drop to 16, and nationality criteria remained the same, the eligible population would increase by around 1.3 million to 49 million people. Note that these estimates ignore other qualifying criteria.

5.1 What would the impact be if 16- and 17-year-olds could vote?

It is not possible to predict how many 16- and 17-year-olds would turn out to vote nor how they would vote. There is no official data on turnout by age, but polling data suggests that the two age groups least likely to vote are 18 to 24-year-olds and 25 to 34-year-olds. However, extrapolating about the behaviour of 16- and 17-year-olds based on those aged over 18 may not be appropriate as the experience in

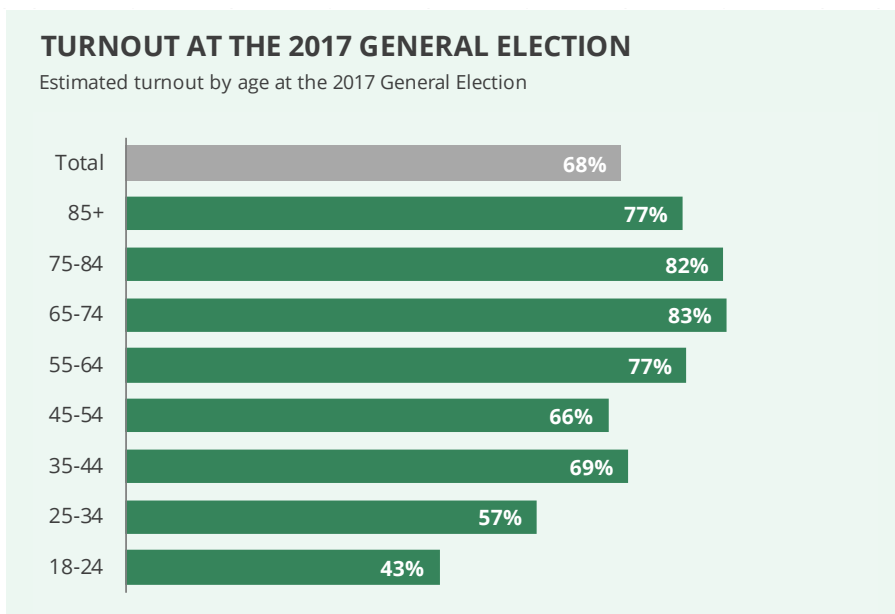
⁶¹ ONS, [Labour Force Survey](#), Q2 2017. Respondents with no answer for nationality have been removed; figures rounded to nearest 1,000; ignores other criteria which may result in ineligibility to vote; people who are eligible to vote may not necessarily register to vote.

Scotland appears to suggest that voters under 18 have, so far, been more likely to turn out than their slightly older compatriots (see Section 3.2).

The 2017 General Election was the fourth in succession in which turnout increased. Turnout was 68.8% across the UK, up from 66.2% in 2015 and the highest General Election turnout since 1997 (71.4%).⁶³

The *Guardian* reported that the increase in turnout at the 2017 General Election was driven by younger voters, with more than half of those aged 18-24 turned out to vote, an increase of 16 percentage points on 2015.⁶⁴

The British Election Study face-to-face survey is considered the “the gold standard” measure of turnout because it is the only survey that validates respondents’ self-reported turnout against the electoral record.



Note: data weighted with the wt_vote_valid variable. Turnout **Source:** British Election Study, 2017 BES Expert Survey.

Recent analysis by the BES team of their 2017 face-to-face survey⁶⁵ suggests that the “youthquake” is a myth and that younger voters were no more likely to vote in 2017 than previously.

“There is no evidence of a surge in voter turnout amongst the youngest eligible voters (indeed turnout in the youngest age group is actually slightly *lower* in our 2017 survey)... There was likely a small increase in turnout across a large age range, with a slightly larger rise for those aged 30-40. The margin of error means that we cannot rule out a small increase (or decrease) in youth turnout in 2017. We can be confident, though, that there

What is the BES face-to-face survey?⁶²

According to the BES team the face-to-face survey “is different to other types of survey, which tend to be conducted via the internet and over the phone. Those methods are particularly prone to problems of response bias – the types of people who do surveys online or on the phone are more likely to vote than the population as whole.

The BES face-to-face survey is designed to be as representative of the country as possible – including contacting large numbers of people who didn’t vote in the election. People are selected at random from thousands of addresses across the country and doors are knocked until as many people as possible participate.”

The BES face-to-face survey team “verify people’s survey answers by checking the marked electoral register. Of course, the BES face-to-face isn’t perfect and there is a ‘margin of error’ around the turnout estimates but the results are as close to the truth about who turned out to vote as is possible to get.”

⁶² British Election Study, *The myth of the 2017 youthquake election*, 29 January 2018.

⁶³ See Chapter 3.5 Electorate and Turnout – in the Library briefing, *General Election 2017: full results and analysis*.

⁶⁴ The Guardian, *‘Youthquake’ behind Labour election surge divides generations*, 20 June 2017

⁶⁵ British Election Study, *The myth of the 2017 youthquake election*, 29 January 2018.

was no dramatic surge in youth turnout of the sort suggested by some other surveys. In short, there was no ‘youthquake’.”⁶⁶

The chart above presents data from the BES face-to-face survey for the estimated turnout of different age groups at the 2017 General Election. The BES data suggest that around 43% of registered 18-24 year olds voted. The BES estimate may be different from other estimates available, for example Ipsos-MORI’s [How Britain Voted](#), although the BES face-to-face survey is a more reliable estimate of voter behaviour.

In July 2017, the ONS published an article [What impact could lowering the UK voting age to 16 have on the shape of the electorate?](#)

Its calculations found that overall there were 88 constituencies where the number of 16- and 17-year-olds was greater than the winning margin. As the article notes:

“this doesn’t mean that the outcome in the seats would have changed, that would depend on voter turnout and preference, but it does show us those areas where there would have been potential for change”.

5.2 What has happened in Scotland?

Some argue that lowering voting age will have a negative impact on turnout and drive down turnout overall. This does not seem to have been the case in Scotland, although whether or not people turnout to vote is a complex decision and not determined by a single factor.

As noted in Section 3, the franchise (those eligible to vote) was extended temporarily in Scotland to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in the referendum on independence in 2014. The Electoral Commission reported that registered electorate at the referendum included 109,593 16- and 17-year-olds.

The Scottish Parliament was subsequently given the power to extend the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds for elections to the Scottish Parliament and for local government elections in Scotland.

The *Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Act 2015* received Royal Assent on 24 July 2015. The first Scottish Parliament election in which 16- and 17-year-olds could vote were held in May 2016 and the first local government election in May 2017 (see Section 4).

A survey carried out by the Electoral Commission indicated that 69% of 16- to 34-year-olds said that they voted in the referendum on independence, compared with 85% those aged 35-54 years and 92% of the 55+ age group. Claimed turnout amongst 16- and 17-year-olds was 75%, significantly higher than amongst 18- to 24-year-olds (54%).

⁶⁶ For further information please see the British Election Study article [The myth of the 2017 youthquake election](#), and [Youthquake – a reply to our critics](#).

The Electoral Commission reported that 97% of those 16- and 17-year-olds who reported having voted in the 2014 independence referendum said that they would vote again in future elections and referendums.⁶⁷

Overall the turnout at the 2016 Scottish Parliament elections was 55.8% of the registered electorate in the constituency vote and 55.9% in the regional vote. This is the highest turnout recorded since the first Scottish Parliament election in 1999 where 58.8% of the eligible electorate voted in the constituency ballot and 58.7% in the regional ballot.⁶⁸

This pattern seems to have continued in 2017. The 2017 local council elections in Scotland were the first Scotland-wide set of council elections at which 16- and 17-year-olds could vote. Overall turnout for the elections was 46.9%. This was the highest turnout in stand-alone local council elections in Scotland since 1977. Turnout was higher in 1999, 2003 and 2007 but local elections were held on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections in those years.⁶⁹

This may have impacts on future elections in Scotland and research has previously indicated that if voters vote in the first elections they are eligible for, they are more likely to vote throughout their lives.⁷⁰

5.3 International experience

The experience so far in Scotland appears to mirror what has happened in Austria. The National Assembly for Wales Expert panel noted that there was little actual evidence of the impact of lowering the voting age as few places have done so but it cited research from Austria, where 16- and 17-year-olds can vote:

Studies in the only European country to have lowered the voting age to 16 for all elections find that turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds is higher than among 18 to 21-year-olds, although lower than for older voters. Citizenship education in Austria was changed when the voting age was reduced, and there have been substantial efforts to engage young voters.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Electoral Commission, *Scottish Independence Referendum Report on the referendum held on 18 September 2014*, December 2014

⁶⁸ Electoral Commission, *The May 2016 Scottish Parliament election: Report on the administration of the 5 May 2016 Scottish Parliament election*, September 2016

⁶⁹ Electoral Commission, *Scottish council elections 2017 Report on the administration of the elections held on 4 May 2017*, September 2017

⁷⁰ Democratic Audit, *Engaging young voters with enhanced election information*, 2014, page 21.

⁷¹ National Assembly for Wales, *The report of the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform*, December 2017

6. The Isle of Man and Jersey

In February 2006 the Isle of Man lowered the voting age from 18 to 16. At the general election held there on 23 November 2006 those aged between 16 and 17 who voted became the first citizens in the European Union to vote at that age in a general election.

The Speaker of the House of Keys in the Isle of Man, then the Hon Stephen Rodan, submitted a written submission to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee's report on Voter engagement in the UK Political and Constitutional Reform Committee Voter engagement in the UK (see Section 2.5).

The experience in the Isle of Man was that 35% of eligible 16- and 17-year-olds registered to vote in the first election where they were eligible to vote. Turnout of the registered voters at the next election was 60.2%—very close to the turnout figure for the electorate as a whole. The rate of registration for this age group had since risen to 60.1%.

The Speaker concluded by saying that:

Whatever the effect on turnout, I remain of the view that voting at 16 is right in principle. I am not alone. Many Keys candidates now make reference to young peoples' issues in their election manifestos – for example, the need for more facilities such as drop-in centres for youngsters. It is arguable whether such issues would have had such a profile if the voting age had remained at 18.

There is no doubt that those young people who voted for the first time in 2006 and 2011 did so with real pride and enthusiasm. The next challenge will be for politicians to make sure that the act of voting remains relevant for them, and that political awareness for the next generation of 16- and 17- year olds is fostered, not least within our schools.⁷²

The Channel Island of Jersey lowered its voting age from 18 to 16 in July 2007.⁷³ The change added around 2,000 names to the electoral roll and meant that those aged over 16 were first able to vote in the elections of senators and deputies in October and November 2008 respectively.⁷⁴

Turnout at the 2011 elections for all ages was 46%. In the statistical bulletin *Jersey's Better Life Index 2013*, the voter turnout analysis combined 16- and 17-year-olds with those aged 18-34. The proportion of respondents aged 55 to 64 (70%) or over 65 (79%) who reported having voted was more than double that of 16- to 34-year-olds (33%).⁷⁵

⁷² [Written evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee submitted by the Hon Stephen Charles Rodan SHK, Speaker of the House of Keys, Isle of Man \(VUK 90\)](#)

⁷³ [Voting at 16](#), BBC Online

⁷⁴ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article2039862.ece> (Subscription Required)

⁷⁵ [Jersey's Better Life Index report 2013](#)

7. International comparisons

The voting age for national elections in EU countries is 18, except for Austria where it was reduced to 16 in 2007.

Other exceptions in the EU are as follows:

- Slovenia: 16-year-olds may vote if they are in employment;
- Hungary: 16-year-olds may vote if they are married;
- Norway: 16-year-olds may vote in local elections in some municipalities;
- Malta: the minimum voting age for local elections is 16;
- Italy: only those over the age of 25 may vote in elections to the Senate.

Countries with minimum voting age other than 18 in elections to national parliaments

Min age	Country
16	Argentina, Austria, Brazil*, Cuba Ecuador, Nicaragua
17	Indonesia, Timor-Leste
19	Republic of Korea
20	Nauru, Bahrain, Cameroon Cote D'Ivoire, Gabon, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, Oman, Pakistan, Samoa, Singapore,
21	Tonga

* In Brazil voting is optional for 16-17s & 70+ and compulsory for other ages
Sources: IPU [Parline database](#) and the [ACE Electoral Knowledge network](#)

The Electoral Commission's consultation paper on the voting age in the UK, published in 2003, looked at the voting age in other countries. The Commission noted that in 2003 all EU member states had a minimum voting age of 18 for national elections although in Germany and Austria there had been a reduction to 16 in certain areas for local elections (since the Commission carried out its research for this consultation exercise the voting age in Austria has been reduced to 16).⁷⁶ The Commission summarised its findings on the voting age in other countries:

...the vast majority of countries around the world (including all the EU member states, Australia, Canada and the USA) have a minimum voting age of 18. Japan has a voting age of 20, but it should be noted that in Japanese culture the customary age at which an individual is considered to become an adult is 20, whereas in the West it is generally held to be 18.

3.5 The minimum voting age is 17 in East Timor, Indonesia, North Korea, the Seychelles and the Sudan, 16 in Brazil, Cuba and Nicaragua, and 15 in Iran. It is 20 in Cameroon, Japan, South

⁷⁶ "Sixteen-year-olds have been given the vote in Austrian national elections – the lowest voting age in the European Union. The law was supported by four of the five parties in parliament, but opposed by the right-wing Freedom Party. Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua and the Isle of Man allow voting at 16." Austria lowers voting age to 16, *Independent*, 6 June 2007.

Korea, Nauru, Taiwan and Tunisia, and 21 in Central African Republic, Fiji, Gabon, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, Maldives, Monaco, Morocco, Pakistan, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Tokelau and Tonga.

3.6 In general terms, the ages referred to above are applicable for all levels of public election in the relevant country. However, there are variations in some areas:

- in Italy, an individual cannot vote in elections to the Senate (the second chamber of the national parliament) until age 25;
- in Germany the minimum age for municipal – i.e. local, but not regional or national – elections in Lower Saxony was reduced from 18 to 16 in 1995; the Lander of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, North-Rhine Westphalia, Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein have subsequently followed suit;
- similarly, the Lander of Carinthia, Burgenland and Styria in Austria have reduced the minimum voting age for municipal and mayoral elections from 18 to 16; and
- in March 2002 the United States city of Cambridge, Massachusetts voted to reduce its voting age from 18 to 17 for local elections (although this is yet to be ratified by the state legislature).⁷⁷

⁷⁷ *How old is old enough? The minimum age of voting and candidacy in UK elections.* Electoral Commission consultation paper, 2003.

8. Parliamentary business on voting age since 2000

This section gives a brief overview of Parliamentary discussion on reducing the voting age since 2000.

8.1 *Representation of the People Act 2000*

The RPA 2000 gave effect to the Working Party on Electoral Procedures, a group chaired by the then Home Office Minister, George Howarth. The cross-party measures agreed by the Working Party and included in the Bill included improving registration of people with no permanent address and prisoners on remand, and improving access to elections for disabled voters.

On the first day of the committee stage of the Bill Simon Hughes (Liberal Democrat) moved an amendment that would have lowered the voting age for all elections to 16. He highlighted previous recent attempts to lower the voting age since 1985 and argued that there was a need to simplify the law on when people become entitled to specific rights⁷⁸

Responding for the Labour Government, Mike O'Brien MP said:

These are serious issues that deserve to be debated. However, it is important that changes are brought forward with a degree of consensus. The Bill is the result of an all-party working group and a significant degree of cross-party support and agreement about the way forward.

...

The Liberal Democrats' proposal to reduce the voting age to 16 has not had the same degree of broad-based support. It is regrettable that in bringing forward this idea they have not sought the support of Conservative Members, Labour Members and others by securing their agreement to put their names to the amendment.

As I have said, the issue deserves to be treated seriously and discussed in an all-party context. I suggest that the Select Committee on Home Affairs might be the appropriate venue. An appropriate cross-party group, of which there are several, might properly consider it.

8.2 *Elections (Entitlement to Vote At Age 16) Bill*

In December 2001, Matthew Green, Liberal Democrat MP, introduced a ten-minute rule Bill, the *Elections (Entitlement to Vote At Age 16)*, arguing that lowering the voting age "can only benefit society" by empowering young people and giving them "a greater sense of responsibility in society".⁷⁹

⁷⁸ [HC Deb 15 December 1999, c305-6](#)

⁷⁹ [HC Deb 18 December 2001, 148-9](#)

No one spoke against the motion and the Bill was introduced, although it made no further progress.

8.3 *Voting Age (Reduction to 16) Bill (HL) 2002-03*

The Conservative Peer, Lord Lucas, introduced a Private Member's Bill, the *Voting Age (Reduction to 16) Bill (HL) 2002-03*, which received its Second Reading on 9 January 2003, just before the Electoral Commission's review of the age of electoral majority.⁸⁰

Lord Bassam of Brighton replied for the Labour Government:

Any decision on the major step of further reducing the voting age cannot be taken in isolation, or without widespread public debate. While the Government are not necessarily opposed to the policy that the noble Lord, Lord Lucas, is seeking to push forward, we argue that his Bill is premature...⁸¹

Although the Bill was passed by the House of Lords there was no Parliamentary time for it in the House of Commons.

8.4 Welsh Affairs Select Committee report 2004

The Welsh Affairs Select Committee supported the reduction in the voting age in its first report of 2003-04, stating that it could be a positive step towards reengaging young people in democratic politics. It recommended that the Government should look further at the arguments for lowering the voting age.⁸²

8.5 *Representation of the People (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill 2005-06*

The Liberal Democrat MP, Stephen Williams, introduced a private Member's Bill, the *Representation of the People (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill*, on 29 November 2005.⁸³ Stephen Williams argued that teenagers were better prepared for the vote in the modern world:

In 1969, when Parliament previously decided to extend the franchise, the school-leaving age was 15 and most people left school at 15. Few went on to further education and even fewer to higher education. In 2005, the educational world is totally different. I am sure that today's teenagers have the same social interests as their counterparts in the 1960's, but this decade's 16-year-olds are better informed and of a similar maturity to 18-year-olds of nearly 40 years ago. It is now time for them to use their knowledge and maturity and for us to extend the vote to them.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ [HL Deb 9 January 2003 cc 1106-1114](#)

⁸¹ [Ibid](#), c1120

⁸² [The Empowerment of Children and Young People in Wales](#), Welsh Affairs Select Committee. First report, 2003-04, HC 177

⁸³ [HC Deb 29 November 2005 c138-143](#)

⁸⁴ [Ibid](#), c138-139

The Bill was negatived on division and did not receive a Second Reading.⁸⁵

8.6 *Voting Age Reduction Bill 2007-08*

On 5 December 2007 Julie Morgan MP presented a Private Member's Bill, the *Voting Age Reduction Bill 2007-08*, to reduce the voting age for Parliamentary and other elections to 16 years. The Bill received its Second Reading on 6 June 2008 but did not proceed further.⁸⁶

Julie Morgan had previously tabled an Early Day Motion on 5 December 2007 welcoming the announcement by the Government to consider the issue (see Section 2.4) and the EDM called for the voting age to be lowered, which had attracted 111 signatures.

8.7 *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011*

During the passage of the Bill that went on to become the *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011*, there were attempts to amend the Bill to include a provision to reduce the voting age for the referendum on the voting system.⁸⁷

At the committee stage of the Bill in the House of Commons, Natascha Engel (Labour) proposed an amendment to reduce the voting age to 16.⁸⁸ The proposals were supported by the Shadow Minister for Justice, Chris Bryant.⁸⁹

The Minister, Mark Harper, said that the Government did not want to change the franchise by amending the Bill:

I do not think that experimenting with the franchise in this Bill is the right way to go.

The Minister also touched on the logistics of changing the registration system to allow for the inclusion of 16-year-olds so close to the proposed poll:

...this issue is not a small one, because if all 16-year-olds on the date of the referendum were able to vote, that would mean electoral registration officers having to register those who are 15, which is a significant change to the way that they collect data.

The amendment was defeated after a division; Ayes 196, Noes 346.⁹⁰

In the House of Lords, Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town moved an amendment in Grand Committee which would allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in the AV referendum.⁹¹ Lord Falconer (Labour) supported

⁸⁵ Ibid, c141-143

⁸⁶ Votes at 16 Coalition, *16 for 16: 16 reasons for Votes at 16*, May 2008

⁸⁷ For further information about the *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill* see Research Paper [10/55](#)

⁸⁸ [HC Deb 18 October 2010 c695](#)

⁸⁹ [HC Deb 18 October 2010 c705](#)

⁹⁰ [HC Deb 18 October 2010 c717](#)

⁹¹ [HL Deb 13 December 2010 c446](#)

the amendment in a personal capacity but said that the Labour Party had indicated that there should be a free vote on the issue.⁹²

Lord McNally reiterated that the Bill was not the right platform on which to discuss the issue.⁹³ The amendment was withdrawn.

A similar amendment was moved by Lord Howarth of Newport at report stage in the House of Lords. Although Lord Howarth supported Lady Hayter's proposal to lower the voting age for the referendum, he did not favour lowering the voting age to 16 for general elections.

Lord Strathclyde responded to the debate and again stated the Government's view that the referendum Bill was not the correct vehicle for considering wider changes to the franchise:

...there are different views on the question of whether the voting age in this country should be lowered to 16, but if we are to have that debate, it needs to be had in relation to elections more generally, and the passage of the Bill does not provide the right platform.⁹⁴

The amendment was withdrawn.

8.8 Voting Age (Comprehensive Reduction) Bill [HL] 2012-13 Bill

The *Voting Age (Comprehensive Reduction) Bill [HL] 2012-13* received its first reading in the House of Lords on 22 October 2012.⁹⁵ The Bill, a Private Member's Bill sponsored by Lord Tyler (Liberal Democrat), made provision to amend the *Representation of the People Act 1983* 'to extend the franchise for parliamentary and other elections, and for referendums, to all citizens over the age of 16 years'. The Bill did not progress any further.

8.9 Westminster Hall debate 18 December 2012

Julie Elliot (Labour) secured a debate in Westminster Hall on 18 December 2012 on votes for 16- and 17-year-olds.⁹⁶ Ms Elliott said that the Scottish Government's proposal to extend the franchise for the referendum on Scottish independence to 16- and 17-year-olds had 'reignited the issue of votes at 16 at a national level.'⁹⁷

The then Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, Chloe Smith, responded to the debate and made it clear that there was no consensus within the Coalition Government on the issue and that the Coalition Government had no plans for a change in the law.⁹⁸

⁹² HL Deb 13 December 2010 c462

⁹³ HL Deb 13 December 2010 c464

⁹⁴ HL Deb 7 February 2011 c57

⁹⁵ [HL Deb 22 October 2012 c11](#)

⁹⁶ [HC Deb 18 December 2012 222 - 229WH](#)

⁹⁷ [HC Deb 18 December 2012 c 222WH](#)

⁹⁸ [HC Deb 18 December 2012 c226WH](#)

The Minister also noted that electoral registration amongst young people was lower than for other population groups and that lowering the voting age could mean a fall in overall turnout at elections.⁹⁹

8.10 Backbench business debate 24 January 2013

Stephen Williams (Liberal Democrat) secured a backbench business debate on 24 January 2013 on the lowering of the voting age.¹⁰⁰ Mr Williams suggested that the time had come to extend the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds, arguing that lowering the voting age would increase turnout.

Lowering the voting age to 16 also makes it more likely that people will vote while they are in the stable environment of home and education. Voting is habitual. We know from various studies that if someone votes for the first time when they are just 18, they pick up the pattern of voting for later life.¹⁰¹

The Cabinet Officer Minister, Chloe Smith, responded to the debate saying she was not yet convinced that there was sufficient evidence to reduce the voting age and again argued that turnout was likely to go down if voting age was reduced:

Registration among young people is lower than among other population groups. Recent Electoral Commission research shows that 55% of 17 and 18-year-olds and 56% of 19 to 24-year-olds were on the register, compared with 94% of over-65s. Those figures are telling.

I also note that the turnout figures for 18 to 24-year-olds have been falling. At successive elections from 1974 to 1992, approximately a quarter of that group did not vote. That is important to know and something we all ought to take seriously and work on. There is clearly an issue about engagement, particularly with younger electors, which goes beyond franchise, and the Government are trying to address it.¹⁰²

A division at the end of the debate on the motion “that this House believes that the age of eligibility for voting in all elections and referendums in the United Kingdom should be reduced to 16” was agreed: Ayes 119, Noes 46. The motion was non-binding.

8.11 House of Lords short debate on 27 February 2013

Lord Tyler (Liberal Democrat) tabled a question for a short debate on the voting age in the House of Lords on 27 February 2013.¹⁰³ Lord Tyler asked the Government how they intended to respond to the majority vote in the House of Commons calling for a reduction in the voting age to 16. He also argued that the Electoral Commission should be asked to undertake a further review of the voting age:

⁹⁹ [HC Deb 18 December 2012 c227WH](#)

¹⁰⁰ [HC Deb 24 January 2013 c479](#)

¹⁰¹ [HC Deb 24 January 2013 c487](#)

¹⁰² [HC Deb 24 January 2013 c523](#)

¹⁰³ [HL Deb 27 February 2013 cGC174](#)

As a member of the informal cross-party group of parliamentarians who advise the Electoral Commission, I am very conscious that the Commission, rather than party politicians, should be responsible for advising Parliament on extensions to the franchise. However, it is now nearly 10 years since the commission studied the issue. Its report promised a “further formal review of the minimum voting age within five to seven years of this report”.¹⁰⁴

Lord Norton of Louth suggested that the debate should focus on the low turnout of the 18-24 age group at elections instead of lowering the voting age:

Debate on the issue appears to stem from a false premise. Voting is a consequence of political interest, not a cause of it. Lowering the voting age is not likely to have a positive impact on turnout any more than it did when it was lowered to 18 in 1969. It did not promote participation in democracy, but rather served to demonstrate what we already knew: young people are among the groups least likely to vote. That is borne out by the data for recent general elections. One does not change that by further lowering the voting age.¹⁰⁵

Lord Wallace of Saltaire responded to the debate on behalf of the Government. He stressed that the Coalition Government had no plans to lower the voting age and reminded the House that there was no consensus on the issue within the Coalition.¹⁰⁶

8.12 *Voting Age (Comprehensive Reduction)* *Bill [HL] 2013-14*

Lord Tyler (Liberal Democrat) introduced another Private Member’s Bill on reducing the voting age on 9 May 2013. The *Voting Age (Comprehensive Reduction) Bill 2013-14* received its Second Reading in the House of Lords on 25 October 2013.¹⁰⁷

Lord Lexden (Conservative) opposed the Bill, citing the ongoing concerns about the possible impact on turnout:

According to this year’s *Audit of Political Engagement* by the Hansard Society...the proportion of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 who are certain to vote at the next election now stands at 12%, down 10 points in one year. The Hansard Society poses the central question: “Given the degree to which the current cohort of young people are increasingly turned off by the idea of using their vote, what exactly is going to be different about voting and politics generally that is going to engage their younger 16- and 17-year-old brothers and sisters?”¹⁰⁸

Baroness Smith of Basildon (Labour) supported the Bill and said she was ‘delighted that the Labour Party’s leader, Ed Miliband, made his and our party’s commitment so clear’.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ [HL Deb 27 February 2013 cGC176](#)

¹⁰⁵ [HL Deb 27 February 2013 cGC177](#)

¹⁰⁶ [HL Deb 27 February 2013 cGC187](#)

¹⁰⁷ [HL Deb 25 October 2013 c1276](#)

¹⁰⁸ [HL Deb 25 October 2013 c1279](#)

¹⁰⁹ [HL Deb 25 October 2013 c1280](#)

Lord Wallace of Saltaire responded to the debate and again emphasised that there was no consensus within the Coalition Government on the issue. He also highlighted the perception of partisanship around the argument:

let us all be a little honest: the reason why the Greens, the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party are in favour of votes at 16 is not completely unconnected with the hope and belief that young people are more likely to vote for those sorts of party, and the position of the Conservative Party for various reasons is not entirely the same... So we need a cross-party consensus on the franchise and we need to approach this as carefully and consensually as possible.¹¹⁰

8.13 Westminster Hall debate 6 May 2014

Sarah Champion (Labour) secured a [Westminster Hall debate](#) on 6 May 2014 on votes at 16.¹¹¹ Sarah Champion argued that the time was right “to open the democratic system even further and to include 16- and 17-year-olds among the people who are able to vote.”¹¹²

Tom Brake, then Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Leader of the House, responded to the debate which he said had “again shown the divergent views in this House on whether 16- and 17-year-olds should be eligible to vote” and had reflected “differing opinions on the issue in society at large”. He added the Government was “taking a range of measures to encourage young people to register and to ensure that their voices are heard”.¹¹³

8.14 *Cities and Local Government Bill 2015-16*

During Report Stage of the *Cities and Local Government Bill [HL] 2015-16* in the House of Lords, the Government was defeated on an amendment moved by Lord Tyler (Liberal Democrat) which made provision to lower the voting age for council elections.¹¹⁴ Lord Tyler argued that the engagement of young voters in the Scottish independence referendum showed that 16- and 17-year-olds were ready to vote in all elections:

...the new young voters proved themselves to be better informed, more conscientious and even more mature than many of their elders—they blew to smithereens all the misgivings and dire warnings of the doomsayers.¹¹⁵

The amendment was reversed by the House of Commons on 17 November 2015.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ [HL Deb 25 October 2013 c1293](#)

¹¹¹ [HC Deb 6 May 2014 c1WH](#)

¹¹² [HC Deb 6 May 2014 c2WH](#)

¹¹³ [HC Deb 6 May 2014 c27WH](#)

¹¹⁴ [HL Deb 15 July 2015 c625](#)

¹¹⁵ [HL Deb 15 July 2015 c625](#)

¹¹⁶ [HC Deb 17 November 2015 c581](#)

8.15 EU Referendum Bill 2015-16

During the passage of the *European Union Referendum Bill 2015-16* there were attempts to amend the Bill to allow the franchise for the referendum to include 16- and 17-year-olds. Amendments at Committee Stage and Report Stage in the House of Commons were negated on divisions. Library Briefing Paper 7249, *European Union Referendum Bill 2015-16: progress of the Bill* gives further details.

At Report Stage of the Bill in the House of Lords on 18 November 2015, an amendment to extend the franchise for the referendum to 16- and 17-year-olds was agreed after a division, Contents 293; Not-Contents 211.¹¹⁷

Introducing the amendment, Baroness Morgan of Ely (Labour), argued that it was right to reduce the voting age for the referendum:

This is a very exceptional situation, because it is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for [16- and 17-year-olds] to vote on this significant issue. It is different from other elections, because within two years' time they will be able to take a position on who they want to run their country; in this instance, they will possibly never again get a say on their country's future relationship with the EU. However, they will have to live with the consequences of that decision for longer than any of us. With the current system there is also a danger that we are sending mixed messages to young voters in different part of the country, which is of course particularly true for Scotland, where they have had this opportunity to vote before.¹¹⁸

The Government was not persuaded that the franchise should be changed for the referendum. The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, Lord Faulks, said it was not appropriate to use the EU Referendum Bill to reduce the voting age. He also suggested the Government did not want to appear to enfranchise people on the basis that they may support one outcome over another:

We should avoid any action that could be seen as some attempt to push towards a particular outcome. That is a significant reason why, with the small changes to enfranchise Gibraltar electors and Peers, both of whom are already entitled to vote in certain elections, the Bill adopts the parliamentary franchise. We want to avoid any allegations of interference and we fear that changing the franchise, including this particular change, could be seen as doing exactly that and could seriously undermine the legitimacy of the referendum.¹¹⁹

Lord Faulks added:

Legislation as momentous as this must command consensus in both Houses and the country as a whole. Reference was made to a recent amendment voted on in this House to the Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill to allow 16-year-olds to vote: that was reversed by the House of Commons yesterday by a substantial majority.

¹¹⁷ [HL Deb 18 November 2015 c180](#)

¹¹⁸ [HL Deb 18 November 2015 c153](#)

¹¹⁹ [HL Deb 18 November 2015 c174](#)

A change of this sort needs substantial legislation; it is a very important change. We have decided that the appropriate franchise is the one that has pertained satisfactorily in previous referenda and general elections, one that pertains in every country in the EU except Austria. There may come a time for change, when we lower the age to 16. There may be a debate to be had. This is not the moment for that debate.¹²⁰

8.16 Ten Minute Rule Bill on reducing the voting age 20 July 2016

On 20 July 2016, Caroline Lucas (Green) introduced a bill under the Ten Minute Rule Bill procedure, to introduce proportional representation for elections to the House of Commons and to reduce the voting age to 16 in all UK elections.¹²¹ She argued that there should be equality in voting rights between Scotland and the rest of the UK.¹²²

John Penrose (Conservative) spoke against the motion saying that Parliament had rejected the idea a number in recent months.¹²³

The motion to introduce the Bill was defeated on division: Ayes 74, Noes 81.¹²⁴

8.17 *Representation of the People (Young People's Enfranchisement and Education) Bill 2017-19*

Jim McMahon (Labour/Co-op) introduced a Private Member's Bill through the ballot procedure in July 2017. This Bill started its second reading debate on Friday 3 November 2017 but ran out of time and is unlikely to make any further progress.¹²⁵

The Bill seeks to reduce the voting age to 16 for all elections in the UK and makes provision for the Citizenship and the constitution education a part of the National Curriculum at Key Stages 1-4 in England (schools policy is devolved).

8.18 *Representation of the People (Young People's Enfranchisement) Bill 2017-19*

This is a Private Member's Bill introduced by Peter Kyle through the ballot procedure in July 2017. Second reading debate commenced on Friday 11 May 2018, but the debate stood adjourned at the end of business. The Bill is unlikely to make any further progress.¹²⁶

¹²⁰ [HL Deb 18 November 2015 c179](#)

¹²¹ [HC Deb 20 July 2016 c834](#)

¹²² [ibid](#)

¹²³ [HC Deb 20 July 2016 c838](#)

¹²⁴ [ibid](#)

¹²⁵ [HC Deb 3 November 2017, c1137-61](#)

¹²⁶ [HC Deb 11 May 2018, 1081-90](#)

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