



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Voting age

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## Summary

This Note gives details of the attempts to change the law to lower the voting age over the last decade. The Labour Party, the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party all support voting at 16. The Conservative Party has not been in favour but recently the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Ruth Davidson, said that she supported lowering the voting age.

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

The franchise for the referendum on independence for Scotland in 2014 was extended to include 16 and 17 year olds. 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. The voting age for UK Parliamentary elections remains at 18, as in the rest of the UK.

In Wales, the National Assembly is to be given the power to lower the voting age for its elections. The *Wales Act 2017* received Royal Assent on 31 January 2017 and gives the NAW legislative competence for the administration of Assembly and local government elections in Wales, including the franchise for those elections. The Presiding Officer has established an 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.

In Northern Ireland, the franchise for local government elections is currently an excepted measure. The legislative competence for this remains with Westminster and would only be devolved by primary legislation being passed by the House of Commons.

# 1. Current position

There are two distinct franchises, the Parliamentary franchise and the local government franchise. There are also separate electoral registers for each franchise but in practice they are maintained, as far as is practicable, as a single register.

The **Parliamentary franchise**, the entitlement to vote in UK Parliamentary elections, is reserved to the UK Government. At the moment you must be **18 years of age** on polling day and appear on the electoral register to vote in a UK Parliamentary election.

The **local government franchise**, the entitlement to vote in local elections, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland currently states you must be 18 years of age on polling day in order to vote and appear on the electoral register for local government elections. This includes elections for mayors and police and crime commissioner elections in England and Wales.

The local government franchise has been devolved to Scotland since 2015 (see Section 4). In Scotland, voters in elections using the local government franchise must be 16 years of age on polling day and appear on the electoral register for local government elections. This includes elections to the Scottish Parliament, which use the local government franchise.

In Wales, the power to lower the voting age for elections to the National Assembly of Wales (NAW) and local elections in Wales is to be devolved to Cardiff (see Section 5). 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. These powers are expected to be transferred in 2018. The Welsh Government supports the lowering of the voting age for local government elections and the National Assembly has appointed an Expert Panel on Electoral Reform to consider options for elections to the Assembly.

Northern Ireland does not have legislative competence for lowering the voting age. The franchise for local elections in Northern Ireland is an excepted measure, which means it would only be devolved by primary legislation at 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. The motion was opposed by the Democratic Unionist Party.<sup>1</sup>

The Labour Party, the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party all support voting at 16. The Liberal Democrats have had a commitment to lower the voting age in their general election manifestos since 2001 but there was no such commitment in the

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<sup>1</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly, 6 November 2012.

## 5 Voting age

Coalition Agreement published by the previous Government in May 2010.

Historically the Conservative Party has generally opposed reducing the voting age but recently the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Ruth Davidson, announced that she supported lowering the voting age. In her contribution to the Tory Reform Group's publication, *Giving 16 and 17 year olds the vote: the Tory case*, Ruth Davidson wrote:

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.<sup>2</sup>

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee's report on voter engagement, published in November 2014, called on the Government to lead a national discussion on reducing the voting age and to allow the House of Commons a free vote on the issue.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Giving 16 and 17 year olds the vote: the Tory case*, Tory Reform Group, 27 September 2015

<sup>3</sup> *Voter engagement in the UK*, Political and Constitutional Reform Committee fourth report 2014-15, November 2014

## 2. Background

In recent years there has been pressure for a reduction in the voting age from 18 to 16. The Electoral Reform Society argues for this and organised a coalition on the issue. This resulted in the launch of the *Votes at 16* campaign on 29 January 2003.

Professor Robert Blackburn stated in his book, *The Electoral System in Britain*, that 'the argument against any further age reduction in voting rests simply upon grounds that some arbitrary age limit has to be drawn, and that many 16 and 17 year old people are unlikely to have gained the necessary political maturity to be able to express a considered political judgement.'<sup>4</sup> However, at the age of 16 an individual is able to leave school, get married, join the armed forces and pay tax.<sup>5</sup>

The academic David Denver has argued that turnout would fall as a result of lowering the voting age since young people are the least likely to vote.<sup>6</sup> Recent experience of 16 and 17 year olds voting in Scotland has not so far seen turnout being adversely affected (see Section 4), although whether or not people turnout to vote is a complex decision and not determined by a single factor. In 2006, the Power Commission rejected the idea that this was a legitimate reason for blocking the change (see Section 2.3).

The Howarth Working Party on Electoral Procedures considered the matter of reducing the voting age in 1999.<sup>7</sup> The Working Party did not recommend a reduction in the voting age and nor did the Home Affairs Committee enquiry into electoral law and administration in 1998.<sup>8</sup>

The Liberal Democrats adopted the policy of reducing the voting age to 16 in their 2001 manifesto and this was reiterated in 2005.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> The SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party are also members of the Votes at Sixteen coalition.<sup>11</sup>

The Liberal Democrat Party manifesto for the 2010 general election again contained a commitment to votes at 16 but there was no such commitment in the Coalition Agreement published in May 2010.

The Labour Government's Children and Young People's Unit produced a report entitled *Yvote?/Ynot?* in July 2002 which examined the reasons

<sup>4</sup> *The Electoral System in Britain*, by Robert Blackburn 1995, p73

<sup>5</sup> 'The Case for Votes at 16', by A Folkes, *Representation*, Vol 41 No1, 2004, p53.

<sup>6</sup> 'Lower voting age would cut turnout', *Independent* 31 January 1997

<sup>7</sup> For background on the Howarth working party see Research Paper 99/94, *The Representation of the People Bill*

<sup>8</sup> Home Affairs Committee, *Electoral Law and Administration*, HC 768 1997-98, October 1998

<sup>9</sup> *The Liberal Democrats: the real alternative*, 2005

<sup>10</sup> *The Liberal Democrats: Real Democracy*, 2007

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.votesat16.org/about/who-we-are/>

for falling turnout amongst young people.<sup>12</sup> 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 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.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.1 Votes at 16 campaign

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.<sup>14</sup>

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.

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<sup>12</sup> *Young people and politics: a report on the yvote?/ynot? project*. Children and Young People's Unit. 2002

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p 53

<sup>14</sup> [New coalition bids for votes at 16](#), *Guardian*, 28 January 2003

The UK Youth Parliament is a supporter of the Votes at 16 campaign and made the issue its national campaign for 2017.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2 Electoral Commission review of the voting age in 2003

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.

The Commission published its findings in April 2004.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.3 The Power report

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.<sup>19</sup> Recommendation 16 was to lower the voting and candidacy age to 16 (with the exception of candidacy for the House of Lords).

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<sup>15</sup> [UK Youth Parliament](#)

<sup>16</sup> *Age of electoral majority: report and recommendations*, Electoral Commission, April 2004

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p5

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p5

<sup>19</sup> *Power to the People*, Power Commission, February 2006.



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 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.4 Youth Citizenship Commission

On 3 July 2007 Prime Minister Gordon Brown delivered a statement to the House of Commons on Constitutional Reform.<sup>25</sup> He said:

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p199

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p199-201

<sup>22</sup> Ibid,p199-201

<sup>23</sup> House of Commons Standard Note, [SN/PC/4125](#), *The Political Process and Citizenship Education*, 17 August 2006

<sup>24</sup> *Power to the People*, Power Commission, February 2006, pp201

<sup>25</sup> [HC Deb 3 July 2007 c815-833](#)

...we must give new life to the very idea of citizenship. All in this House would acknowledge that there are very specific challenges we must meet on engaging young people and improving citizenship education. I hope that there will be all-party support for a commission to review this and make recommendations. Although the voting age has been 18 since 1969, it is right, as part of that debate, to examine, and hear from young people themselves, whether lowering that age would increase participation.<sup>26</sup>

The Green Paper, *The Governance of Britain*, stated that there would be a Youth Citizenship Commission which would:<sup>27</sup>

...examine ways to invigorate young people's understanding of the historical narrative of our country and of what it means to be a British citizen, and to increase their participation in the political sphere. The Commission will examine what support schools in England need to improve the ways that they prepare young people for their life as an adult citizen. It will look at how citizenship education can be connected to both a possible citizenship ceremony when young people reach adulthood and to the acquisition of voting rights. In that context, the Commission will also examine, including in debate with young people, whether reducing the voting age would increase participation in the political process.<sup>28</sup>

The Youth Citizenship Commission published its recommendations following a consultation but did not recommend a reduction in the voting age. 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.

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<sup>26</sup> [HC Deb 3 July 2007 c819](#)

<sup>27</sup> *The Governance of Britain*, [CM 7170](#) July 2007

<sup>28</sup> *The Governance of Britain*, [CM 7170](#) July 2007

## 3. Scotland

### 3.1 Referendum on independence for Scotland

The memorandum of agreement between the UK Government and the Scottish Government on a referendum on independence for Scotland made provision for a Section 30 Order which enabled the Scottish Parliament to legislate for the referendum.<sup>29</sup> The Bill set out the franchise and 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. 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; the memorandum of agreement stated that it would be for the Scottish Government to decide whether to extend the franchise.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, David Mundell, made a statement 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.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup> Ann McKechn (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

<sup>29</sup> [Agreement between the UK Government and the Scottish Government on a referendum on independence for Scotland](#), 15 October 2012

<sup>30</sup> HC Deb 15 October 2012 c65

<sup>31</sup> HC Deb 15 October 2012 c68

and 17-year-olds to vote, they will have to create their own register, and that carries with it significant complexities.<sup>32</sup>

Section 2(1) of the *Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Act 2013* set out the franchise for the referendum.<sup>33</sup>

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 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.<sup>34</sup>

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 total referendum electorate and equivalent to around 89% of all 16- to 17-year-olds resident in Scotland.<sup>35</sup>

### 3.2 Scotland in the UK: an enduring settlement

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.<sup>36</sup> The Command Paper set out draft clauses for the further devolution of powers to Scotland. These included provisions for the conduct of Scottish Parliament elections to be devolved to the Scottish Government and Parliament. This competence was already devolved for local elections. There were to be a requirement for certain electoral measures to be passed by a "super-majority", a two-thirds majority, of the Scottish Parliament; these include amendments to the franchise.

Draft clause 6 would devolve the legislative competence relating to the franchise.

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<sup>32</sup> HC Deb 15 October 2012 c71

<sup>33</sup> *Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Act 2013*

<sup>34</sup> *Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Bill: stages of the Bill*

<sup>35</sup> *Scottish Independence Referendum 2014*, Library Research Paper 14/50

<sup>36</sup> *Scotland in the United Kingdom: An enduring settlement*, Cm

### 3.3 Reducing the voting age for Scottish Parliament elections

The Prime Minister confirmed that Scotland would be given the power to reduce the voting age for the Scottish Parliament elections in 2016 on 15 December 2014.<sup>37</sup>

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 Parliament in 2016, and for local government elections in Scotland in 2017. The [Policy Memorandum](#) published by the Scottish Government to accompany the *Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill* stated that the voting age would also be lowered for any 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”.<sup>38</sup>

On 18 June 2015, the *Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill* was passed by the Scottish Parliament. The Bill made provision for the extension of the franchise for Scottish Parliamentary and local government elections in Scotland to 16 and 17 year olds. The Bill received Royal Assent on 24 July 2015.<sup>39</sup>

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.

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<sup>37</sup> [David Cameron accepts Scottish Parliament votes at 16](#), *BBC News*, 15 December 2014

<sup>38</sup> [Scottish Elections \(Reduction of Voting Age\): Policy Memorandum](#), 2 April 2015

<sup>39</sup> [Scottish Elections \(Reduction of Voting Age\) Act 2015](#)

## 4. Wales

The Silk Commission considered the electoral arrangements of the National Assembly for Wales to be outside its terms of reference and made no recommendations relating to the Assembly's elections.

On 27 February 2015 the UK government published proposals for further devolution to Wales. The package formed part of the St David's Day Agreement between the main political parties in Wales and the full proposals were published as a Command Paper, *Powers for a purpose: Towards a lasting devolution settlement for Wales*.

The Government noted that "there was a strong consensus that the Assembly should ... be responsible for Assembly elections, in line with the recommendations made in the Smith Commission Agreement for the Scottish Parliament to have all powers in relation to elections to the Scottish Parliament."<sup>40</sup>

The Secretary of State for Wales, Stephen Crabb, set out the main recommendations in the St David's Day 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.<sup>41</sup>

The Government promised to bring forward a Wales Bill in the Queen's Speech after the general election and the *draft Wales Bill* was published on 20 October 2015.<sup>42</sup> This Bill was extensively critiqued by a [pre-legislative scrutiny report](#) published by the Welsh Affairs Committee, and by reports from the [Welsh Governance Centre and the Constitution Unit](#), the [Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee](#) in Cardiff Bay.

In June 2016 the *Wales Bill 2016-17* was introduced which differed significantly in some aspects but still include the proposed devolution of electoral arrangements for the National Assembly and for local government. It was given a Second Reading by the House of Commons on [14 June 2016](#) and received Royal Assent on 31 January 2017.

The powers relating to election in Wales are expected to be devolved in 2018.

### 4.1 Devolution of electoral arrangements

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

<sup>40</sup> *Powers for a purpose: towards a lasting devolution settlement for Wales*, Cm 9020, February 2015

<sup>41</sup> [Landmark funding announcement and new powers for Wales in St David's Day Agreement](#), Wales Office press release, 27 February 2015

<sup>42</sup> [Draft Wales Bill](#), CM9144, 20 October 2015

in Wales. [The consultation](#) ran from 18 July to the 10 October 2017. It said:

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.<sup>43</sup>

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 has 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. It is due to report soon.

The last time the National Assembly voted on the subject of reducing the voting age Assembly Members voted 41 votes to 5 in favour of lowering the voting age for council elections in Wales. A further seven Members abstained.<sup>44</sup>

The National Assembly also undertook a consultation on lowering the voting age to 16 in November 2014. A summary of responses was published in July 2015, [Vote@16? The consultation](#) and of the 10,300 young people aged 11 to 25 surveyed, 53% favoured lowering the voting age to 16 and 79% agreed that young people should have political education and learn about politics and voting.

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<sup>43</sup> Welsh Government, *Electoral Reform in Local Government in Wales*, Number: WG32167, p7

<sup>44</sup> The vote was on amendment 7 to the debate on [Strengthening Local Government Democracy](#) on 14 May 2013.

## 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 there are nearly 1.5 million 16 and 17 year olds in the UK.

This represents about 2.3% of the population.

### Population aged 16 and 17 in the UK: mid-2016

	Population	Population aged 16 and 17	2017 General election electorate
United Kingdom	65,648,000	1,490,000	46,826,000
England	55,268,000	1,256,000	39,297,000
Scotland	5,405,000	116,000	3,988,000
Wales	3,113,000	71,000	2,298,000
Northern Ireland	1,862,000	48,000	1,243,000

Sources:

ONS Mid-year population estimates

House of Commons Library General Election statistics

In order to register to vote for elections to the UK Parliament you must be British, Irish or a qualifying Commonwealth citizen resident in the UK. In addition citizens of an EU country resident in the UK may register to vote in local government elections and elections to the devolved administrations.

### 5.1 What would the impact on turnout 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 and how they would vote. There is no official data on turnout by age, but polling data suggests that turnout tends to increase with age, with the lowest turnout in the younger age groups. However, research has indicated that that if voters vote in the first elections they are eligible for, they are more likely to vote throughout their lives.<sup>45</sup>

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%).<sup>46</sup>

The *Guardian* reported that the increase in turnout at the 2017 General Election was driven by younger voters, with more than half of those

<sup>45</sup> Democratic Audit, *Engaging young voters with enhanced election information*, 2014, page 21

<sup>46</sup> See Chapter 3.2 Who voted for which party? Social characteristics of voters – in the Library briefing, *General Election 2017: full results and analysis*



## 17 Voting age

aged 18-24 turned out to vote, an increase of 16 percentage points on 2015.<sup>47</sup>

The data suggests that at the 2017 General Elections, Conservative support was strong among older voters. 61% of those aged 65+ reported voting Conservative and 25% Labour. Around 62% young voters aged 18-24 supported Labour and 27% supported the Conservative Party.<sup>48</sup>

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

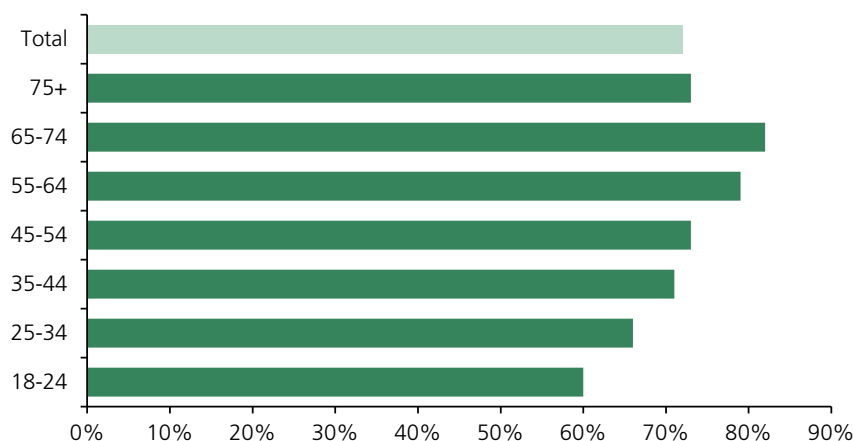
Its calculations found that overall there were 88 constituencies where the number of 16- and 17-year-olds was greater than the winning margin. As the article notes

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.

The EU referendum in 2016 saw more people turnout overall. The chart below<sup>49</sup> presents survey data by compiled by IpsosMORI for the turnout of different age groups at the 2016 EU Referendum.

The IpsosMORI analysis suggests that around 60% of 18-24 year olds voted in the 2016 EU Referendum and each subsequent age group had a higher turnout rate than the previous general election (except for those aged 75 or older).

### EU Referendum 2016: estimated turnout by age



Note: Adjusted by BES age over-claim. Base: 7,816 GB adults aged 18+

<sup>47</sup> The Guardian, ['Youthquake' behind Labour election surge divides generations](#), 20 June 2017

<sup>48</sup> See Chapter 3.2 Who voted for which party? Social characteristics of voters – in the Library briefing, [General Election 2017: full results and analysis](#)

<sup>49</sup> IpsosMORI, [The 2016 EU Referendum: who was in and who was out?](#), 5 September 2016.

## 5.2 What has happened to turnout in Scotland?

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 those registered to vote 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.

On 18 June 2015, the *Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill* was passed by the Scottish Parliament. It meant 16 and 17 year olds were able to vote in the Scottish Parliament elections from 2016 and in local government elections in Scotland from 2017.

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.

There are no breakdowns of votes cast by characteristics of voters because votes are cast in secret, but opinion polls and surveys can give some idea of how people vote.

Generally younger people have lower levels of turnout than older voters. Despite this, the independence referendum in Scotland in 2014, the first time 16 and 17 year olds could vote in a public poll anywhere in the UK, saw the highest turnout at a nationwide referendum or parliamentary election in Scotland since the franchise was extended to women in 1918.

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

The Electoral Commission reported that 97% of those 16-17 year olds who reported having voted in the 2014 independence referendum said that they would vote again in future elections and referendums.<sup>50</sup>

The Scottish Parliament elections of May 2016 were the first that 16 and 17 year old could vote in. About 80,000 were registered to vote, about 2% of the electorate. As with the referendum, 16 and 17 year olds were generally less likely to have said they had voted than older voters. Claimed turnout for 16 and 17 year olds was 78%, similar to the referendum, compared to over 90% of those aged 55+.

Overall the turnout at the 2016 Scottish Parliament elections was 55.8% of the registered electorate in the constituency vote and 55.9%

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<sup>50</sup> Electoral Commission, [Scottish Independence Referendum Report on the referendum held on 18 September 2014](#), December 2014

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.<sup>51</sup>

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 elections were held on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections in those years.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Electoral Commission, *The May 2016 Scottish Parliament election: Report on the administration of the 5 May 2016 Scottish Parliament election*, September 2016

<sup>52</sup> Electoral Commission, *Scottish council elections 2017 Report on the administration of the elections held on 4 May 2017*, September 2017

## 6. Attempts to lower the voting age to 16

### 6.1 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.<sup>53</sup> Lord Lucas said:

This Bill... would reduce the voting age in parliamentary and other elections to 16. There are two principal reasons for doing this. One is equity and justice. The other is the opportunity which it might give us to make a contribution to the revival of active democratic politics in this country, whose decline over many years we are all well aware of and much concerned with.<sup>54</sup>

Lord Bassam of Brighton replied for the Labour Government:

Throughout the world, 18 years of age is by far the most common minimum age for voting. Some 142 countries set their voting age at 18 for at least one of their chambers of parliament: 171 chambers altogether have a franchise at 18. Only three, Korea, Indonesia, and the Sudan, set the voting age at 17, with a further three, Brazil, Cuba, and Nicaragua, permitting voting at 16, and just one, Iran, setting the age at 15.

As has been acknowledged, the age of majority in the United Kingdom was last reviewed in depth in the 1960s by the Latey Commission, whose recommendation was brought into effect through the Representation of the People Act 1969. There has been no further legislative move on this subject since then, although an amendment was proposed to reduce the minimum voting age to 16 during the Committee stage of the Representation of the People Bill in 1999. However, that legislation had been drawn up to implement the recommendations of the Howarth working party, and was fast-tracked on the understanding that it was purely a vehicle to implement those recommendations. We took the view that amendments on other issues could have endangered its fast-track status. Therefore, the amendment was opposed and defeated at that stage.

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...<sup>55</sup>

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

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<sup>53</sup> [HL Deb 9 January 2003 cc 1106-1114](#)

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, c1106

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, c1120

## 6.2 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 and made the following recommendation:

Lowering the voting age would involve young people whose voices should be heard in our democracy and could be a positive step towards reengaging young people in democratic politics. To that end we support the Electoral Commission's inquiry into the voting ages. In principle we support a lowering of the voting age to 16 and recommend that the Government looks favourably on the argument to lower the voting age. We would further recommend that the Government satisfies itself that the current legal protections afforded to 16 to 18 year olds would not be undermined by any reduction in the voting age before coming to any decision.<sup>56</sup>

## 6.3 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.<sup>57</sup> Stephen Williams said:

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, our eyes can be open and we can see that we have the best ever educated, informed and politically interested cohort of 16 and 17-year-olds. In recent times, young people's interest has been awakened in politics. Perhaps one of the few silver linings of the Iraq war is that young people take an interest in the Chamber's deliberations and the fundamental decisions that we can make in this place...

Like the rest of us, young people can pick and Hoover up information 24 hours a day through television and the internet. In schools, citizenship is compulsory at key stages 3 and 4 for all 11 to 16-year-olds in England, stimulating community involvement and political literacy. 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.<sup>58</sup>

The Bill was negated on division and did not receive a Second Reading.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *The Empowerment of Children and Young People in Wales*, Welsh Affairs Select Committee. First report, 2003-04, HC 177

<sup>57</sup> [HC Deb 29 November 2005 c138-143](#)

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, c138-139

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, c141-143

## 6.4 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. Julie Morgan had previously tabled an Early Day Motion on 5 December 2007:

That this House welcome the Government's plans to consider the arguments for lowering the voting age to 16, as stated in the Governance of Britain Green Paper; notes that 16 and 17 year olds have been calling for the right to vote for many years through the Votes at 16 coalition; notes that 16 is the age at which young people start to make real decisions about their lives, and many significant rights come into play; recognises that lowering the voting age could play a huge role in helping young people feel more connected with political processes and is the next logical extension for citizenship education; and therefore supports the Voting Age (Reduction) Bill introduced into this House; and calls on the Government to establish without delay the Youth Citizenship Commission with a clear remit to develop the necessary framework for reducing the voting age to 16.<sup>60</sup>

Julie Morgan referred in the debate to the pamphlet she had produced with the 'Votes at Sixteen' campaign and the 16 reasons for lowering the voting age listed in the pamphlet.<sup>61</sup>

## 6.5 Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill 2010-11

During the passage of the *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill* in 2010-11 there were attempts to amend the Bill to include a provision to reduce the voting age for the referendum on the voting system.<sup>62</sup> At the committee stage of the Bill in the House of Commons, Natascha Engel (Labour) proposed an amendment which she said "would have the effect of lowering the voting age for the referendum to make sure that all people who are aged 16 on the day of the referendum can have their say on something that will affect them when they are 18 and eligible to vote in the general election."<sup>63</sup>

The Shadow Minister for Justice, Chris Bryant, was also in favour of lowering the voting age:

I happen to support votes at 16 and 17, simply because we ask young people to do many things in modern society, and they are aged in many ways. We now expect them to take on significant levels of debt, and to consider doing so before they go to university, and I honestly believe that if they can make decisions about whether they can parent, about whether they have children, I think that they should also be able to decide who governs the country. That is not the precise proposal in the amendment before us, because it relates merely to the

<sup>60</sup> EDM 493, 2007-08

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/publications>

<sup>62</sup> For further information about the *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill* see Research Paper 10/55

<sup>63</sup> [HC Deb 18 October 2010 c695](#)

referendum, but I think that general election votes should also apply to that age group.<sup>64</sup>

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...

[...]

...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 hon. Lady [Natascha Engel] said that the change would not cause much trouble, but it would actually cause a significant amount of trouble. I therefore hope that she will not press her amendment 332 to a vote, but if she does, I urge hon. Members on both sides of the Committee - and particularly those on the Government side - to vote against it. I also hope that those who are otherwise in favour of lowering the voting age can be happy that this is not the place to do so, because as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West said, he can bring forward a private Member's Bill on the issue, which would be the place to have that debate. I urge hon. Members not to press their amendments to a vote.

The amendment was defeated after a division; Ayes 196, Noes 346.<sup>65</sup>

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 referendum on AV.<sup>66</sup> Lord Falconer (Labour) supported the amendment in a personal capacity but said that the Labour Party had indicated that there should be a free vote on the issue.<sup>67</sup> Lord McNally said that the Government had no current plans to change the voting age and that the Bill was not the right platform on which to discuss the issue.<sup>68</sup> 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 that those "who ... have attained the age of 16 and who would be entitled to vote as electors at the subsequent parliamentary election" should be able to vote in the referendum, he did not favour lowering the voting age to 16 for general elections.

Lord Strathclyde responded to the debate on behalf of the Government and said there were no current plans to lower the voting age but added that he recognised that:

...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. It was ingenious of the noble Lord to say that, because the referendum is of constitutional interest, the voting age should

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<sup>64</sup> [HC Deb 18 October 2010 c705](#)

<sup>65</sup> [HC Deb 18 October 2010 c717](#)

<sup>66</sup> [HL Deb 13 December 2010 c446](#)

<sup>67</sup> [HL Deb 13 December 2010 c462](#)

<sup>68</sup> [HL Deb 13 December 2010 c464](#)

therefore be lowered on this one occasion, but I am afraid that it cut no ice with me.

We do not think that these amendments would be practically sensible in the context of this referendum. No doubt, when the dust has settled on the Bill, there will be opportunities seriously to debate longer-term issues on voting age. Although the noble Lord has had a good go on the Bill, we do not believe that this is the right place for such a provision.<sup>69</sup>

The amendment was withdrawn.

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

The *Voting Age (Comprehensive Reduction) Bill [HL] 2012-13* received its first reading in the House of Lords on 22 October 2012.<sup>70</sup> 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.

## 6.7 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.<sup>71</sup> 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.'<sup>72</sup> She continued:

With that in mind, it seems the right time to reconsider lowering the voting age to 16 in all elections and referendums held in the UK. It would be wrong to send the message that it is right for some of the UK's 16 and 17-year-olds to be deemed capable of voting while others are not. In July 2012, the devolved Welsh Assembly, in a debate on the issue, voted on a motion expressing support for lowering the voting age to 16 that had cross-party support.

The Minister will know that constitutional reform, including lowering the voting age, is not devolved and, therefore, the responsibility for making that happen still rests with the UK Government. For the sake of a more equal, inclusive political system across the whole UK, the Government and the Electoral Commission must consider extending the right to vote to 16 and 17-year-olds across the country.<sup>73</sup>

Julie Elliott paid tribute to the work of the *Votes at 16* coalition and called for a free vote in Parliament on lowering the voting age. She also

<sup>69</sup> HL Deb 7 February 2011 c57

<sup>70</sup> [HL Deb 22 October 2012 c11](#)

<sup>71</sup> [HC Deb 18 December 2012 222 - 229WH](#)

<sup>72</sup> [HC Deb 18 December 2012 c 222WH](#)

<sup>73</sup> *ibid*



urged the Government to commission research into how citizenship education could be improved and expanded.<sup>74</sup>

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.<sup>75</sup>

Chloe Smith referred to the report of the Youth Citizenship Commission (see Section 2.4 above) and noted that it 'did not find significant evidence on which to base a recommendation.'<sup>76</sup> 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.<sup>77</sup> There was no provision in the Coalition Agreement to lower the voting age and Chloe Smith confirmed that the Coalition Government had no plans for a change in the law.<sup>78</sup>

## 6.8 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.<sup>79</sup> Mr Williams suggested that the time had come to extend the franchise to 16 and 17 year-olds:

There is widespread support for this proposed measure among parliamentarians from all parties. It is also supported by a wide coalition of youth charities, including the British Youth Council, Barnardo's and the YMCA, as well as youth representation groups, such as the National Union of Students and, as the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) just mentioned, the UK Youth Parliament...<sup>80</sup>

Mr Williams argued later in the debate 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.<sup>81</sup>

Caroline Lucas (Green Party) supported the motion to reduce the voting age:

...a strong reason for supporting the motion is the evidence ... from countries such as Austria, where lowering the voting age has led to increased voter turnout, and that, given that voter turnout is something that we all care about, this proposal would be a very good way of achieving that.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> [HC Deb 18 December 2012 c225WH](#)

<sup>75</sup> [HC Deb 18 December 2012 c226WH](#)

<sup>76</sup> [ibid](#)

<sup>77</sup> [HC Deb 18 December 2012 c227WH](#)

<sup>78</sup> [HC Deb 18 December 2012 c229WH](#)

<sup>79</sup> [HC Deb 24 January 2013 c479](#)

<sup>80</sup> [HC Deb 24 January 2013 c479](#)

<sup>81</sup> [HC Deb 24 January 2013 c487](#)

<sup>82</sup> [HC Deb 24 January 2013 c480](#)

Natascha Engel (Labour) argued that the Scottish referendum would provide the opportunity to see how giving 16-year-olds the vote could work:

Why should we not view it as a pilot? After 16, 17 and 18-year-olds have had their say in the referendum, we can look at how it went. I agree that the genie is out of the bottle once 16-year-olds are able to vote in a referendum, because after that it will be very difficult to say to them that they are to be denied a vote in the general election that will take place in the following year.<sup>83</sup>

The then Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, Chloe Smith, responded to the debate; she was not yet convinced that there was sufficient evidence to reduce the voting age:

Hon. Members have argued that 16 and 17-year-olds ought to be able to vote in order to help engage young people at an early age in our democratic and political processes, but they do not yet convince me. I have not seen compelling evidence.

[...]

We should certainly continue to consider the question, and I welcome the role of the Backbench Business Committee in that. Perhaps the more pressing question is what we can do to increase registration and turnout in groups who can vote. 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.<sup>84</sup>

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.

## 6.9 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.<sup>85</sup> 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 and urged that the Electoral Commission should be asked to undertake a further review of the voting age:

As a member of the informal cross-party group of parliamentarians who advise the Electoral Commission, I am very

<sup>83</sup> [HC Deb 24 January 2013 c494](#)

<sup>84</sup> [HC Deb 24 January 2013 c523](#)

<sup>85</sup> [HL Deb 27 February 2013 cGC174](#)

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”.

That was nine years ago, in 2004. In July 2007, the then Prime Minister promised yet more examination of the case, including an analysis of “whether reducing the voting age would increase participation in the political process”.

Although the resulting Youth Citizenship Commission found strong support for votes for 16 and 17 year-olds, it also identified “a real evidence gap” on the issue. That was nearly four years ago.

There are two areas in which further evidence could be sought immediately. The first is the claimed tendency that those who start voting young, continue to do so throughout their lives. Secondly, we need to take account of the practical experience of secondary schools in Northern Ireland where completion of citizenship naturally leads to inclusion on the individual electoral registration process.

I hope that the Minister will be able to give us a firm commitment, after all these previous promises, that the Government do not consider the upcoming franchise extension in the Scottish referendum as an ad hoc, piecemeal, self-contained irrelevance, and that the Electoral Commission will now be invited to fulfil its promise to undertake further comprehensive investigation as a matter of urgency.<sup>86</sup>

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.

Focusing on the voting age may be seen as a form of displacement activity, recommending change to process rather than addressing the real causes of distrust in the political system. The claim made in another place by one MP in an EDM that “lowering the voting age could play a huge role in helping young people feel more connected with political processes” is to misunderstand the root of the problem and is arguably a dangerous misunderstanding.

Our time today would be better spent getting to grips with the really important question of why young people are not willing to engage with the political process. As the Youth Citizenship Commission observed, “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".<sup>87</sup>

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. He continued:

That in turn reflects the different views held across society at large and the divergent positions on this topic both within and across the various political parties. After all, we have discovered over the course of the past two and a half years just how difficult political and constitutional change is and how on any proposals for political and constitutional change there are always at least 15 different and contradictory arguments for why nothing should be done, while fewer arguments are made in support of the case for change. Nevertheless, we welcome the ongoing discussions and debate on this issue and we would encourage the noble Lord, Lord Tyler, and others to maintain their approach.<sup>88</sup>

## 6.10 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.<sup>89</sup>

Lord Lexden (Conservative) opposed the Bill:

As regards the population as a whole, my noble friend's Bill would seem to embody an idea whose time has not yet come. Even among young people interest in the idea would not seem to be matched by enthusiasm for actually exercising the right to vote. Enfranchised 16 year-olds could be expected to follow the example of their immediate seniors who have the vote. 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?"<sup>90</sup>

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'.<sup>91</sup> Baroness Royal of Blaisdon (Labour) spoke in favour of the Bill and said she had changed her mind about reducing the voting age:

I did not use to be in favour of votes at 16 but, over the past few years, I have met and exchanged views with hundreds and hundreds of young people, the majority of whom I found to be in

<sup>87</sup> HL Deb 27 February 2013 cGC177

<sup>88</sup> HL Deb 27 February 2013 cGC187

<sup>89</sup> HL Deb 25 October 2013 c1276

<sup>90</sup> HL Deb 25 October 2013 c1279

<sup>91</sup> HL Deb 25 October 2013 c1280

favour of votes at 16. More importantly, those who are not in favour express concern that they do not have enough knowledge to equip themselves to vote and do not want the media—whether written media, television or social media—to be their only guide. If only many of the millions of people who do vote had the same concern.

I am proud that my own party is now in favour of votes at 16. The policy was not plucked from the air, as some have suggested—not in today's debate, I hasten to add—but is the result of a clear policy-making process by which it was agreed that the voting age should be reduced but that it must, in parallel, be accompanied by improved citizenship education, including active citizenship.<sup>92</sup>

Lord Wallace of Saltaire responded to the debate and reiterated that there was no consensus within the Coalition Government on the issue:

This reflects differing views in society at large and the divergent positions on the topic within and across political parties. Having said that, let me bring one of the underlying issues out into the open; 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. The noble Lord, Lord Lexden, is an enthusiast for making it easier for those who live overseas to vote. That again is an important issue in terms of democratic participation. It is not completely unconnected perhaps with the belief that those people might just be a little more inclined to vote Conservative. So we need a cross-party consensus on the franchise and we need to approach this as carefully and consensually as possible.<sup>93</sup>

## 6.11 Westminster Hall debate 6 May 2014

Sarah Champion (Labour) secured a [Westminster Hall debate](#) on 6 May 2014 on votes at 16.<sup>94</sup> 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.”<sup>95</sup> She continued:

We cannot expect 16 and 17-year-olds to contribute to our society through various means—economically, physically, intellectually or socially—in a capacity where we recognise them as an adult, but then give them the democratic rights of a child. That conflict is already being recognised in a number of countries, such as Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Argentina. We must not allow ourselves to fall behind: we have been pioneers of voting reform in the UK in the past, and I hope that we are open-minded enough now to continue that trend. It is high time that we recognised the clash within our expectations of 16-year-olds. We trust our young people to contribute to society in many ways, so we should start to give them their democratic rights.<sup>96</sup>

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

<sup>92</sup> [HL Deb 25 October 2013 c1290](#)

<sup>93</sup> [HL Deb 25 October 2013 c1293](#)

<sup>94</sup> [HC Deb 6 May 2014 c1WH](#)

<sup>95</sup> [HC Deb 6 May 2014 c2WH](#)

<sup>96</sup> [HC Deb 6 May 2014 c7WH](#)

eligible to vote” and had reflected “differing opinions on the issue in society at large”. He added that there was no consensus within the Coalition Government on the issue. However, the Government was “taking a range of measures to encourage young people to register and to ensure that their voices are heard”.<sup>97</sup>

## 6.12 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.<sup>98</sup> Lord Tyler argued that the engagement of young voters in the Scottish independence referendum showed that 16 – 17 year olds were ready to vote in all elections:

...since September last year, we have had hard empirical evidence from Scotland of the readiness among young people to take on this vital civic function. The huge success of the extension of the vote to 16 and 17 year- olds in the referendum ... was thought by some to be a step too far.

But consider the facts. First, there was a remarkable response in terms of registration—no signs of disinterest there. Secondly, the level of debate, as noted by all observers including Members of your Lordships’ House, was lively, intelligent and very well informed. Thirdly, the turnout on the day of the poll was excellent, with 75% casting their vote, which far outweighed that of the 18 to 24 year-old cohort, which managed only 54%...In summary, 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.<sup>99</sup>

The amendment was reversed by the House of Commons on 17 November 2015.<sup>100</sup>

## 6.13 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.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>97</sup> [HC Deb 6 May 2014 c27WH](#)

<sup>98</sup> [HL Deb 15 July 2015 c625](#)

<sup>99</sup> [HL Deb 15 July 2015 c625](#)

<sup>100</sup> [HC Deb 17 November 2015 c581](#)

<sup>101</sup> [HL Deb 18 November 2015 c180](#)

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.<sup>102</sup>

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 and that the amendment was incomplete:

...because it would not enfranchise 16 and 17 year-olds in Gibraltar and does not make provision for the technical legislation and time-consuming operational work that would be required to register these young electors. The question of principle, however, has been roundly debated in Committee and here today. There has not been a great deal of agreement, but I hope that there may be some agreement about the House that it is essential that this referendum should be seen to be fair—and that it should be fair. 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.<sup>103</sup>

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.

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.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> [HL Deb 18 November 2015 c153](#)

<sup>103</sup> [HL Deb 18 November 2015 c174](#)

<sup>104</sup> [HL Deb 18 November 2015 c179](#)

## 6.14 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.<sup>105</sup>

Caroline Lucas set out her arguments for PR and for lowering the voting age:

...proportional representation is about fairness, which is why my Bill puts PR hand in hand with giving 16 and 17-year-olds the vote. Sixteen-year-olds are considered old enough to enter into marriage and civil partnerships, pay income tax and national insurance, obtain welfare benefits in their own right, and join the armed forces, a political party or a trade union.

[...]

The United Kingdom was one of the first countries in the world to lower the voting age from 21 to 18, but it is now trailing behind countries such as Brazil, Argentina, and Austria—unless, of course, you live in Scotland, which has blazed a trail with a more inclusive and equal political system, through giving 16 and 17-year-olds the vote in the independence referendum. Those young people need a say, not just on the future of the Union, but on all the decisions that affect their future. We also need equality between 16 and 17-year-olds in Scotland and those in the rest of the UK.<sup>106</sup>

John Penrose (Conservative) disagreed:

This Bill ignores the repeatedly expressed democratic will of Parliament, which has already rejected lowering the voting age many times over the past year, and it ignores a thumping referendum verdict against changing the voting system in 2011 as well. We are about to abolish an entire layer of proportionately elected representatives when we get rid of MEPs as we leave the EU. Now is not the time to replace them with something else. The people have spoken and even though I understand and respect the fact that the answer is not to the hon. Lady's liking, I urge her please to respect its democratic power and to leave the issue alone for a long, long time.<sup>107</sup>

The motion to introduce the Bill was defeated on division: Ayes 74, Noes 81.<sup>108</sup>

## 6.15 Voting Age (Reduction) Bill [HL] 2017-19

The Labour peer and former Minister, Lord Adonis, has introduced a Private Member's Bill in the House of Lords to extend the vote to all 16 and 17 year olds for all Parliamentary and local elections.

His *Voting Age (Reduction) Bill [HL] 2017-19* has not yet been debated.

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<sup>105</sup> [HC Deb 20 July 2016 c834](#)

<sup>106</sup> [ibid](#)

<sup>107</sup> [HC Deb 20 July 2016 c838](#)

<sup>108</sup> [ibid](#)



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

On Friday 3 November 2017, Jim McMahon's Private member's Bill to [reduce the voting age](#) appears second on the Order Paper. As well as planning to reduce the voting age to 16 for all elections the Bill also makes provisions about young people's education in citizenship and the constitution.

## 7. The Isle of Man and Jersey

In February 2006 the Isle of Man was the first part of the British Isles to lower the voting age from 18 to 16. Although it is not officially part of the United Kingdom, it recognises the Queen as Head of State and its citizens are British. 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 Channel Island of Jersey lowered its voting age from 18 to 16 in July 2007.<sup>109</sup> Although Jersey is not officially part of the United Kingdom, like the Isle of Man, its citizens are British. 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.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> [Voting at 16](#), BBC Online

<sup>110</sup> <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article2039862.ece> (Subscription Required)

## 8. International comparisons

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

### 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, Dem Peoples Rep of Korea
19	Republic of Korea
20	Japan, Nauru, Bahrain, Cameroon
21	Kuwait (men), Lebanon, Malaysia, Oman, Samoa, Tonga, Singapore

Voters have to be aged 25+ in Italian Senate elections

\* 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).<sup>111</sup> 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 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:

<sup>111</sup> "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.

- 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).<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> *How old is old enough? The minimum age of voting and candidacy in UK elections.* Electoral Commission consultation paper, 2003.

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