



intergenerational foundation

Fairness for Future Generations

Why British citizens should be allowed to vote at 16

Who we are...

The Intergenerational Foundation (www.if.org.uk) is a think tank which researches fairness between the generations in the UK, in order to protect the interests of younger and future generations, who are at risk of being ignored by current policy-makers.

Our response...

The Intergenerational Foundation is pleased to be able to respond to the Youth Select Committee's call for evidence on lowering the voting age in UK elections to 16. As an organisation which argues for the interests of young people in policy-making, the Intergenerational Foundation (IF) strongly believes that 16- and 17-year-olds should be given the right to vote in all UK elections. IF supports lowering the voting age to 16 for the following reasons:

1. "No taxation without representation"

During the 18th century, Britain's colonial subjects in North America demanded political enfranchisement on the grounds that it was unjust for them to be forced to pay taxes to the British exchequer without having any representation in Britain's parliament, as this meant they had no power to influence how much tax was raised from them or how these tax revenues were spent. The slogan "No taxation without representation" proved to be such a compelling argument that it helped to inspire the American Revolution, and it has endured as a rallying cry for democratic representation ever since.

Today, 16- and 17-year-olds in Britain are the victims of a similar democratic injustice to that which inspired the American colonists to revolt. From the age of 16 onwards, British citizens are allowed to be legally employed as adults and earn wages on which they have to pay tax and national insurance contributions, yet because they cannot vote in general elections they have no power over how the money raised from their taxes is spent. According to the latest ONS data, 316,000 16- and 17-year-olds are currently employed in the UK, so this injustice affects a significant number of young people.¹

2. Counterbalance the ageing of the electorate

Although almost everyone who is above the age of 18 in Britain has the right to vote, IF's research has shown that voter power is not distributed evenly across the age range. IF has previously published a report entitled [*The Rise of Gerontocracy? Addressing the Intergenerational Democratic Deficit*](#). Written on IF's behalf by longevity expert Dr Craig Berry, it analysed Britain's "intergenerational democratic deficit" – essentially, the amount of political power that is wielded by older age cohorts compared to the young.

¹ONS (2014) [*A06: Educational Status and Labour Market Status for people aged from 16 to 24*](#) Newport: ONS

The gap between levels of turnout for old and young voters is triple the OECD average in Britain and one-and-a-half times greater than in any other EU country.² IF's analysis showed that the intergenerational democratic deficit is set to grow because the median age is rapidly rising both among people who actually vote (because of low turnout among the young) and for potential voters (because the adult population of Britain is ageing generally). These trends are displayed in Fig.1.

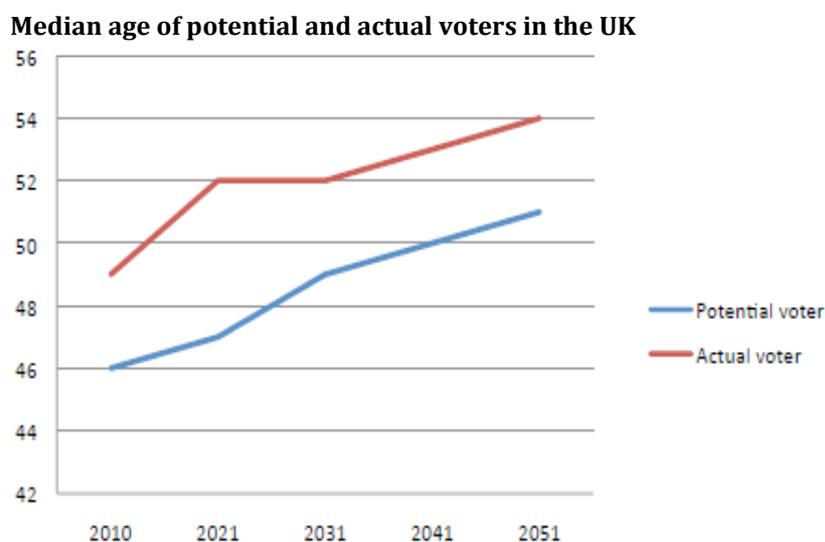


Fig.1 Median age among the share of UK residents who are eligible to vote and people who actually vote (red line)³

In his report for IF, Dr Berry argued that “unless the political marginalisation of young people abates, we are in danger of creating ‘generation D’, a succession of disenfranchised cohorts with little say in how their society is governed. Today’s young people (‘generation Y’ or ‘the jilted generation’) are suffering a democratic deficit, but we can expect this trend to accelerate in coming decades...even if cohort sizes were equal, a democratic deficit would result from the inability of the UK political system to mobilise and genuinely respond to young people’s perspectives.”

As the median age increases among both the electorate and the share of the population which actually votes, politicians will have a bigger incentive to formulate policies that pander to older voters’ interests while ignoring the needs of younger people. Dr Berry’s report recommended that the voting age should be lowered to 16, in part because this will reduce the median age of the electorate, giving politicians more of a reason to pursue policies which will help young people, and also because it should be easier to educate young people about the political process and to help them engage with it while they are still at school, leaving them better-equipped for life as politically active citizens.

3. Why should 16-year-olds not have the vote?

The question which the Youth Select Committee is investigating is often phrased as “why should 16 - year-olds be given the right to vote?” However, it could be argued that this viewpoint looks at the issue the wrong way around; given that the vote is regarded as a fundamental human right in a democracy,

²Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (2014) [Oral evidence: Voter engagement in the UK, HC 10:59 Thursday 27 February 2014](#) London: House of Commons

³Berry, Craig (2012) [The Rise of Gerontocracy? Addressing the Intergenerational Democratic Deficit](#) London: Intergenerational Foundation

surely the burden of proof should rest upon those who want to restrict access to the franchise, rather than upon those who want to expand it. When the question is viewed in this light, there are few convincing arguments which support denying the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds.

The UK has both signed and ratified the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), Article 25 of which states that every citizen should have the right and opportunity to vote without “unreasonable restrictions”. During the 19th and 20th centuries, parliament passed a series of Acts which broadened the franchise by removing restrictions which we now regard as anachronistic and unjust, such as property requirements or the disenfranchisement of women. Men and women who were aged 18 to 20 were barred from voting until as recently as 1969. What this demonstrates is that there is no particularly compelling reason for why the voting age should be stuck at 18 for evermore; views about what constitutes “unreasonable restrictions” to the franchise have altered dramatically over time, and lowering the voting age to 16 would be the logical next step in the process which has occurred over the last two centuries of gradually extending voting rights to more and more people.

4. Society gives under-18s plenty of other responsibilities

One of the main ideas behind placing an age limit on when people can vote is that they are not considered capable of exercising the responsibility of voting before they reach a certain level of maturity; age is used as a proxy for competency. However, this argument is undermined by the fact that there is a significant degree of inconsistency between the different ages at which society allows people to handle various important responsibilities. Although they are not allowed to vote, 16- and 17-year-olds in Britain are already allowed to do the following:

- Leave compulsory education to undertake work, an apprenticeship or training
- Pay taxes and national insurance
- Consent to sexual relationships
- Marry or enter a civil partnership
- Be held responsible for a crime
- Legally change their name by deed poll
- Drive a vehicle
- Join the armed forces
- Become the director of a company

Indeed, the UK is somewhat unusual by international standards in the degree of responsibility which it grants young people. The age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10; this means there is a legal assumption that anyone who is above this age has a sufficient degree of responsibility for their actions for them to be prosecuted if they are accused of a crime. This age is low compared to many other countries; the European average is 14 (it is as high as 16 in Spain and Portugal), and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has ruled that an age of criminal responsibility below 12 is unacceptable.⁴ Young people in Britain can also join the armed forces from the age of 16 (although they need the permission of their parent or guardian, and they cannot participate in active combat until they are 18); this makes the UK the only country in Europe which recruits under-18s, and one of

⁴Lipscombe, Sally (2012) [The Age of Criminal Responsibility in England and Wales](#) London: House of Commons Library

only 20 nations where people can join the armed forces at 16.⁵ This is not a token issue, either; there are currently over 2,000 16- and 17-year-olds serving in the British forces.⁶ The UK has repeatedly faced criticism from the UN and campaign groups for having such a low age of criminal responsibility and for allowing under-18s to join the armed forces, but the UK government has continued to support both policies. The fact that Britain considers young people to be mature enough to make these decisions at a lower age than is the case in many other countries makes it look especially inconsistent that young people are not considered to be mature enough to vote until they are 18.

5. Other countries allow people to vote at younger ages

The age at which people are entitled to vote varies around the world. Under-18s can currently vote in elections in the following countries:

- Austria
- Nicaragua
- Brazil
- Ecuador
- Argentina
- Germany (state elections only)
- Hungary (if you meet certain requirements which give you adult legal rights)
- Slovenia
- Norway (pilot schemes running in selected municipalities)

Of particular significance for the debate in Britain is that other parts of the British Isles have now taken the lead in lowering the voting age ahead of the national government. All three of Great Britain's crown dependencies – the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey – have lowered the voting age to 16 for parliamentary elections. More strikingly still, 16- and 17-year-olds residing in Scotland will be allowed to vote during the Scottish independence referendum in September 2014. Lowering the voting age to 16 is a long-standing policy objective of the Scottish National Party, so there is a strong likelihood that this arrangement will be maintained for future elections in Scotland if the country votes in favour of independence.⁷

If other countries have been able to lower the voting age successfully then there is no obvious reason why Britain cannot do the same; and the fact that some British citizens are able to participate in the democratic process at the ages of 16 and 17 while that right is still denied to the majority, purely because of where they were born, strengthens the argument that, for the sake of Britain's democracy, this is an injustice which deserves to be rectified.

Author:

David Kingman

⁵ForcesWatch (2011) *The recruitment of under-18s into the UK armed forces* London: ForcesWatch

⁶Ministry of Defence (2013) *UK Armed Forces Annual Personnel Report: 1 April 2013* London: Ministry of Defence

⁷BBC News (2013) "[Scottish independence: Referendum voting age bill approved by MSPs](#)" *BBC News* 27 June 2013

For more information about the Intergenerational Foundation and its work, please visit www.if.org.uk or contact Liz Emerson, Co-Founder at liz@intergenerational.org.uk.