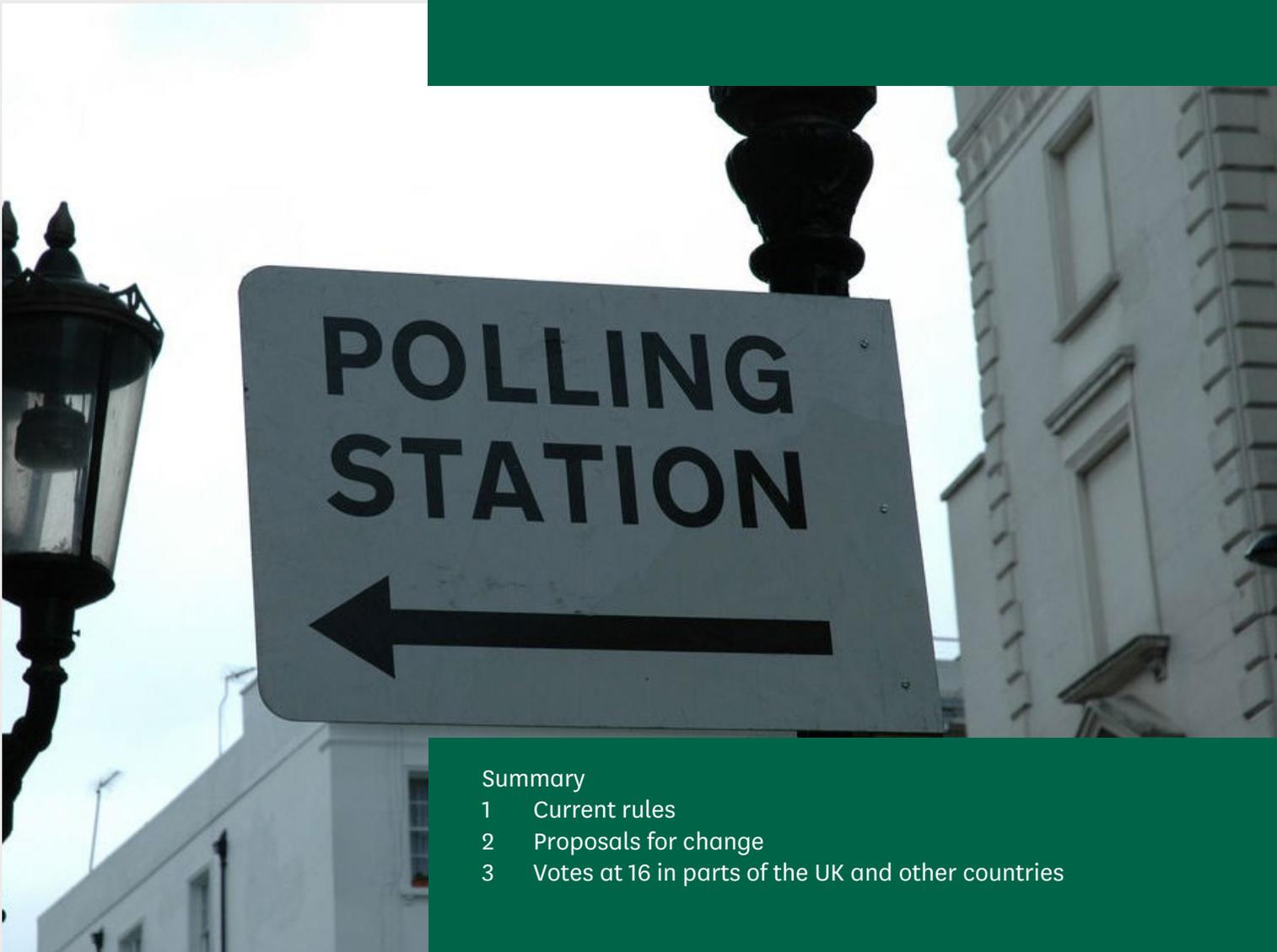


Research Briefing

21 February 2025

By Neil Johnston

Voting age



Summary

- 1 Current rules
- 2 Proposals for change
- 3 Votes at 16 in parts of the UK and other countries

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Summary

The voting age for an election in the UK depends on whether responsibility for making the rules is reserved to the UK parliament or has been devolved to the Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru (Welsh Parliament).

In reserved elections, the voting age is 18. These are:

- elections for the UK Parliament
- all local elections in England
- police and crime commissioner elections (PCC) in England and Wales
- all elections in Northern Ireland

In devolved elections, the voting age is 16:

- local council elections in Scotland and Wales
- elections to the Scottish Parliament and Senedd

The UK Government was elected with a manifesto commitment to lower the voting age for reserved elections to 16. The commitment was not included in the first King's Speech of the new Parliament, but the government says it still plans to legislate before the next general election.

Most other parties in the House of Commons support lowering the voting age. The Conservative Party and the Democratic Unionist Party are opposed. Reform UK did not mention voting age in its manifesto, instead pledging to reform the voting system for Westminster elections.

Supporters of reducing the voting age say that it would help increase political engagement of younger people and that 16- and 17-year-olds already have significant rights, so it is important that they have a say in who governs them. Opponents question young people's maturity and life experience. Some worry about the impact on elections and there are suggestions that it is a partisan move as younger people tend to vote for left of centre parties compared to older people.

In the few countries where voting age has been lowered to 16 research has shown that there has been no impact on the results of elections and that young people enfranchised at 16 are more likely to vote than those enfranchised at 18.

1

Current rules

The right to register to vote in elections is based on nationality, age and residence.

In recent years the rules on voting age have changed depending on which part of the UK you live in. This is as a result of devolution.

Reserved elections are those where responsibility for making the rules is the responsibility of the UK Parliament. These are elections for the UK Parliament, all local elections in England, police and crime commissioner (PCC) elections in England and Wales, and all elections in Northern Ireland. The voting age for reserved elections is 18.

Other elections are those where responsibility for the rules has been devolved to the Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru. These devolved elections are local council elections in Scotland and Wales and elections to the Scottish Parliament and Senedd.

The devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales have lowered the voting age for devolved elections to 16. In these elections the nationality requirements have also been changed. Anyone legally resident in Scotland and Wales can register to vote for devolved elections regardless of citizenship.

The Library briefing, [Who can vote in UK elections?](#) explains full details on eligibility to vote, including on nationality and residence as well as age.

2

Proposals for change

At the 2024 general election the Labour Party included a manifesto commitment to reduce the voting age for all elections to 16 saying:

We will increase the engagement of young people in our vibrant democracy, by giving 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in all elections.¹

Proposals to reduce the voting age were not included in the Labour government's first King's speech.²

The government answered a parliamentary question in October 2024 saying:

As per the manifesto, the Government is committed to act during this Parliament to give 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in all elections, strengthening our democracy, empowering young people to participate and building an informed and empowered electorate.

...

Lowering the voting age will be a major change to the electoral franchise, with implications for the wider electoral sector. Successful design and implementation of the change will require careful planning and engagement with stakeholders in the electoral sector, devolved and local government, education and civil society and, importantly, young people themselves.³

The Conservative Party said it would not change the voting age for reserved elections.⁴ However there are Conservative politicians that think the voting age should be reduced. Writing in a 2016 pamphlet published by the Tory Reform Group, former leader of the Scottish Conservative Party and Member of the Scottish Parliament, Ruth Davidson spoke of the engagement of 16- and 17-year-olds during the referendum on Scottish independence:

...having watched and debated in front of 16- and 17-year-olds throughout the referendum...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.⁵

Reform UK did not mention voting age in their manifesto instead calling for proportional representation for Westminster elections.

¹ Labour Party manifesto, [Change](#), Serving the country

² Prime Minister's Office, [King's Speech 2024: background briefing notes](#), 17 July 2024

³ [PQ 5416 \[on Members: Age\], 11 October 2024](#)

⁴ Conservative manifesto, [Clear plan bold action secure future](#) (pdf), p59

⁵ Tory Reform Group, Giving 16 and 17 Year Olds the Vote: The Tory Case, 2016

Most other parties favour lowering the voting age. The Liberal Democrats also included a commitment to lowering the voting age, as well as extending voting rights to all EU citizens with settled status, and to anyone else who has lived in the UK for at least five years and has the right to stay permanently.⁶ The Liberal Democrats adopted the policy of reducing the voting age to 16 in their 2001 manifesto.⁷

The Green Party for England and Wales and its sister parties in Scotland and in Northern Ireland all support votes at 16 and removing citizenship requirements.⁸ The Scottish National Party (SNP), and Plaid Cymru support the extension of votes at 16 to all elections, not just their devolved elections.⁹

In September 2024, Northern Ireland Assembly Members backed a private member's motion calling for the reduction of the voting age to 16.¹⁰ Democratic Unionist and Traditional Unionist members spoke against.¹¹

Opinion polling suggests the public are unsupportive. Polling by More in Common in June 2024 showed 47% of the public oppose and 28% support lowering the voting age. Those 18 to 26 supported the move 49% to 23%. Only 10% of over 75s supported the change.¹²

Polling in Scotland before the change of voting age for devolved elections showed two-thirds opposed to votes at 16. In 2015 the proportion of people who supported votes at 16 for elections was at 60%.¹³

2.1

The debate

People in favour of lowering the voting age to 16 have argued that 16-year-olds already have a wide range of other rights, and these should include their right to vote.

People opposed to lowering the voting age have argued that the rights accrued at 16 are sometimes subject to qualification. You can only marry or join the army at 16 with parental consent. The age for purchasing cigarettes and alcohol is 18. Since 2015, young people in England have to stay in education or training tied to formal educational qualifications until aged 18.¹⁴

⁶ Liberal Democrat manifesto, [For a Fair Deal](#), Political Reform

⁷ [2001 Liberal Democrat General Election Manifesto](#)

⁸ Green Party manifestos, [England and Wales, Scotland](#)(pdf) p41, [Northern Ireland](#)(pdf) p15

⁹ Plaid Cymru manifesto, [For fairness, for ambition, for Wales](#) (pdf), p44, SNP manifesto, [A future made in Scotland](#) (pdf), p26

¹⁰ Irish News, [Assembly backs motion calling for lower voting age despite DUP opposition](#), 24 September 2024

¹¹ NIA Record of Proceedings, [24 September 2024](#)

¹² More in Common, [What do voters make of proposals to lower the UK's voting age?](#), June 2024

¹³ Christine Huebner and Jan Eichhorn, [Evidence and Good Practice on Lowering the Voting Age to 16](#), p6

¹⁴ Democratic Audit post by Professor Andrew Russell, [The case for lowering the voting age is less persuasive now than at any point in the last 50 years](#), May 2014

Concerns have also been expressed about what might happen to turnout and whether young people will be unduly influenced by their parents.

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

It also considered the available research on the potential impact on turnout. It noted that studies at the time were limited. In Austria, where 16- and 17-year-olds can vote in all elections, this age group was more likely to turn out than those aged 18 to 21 but less likely than older voters. It also concluded young people most likely to engage with the democratic process if the extension of the right to vote was combined with a targeted information campaign tailored specifically for this age group.¹⁵

The Scottish Parliament committee that scrutinised the extension of voting right to 16- and 17-year-olds after the Scottish independence referendum heard evidence that found similar levels of political interest amongst 16- and 17-year-olds as adults, and that 16 and 17 year olds did not simply follow the voting pattern of their parents.¹⁶ It also heard that engagement lasted beyond the referendum and that young people talked about political issues with family members and peers more than English counter-parts.¹⁷

Unicef has warned that debating votes at 16 could have implications for child protection. It has said:

Promoting 16 as the minimum voting age could trigger a debate about a reduction in child protection thresholds. Countries impose different age thresholds to distinguish the rights and responsibilities of children from adults... These inconsistencies are hard to correct and do not reflect human rights law or scientific evidence. It would be important to ensure that lowering the voting age is not equated to a justification to lower other thresholds. Enfranchising adolescents does not mean denying children's potential vulnerabilities in other instances. Therefore, any advocacy for adolescent suffrage would need to clarify protection concerns and invest in an evidence-based debate.¹⁸

Both Scotland and Wales have included protections for registration data of those under 16 who register as attainers. An attainer is someone who can register to vote in advance of reaching voting age. When they attain voting age they are therefore already registered and able to vote.

¹⁵ National Assembly for Wales, [The report of the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform](#), December 2017

¹⁶ Scottish Parliament, [Stage 1 Report by Devolution \(Further Powers\) Committee pdf](#), May 2015, p6

¹⁷ As above, p7

¹⁸ Unicef, [Should children vote? Understanding the debate](#), undated

Copies of the full electoral register are available for use by political parties, candidates and elected representatives to help with voter engagement and processing donations. Data on those attainers under the age of 16 are not made available and can only be used by the electoral registration officer and their staff. There are two exceptions. One is for criminal investigations or proceedings relating to the electoral register or elections, and the other is when someone will be 16 on polling day. Then they can be included on any copy of the register supplied to a candidate.¹⁹

2.2

What has happened where voting age has been reduced?

A concern raised about lowering the voting age is the possible impact on elections. Younger voters tend to turnout at lower rates than older voters in the UK but tend to have different political affiliations to older voters.²⁰

Political leaning

Research based on empirical evidence from countries where the voting age has been lowered to 16 shows there is little evidence that enfranchising younger voters alters election results overall.

As a study funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust points out:

There are around 1.5 million 16- and 17-year-olds in the UK, equivalent to just under three percent of the population aged 16 and over (2.87 percent) and their proportion is not projected to increase until 2039 (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Due to the size of these cohorts in the population their inclusion into the electorate is going to have a negligible impact on overall vote shares, even in the most extreme (and improbable) scenario that all 16- and 17-year-olds turned out to vote and decided to vote in the same way.²¹

These figures do not take account of nationality. Not all of these young people would be eligible to vote in elections as not all of them in England would have the meet the nationality eligibility. In Austria the inclusion of 16- and 17-year-olds in the electorate did not change the political landscape.²²

The February 2025 YouGov Westminster voting intention poll did not survey under 18s but the voting intention of the next age group, ages 18 to 24, had headline voting intention as follows (figures in brackets are for all ages):

- Labour 28% (24%)

¹⁹ Library briefing 1020, [Supply and sale of the electoral register](#)

²⁰ Economics Observatory, [What do we know about voter turnout in parliamentary elections?](#) 2024.

²¹ Christine Huebner and Jan Eichhorn, [Evidence and Good Practice on Lowering the Voting Age to 16](#), p6

²² As above, p7

- Green 20% (9%)
- Conservative 20% (21%)
- Liberal Democrat 17% (14%)
- Reform UK 12% (25%)
- others 3% (6%).

(The 18-24 figures are based on a smaller subset of the main survey so is subject to a wider margin of error than the overall figures.)²³

Turnout

Concerns have also been raised about turnout as the younger someone is the less likely they are to vote generally.

One of the reasons voter turnout has declined has been identified as the lowering of the voting age in 1970. When the change happened, many young adults were leaving home and starting work or going on to higher education. In doing so they did not have experienced voters around them when it came to their first chance to vote and did not develop the habit of voting. New voters enfranchised at 18 turned out at a lower rate than those enfranchised at 21.²⁴

Moving frequently is also a barrier to registering to voting. The age someone is most likely to move between local council areas is 18 to 25. Electoral Commission research in 2010 found that while 92% of people who had lived at the same address for five years were registered to vote, only 21% of those who had been at an address less than a year were registered.²⁵

However, evidence shows that 16- and 17-year-olds, most of who are still living with parents or guardians, are more likely to vote than first-time voters at older ages.²⁶ This has been consistent across many of the places that have lowered the voting age.²⁷ In Austria and Scotland, young people voting at 16 or 17 were more likely to turn out to vote in elections well into their 20s compared to young people who experienced their first vote at an election with a voting age of 18.²⁸

Research has previously indicated that if voters vote in the first elections that they are eligible for, they are more likely to form a voting habit and vote

²³ [Latest YouGov Westminster voting intention figures](#), 3 February 2025

²⁴ Lowering the Voting Age to 16: Learning from Real Experiences Worldwide, p15

²⁵ Richard Berry & Patrick Dunleavy, [Engaging young voters with enhanced election information \(pdf\)](#), p11-12

²⁶ As above, p23

²⁷ Christine Huebner and Jan Eichhorn, [Evidence and Good Practice on Lowering the Voting Age to 16](#), p4

²⁸ As above

throughout their lives.²⁹ Some supporters of lowering the voting age argue this effect could improve turnout rates, particularly if lowering the voting age coincides with better political education and awareness.

Political engagement and education

A younger voting age appears to increase the political engagement of young people. But without effective political education and family support, political participation among young people can remain low.

Lowering the voting age also appears to have a positive influence on young people's engagement. A study of German teenagers found those eligible to vote at 16 were more likely to discuss politics with their family and friends and to use a voting advice apps.³⁰ The study suggests that more research may be needed on "whether there is an initial effect of lowering the voting age – e.g., due to press coverage, public debate or discussions in schools – that may dissipate over time."

Speaking to the Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee, Christine Huebner, a professor at the University of Sheffield who with an academic interest in lowering the voting age spoke of the barriers to registration that some young people face:

In Wales in particular, electoral registration for 16 and 17-year-old voters in the 2021 election was one of the biggest barriers we found. To give you some numbers, we found that, roughly, estimates show that less than half of 16 and 17-year-olds joined the electoral roll in time for the 2021 election.

...

The young people that had family support, that were nudged to get onto the electoral roll in time for the election didn't find the process at all problematic, but there are huge numbers of young people who do not have this kind of family support.³¹

She also noted local authorities varied in what work they undertook to raise awareness. She suggests that automatic voter registration is one solution to remove some of the barriers to young people registering.

The IPPR think tank citizenship thinks citizenship and "well-resourced and unbiased politics education in schools" should be an important part of any decision to lower the voting age. It notes legislation to enhance teaching of democracy was passed at the same time as lowering the voting age in Austria. It also notes the role of education was highlighted in Scotland and

²⁹ Richard Berry & Patrick Dunleavy, [Engaging young voters with enhanced election information \(pdf\)](#), 2014, page 21.

³⁰ Coming of voting age. [Evidence from a natural experiment on the effects of electoral eligibility](#). [Electoral Studies](#), April 2024

³¹ Local Government and Housing Committee, [evidence session 15 November 2023](#), paragraphs 14-15

Wales when they lowered their voting age but without statutory measures accompanying the change.³²

Such education might help increase participation of newly enfranchised teenagers.

PoliticsHome reported in February 2025 that the majority of teachers in England “did not believe the national curriculum provides enough political education to prepare students for voting in elections.”³³ A review of the national curriculum in England is due to make recommendations in 2025.³⁴

³² [Modernising elections: How to get voters back](#) (pdf), January 2025, p29-30

³³ PoliticsHome, [Majority of Teachers Feel Curriculum Not Equipped For Voting At 16, Poll Shows](#), 16 February 2025

³⁴ Gov.uk, [Curriculum and assessment review](#)

3 Votes at 16 in parts of the UK and other countries

3.1 Scotland

The independence referendum

The voting age was first reduced to 16 in Scotland for the Scottish independence referendum of 2014.

Holding an independence referendum is a power reserved to the UK government,³⁵ In 2013 the UK and Scottish governments signed a [“section 30 order”](#) in 2012 that gave a temporary power for the Scottish Parliament to legislate for a referendum on independence.³⁶

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. They also agreed that extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds for the referendum was a matter for the Scottish Parliament.³⁷

The Scottish Government consulted on allowing those aged 16 and over to vote.³⁸ The responses to the question of lowering the voting age for the referendum were 56% broadly agreed and 41% did not.

The consultation received responses from eleven organisations or groups which are either run by, or work with, young people. Ten of these respondents were in favour of allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in the referendum and one group reported that its membership had mixed views.³⁹

Comments were received that expressed views often cited for lowering the voting age, “that if 16 and 17 year olds are able, for example, to get married and join the army”. Another respondent commented “that it is younger people

³⁵ Library briefing, [Supreme Court judgment on Scottish independence referendum](#)

³⁶ Library briefing 8738, [Scottish Devolution: Section 30 Orders](#)

³⁷ [Agreement between the UK Government and the Scottish Government on a referendum on independence for Scotland](#), 15 October 2012

³⁸ Scottish Government, [Your Scotland, Your Referendum](#), January 2012

³⁹ Scottish Government, [‘Your Scotland, Your Referendum’: An Analysis of Consultation Responses](#), October 2012, Section 9

who will live with the outcome of the referendum vote and they should be entitled to have their say on what a future Scotland will look like”.⁴⁰

Some respondents agreed that the voting age should be lowered but the referendum was not the right time and that the referendum should be held using the same franchise that elected the government proposing the change. Others that a reduction of the voting age should apply to all elections across the whole of the UK and not just to Scotland.

Those opposed to the reduction of the voting age cited young people’s immaturity and lack of life experience. The age at which people can buy alcohol and cigarettes (18) was also raised as a reason to not allow those below 18 to vote.⁴¹

The Scottish Government decided to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote. The [Scottish Independence Referendum \(Franchise\) Act 2013](#) set the eligibility to vote in the referendum.⁴²

The final number of 16- and 17-year-olds registered to vote in Scotland, as of 18 September 2014, was 109,533, accounting for 2.6% of the total referendum electorate and equivalent to around 89% of all 16- to 17-year-olds resident in Scotland.⁴³

Scottish Parliament and local elections

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

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

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

In December 2014 the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, confirmed that Scotland would be given the power to permanently reduce the voting age for

⁴⁰ Scottish Government, [‘Your Scotland, Your Referendum’: An Analysis of Consultation Responses](#), October 2012, Section 9

⁴¹ As above

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

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

⁴⁴ Smith Commission, [Report of the Smith Commission for further devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament \(PDF\)](#), 27 November 2014

local and Scottish Parliament elections.⁴⁵ The required section 30 order was made in March 2015.⁴⁶

The [Scottish Elections \(Reduction of Voting Age\) Bill](#) was introduced in the Scottish Parliament on 2 April 2015.⁴⁷ The [Policy Memorandum](#) published by the Scottish Government to accompany the bill stated that the voting age would be lowered for any other poll which used the Scottish local government franchise (for example, elections for membership of a National Park authority). Arrangements would also be put in place “in relation to the registration of 14 and 15-year olds to ensure that they are able to vote in those elections as soon as they attain the age of 16”.⁴⁸

The bill received Royal Assent on 24 July 2015.⁴⁹

The Scottish Conservatives had opposed the reduction of the voting age for the 2014 referendum. However, when the Scottish Parliament debated legislation to permanently reduce the voting age for local government and Scottish Parliamentary elections the Scottish Conservatives supported the move and the Bill was passed without a vote.⁵⁰ The then leader of the Scottish party, Ruth Davidson, wrote in September 2015:

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

The first election in which 16- and 17-year-olds could vote were the Scottish Parliament election on 5 May 2016.

3.2

Wales

From 1 April 2018, powers for the conduct and administration of local council and Assembly elections were devolved to the Senedd Cymru (then called the National Assembly for Wales) and the Welsh Government.

In 2015 a package of reforms had been out in the St David’s Day Agreement between the main political parties in Wales. The then Secretary of State for Wales, Stephen Crabb, said:

⁴⁵ BBC News, [David Cameron accepts Scottish Parliament votes at 16](#), 15 December 2014

⁴⁶ [Scotland Act 1998 \(Modification of Schedules 4 and 5 and Transfer of Functions to the Scottish Ministers etc.\) Order 2015](#)

⁴⁷ See the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) briefing, [Scottish Elections \(Reduction of Voting Age\) Bill](#)

⁴⁸ [Scottish Elections \(Reduction of Voting Age\): Policy Memorandum](#), 2 April 2015

⁴⁹ [Scottish Elections \(Reduction of Voting Age\) Act 2015](#)

⁵⁰ See the Stage 1 debate on the [Scottish Elections \(Reduction of Voting Age\) Bill](#)

⁵¹ [Giving 16- and 17-year-olds the vote: the Tory case](#), Tory Reform Group, 27 September 2015

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

The process culminated with the passing of the [Wales Act 2017](#) in the UK Parliament.⁵³ The act required the Assembly to pass certain legislation relating to elections with a supermajority, where two thirds of Assembly Members had to vote in favour at the final stage of the bill.

In Wales there were two separate pieces of legislation to lower the voting age. The Welsh Government introduced the legislation to reduce the voting age for local council elections. The National Assembly's Commission, the body that employs staff and ensures the effective running of the Assembly (now called the Senedd Commission) introduced a Commission bill to alter the voting age for Senedd elections.

Police and Crime Commissioner elections are a reserved matter, and the voting age remains at 18 for PCC elections in Wales.

Welsh Government legislation

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

The summary of responses was published in July 2017.⁵⁵ Of the responses received relating to voting age, 25 of the 28 responses (89%) supported lowering the voting age to 16. The analysis said the main reason cited was that it is a positive thing to promote interest and participation in young people, and would “serve to breathe new life into politics”. It did not comment on those reasons for opposing.⁵⁶

The Welsh Government then held a second consultation. It said it favoured lowering the voting age and asked whether respondents agreed.

The consultation also pointed out that the franchise for elections to the Assembly was 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

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

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

⁵⁴ Welsh Government, [White Paper: Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed](#), 31 January 2017

⁵⁵ Welsh Government, [White Paper - Summary of Response Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed](#), July 2017

⁵⁶ Welsh Government, [White Paper - Summary of Response Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed](#), July 2017

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.”⁵⁷

The summary of responses to the consultation was published in April 2018. Of those who responded there was strong support for lowering the voting age in local elections to 16. Over two thirds agreed (68%) with 31% disagreeing.⁵⁸

Similar views were expressed to those in the Scottish equivalent consultation. Supporters said lowering the voting age “made sense” in the context of other age-dependent duties, such as paying tax, and the range of rights already enjoyed by young people and “Some saw it as a welcome and natural extension of recognising young people’s rights”.

Reservations were around having sufficient maturity and life experience. Some thought schools would first need to teach democracy more effectively before allowing younger people to vote. The analysis went on to say:

A further reservation was that there was no evidence to support lowering the voting age. A small number considered that lessons from the Scottish experience had yet to be digested.⁵⁹

The [Local Government and Elections \(Wales\) Bill](#) was introduced in the Senedd in November 2019. It received Royal Assent on 20 January 2021. The first elections for local councils in Wales that lowered the voting age to 16 were the May 2022 local elections.

Assembly Commission Act

In anticipation of the power to take control of its own elections, the National Assembly Llywydd and Assembly Commission set up an [Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform](#).

The Panel’s final report was published on 12 December 2017. It recommended that the minimum voting age for Assembly/Senedd elections should be reduced to 16.⁶⁰

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

⁵⁷ As above, p7-8

⁵⁸ Welsh Government, [Consultation – summary of responses: Electoral Reform in Local Government in Wales](#), p7

⁵⁹ As above, 7-8

⁶⁰ Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform, [A Parliament that Works for Wales: The report of the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform](#), December 2017.

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

As few places have reduced the minimum voting age to 16, evidence allowing these arguments to be tested remains limited. However, what evidence there is tends to support the expectation that 16- and 17-year-olds are indeed more likely to vote than 18 to 24-year-olds, if their enfranchisement is part of a package that also includes the provision of information tailored specifically for this age group.⁶¹

The Assembly also held its own consultation on whether the voting age should be reduced.⁶² On the question of minimum voting age, 1,530 responses were received. Of those, 59% favoured votes at 16 and 39% favoured leaving the voting age at 18. Of the responses received from those under the age of 18, over 80% favoured lowering the voting age to 16.⁶³

The consultation also asked whether people thought the franchise for the Welsh Parliament and Welsh local government elections should be the same. There were 1,570 responses and 62% strongly agreed, with 24% agreeing. The number disagreeing was 3% and strongly disagreeing was also 3%.⁶⁴ The Assembly's Education and Youth Engagement team ran workshops with young people. It found around half of participants favoured lowering the voting age but those expressing an interest in politics were keener than those who had low levels of interest. Some of the participants said they needed more education about voting and politics.⁶⁵

On 10 October 2018 the Assembly approved a motion in plenary to allow the Commission to bring forward the proposed Welsh Parliament and Elections (Wales) Bill.⁶⁶

The Counsel General, Jeremy Miles AM, wrote to the committee scrutinising the bill and reiterated the Welsh Government's support for the reduction of the voting age. He committed to working with the Assembly/Senedd to ensuring that the franchise for Assembly elections should be consistent with the local government elections and to avoid divergence of the two franchises.⁶⁷

⁶¹ National Assembly for Wales, [The report of the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform](#), December 2017

⁶² National Assembly for Wales, [Creating a Parliament for Wales](#), February 2018

⁶³ National Assembly for Wales, [Consultation on Creating a Parliament for Wales: Summary of the main findings](#) (pdf), July 2018, p36

⁶⁴ As above, p41

⁶⁵ As above, p43-4

⁶⁶ National Assembly for Wales, Record of Proceedings, [10 October 2018](#).

⁶⁷ National Assembly for Wales Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee, [Letter from Counsel General](#), 13 February 2019

The [Senedd and Elections \(Wales\) Act 2019](#) completed its stages in the Assembly on 27 November 2019 and received the required super-majority of 40 Members to vote in favour at the bill's final stage.⁶⁸

The Act received Royal Assent on 15 January and renamed the Assembly the Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament from 6 May 2020. It meant that 16 and 17-year-olds could vote in the Senedd elections held in 2021.

3.3 Other jurisdictions

Few countries so far have lowered the voting age for national elections.

The Crown dependencies of Isle of Man, Jersey, and Guernsey have all lowered the voting age to 16 for their elections.

The Isle of Man reduced the voting age in 2006. The Speaker of the House of Keys in the Isle of Man, then the Hon Stephen Rodan Political, provided evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee of the UK Parliament. The committee was investigating voter engagement.⁶⁹ Speaker Rodan told the committee:

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

There is no doubt that those young people who voted for the first time in 2006 and 2011 did so with real pride and enthusiasm.⁷⁰

Jersey lowered its voting age from 18 to 16 in July 2007.⁷¹ Guernsey also lowered its voting age to 16 in 2007.⁷² Alderney and Sark did not alter their voting ages until 2022.⁷³

The voting age for national elections in EU countries is 18, except for Austria and Malta.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ This requirement, Section 111A of the Government of Wales Act 2006 was inserted by Section 9 the Wales Act 2017.

⁶⁹ [Voter engagement in the UK](#), Political and Constitutional Reform Committee fourth report 2014-15, November 2014, p78

⁷⁰ [Written evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee submitted by the Hon Stephen Charles Rodan SHK, Speaker of the House of Keys, Isle of Man \(VUK 90\)](#)

⁷¹ BBC News, [Voting at 16](#),

⁷² [States of Guernsey voted to lower the voting age](#)

⁷³ Guernsey News, [Sark teens get the vote from 16](#) and [16 year olds get right to vote](#)

⁷⁴ [Right to vote](#) (Austria) and [Electoral Commission FAQs](#) (Malta)

In Austria several regions lowered the voting age in regional and local elections from 2000. In 2007 the voting age for national elections was lowered to 16.

Malta lowered the voting age to 16 for local elections in 2014 with 16- and 17-year-olds voting for the first time in local elections in 2015.⁷⁵ The voting age for general elections was lowered after legislation was passed in March 2018.⁷⁶

In Germany local and state elections vary but some states and municipalities allow 16-year-olds to vote.⁷⁷ Germany has also lowered the voting age to 16 for European Parliament elections.⁷⁸

Other countries that allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote include:

- Argentina⁷⁹
- Brazil - obligatory for 18+ and optional for 16- and 17-year-olds⁸⁰
- Ecuador – obligatory for 18- to 65-year-olds, optional for 16, 17 and 65+⁸¹

Nicaragua also allows voting at 16 but recent elections have not been considered free and fair.⁸² Cuba also allows 16 year-olds to vote and stand for election but has a one party system of government.

Greece lowered the voting age to 17 in 2016 and in September 2024 Cyprus' government agreed proposals to lower the voting age to 17 in time for its next scheduled national elections in 2026.⁸³

Estonia allows 16 years olds to vote in local elections.⁸⁴

⁷⁵ Act No. XVI of 2014 - [Local Councils \(Amendment\) Act](#)

⁷⁶ Act No. IV of 2018 - [Constitution of Malta and Various Electoral Laws \(Amendment\) Act](#)

⁷⁷ Handbook Germany, [Voting in Germany](#)

⁷⁸ Deutscher Bundestag, [Voting age for European elections lowered to 16 years](#),

⁷⁹ [National electoral code](#)

⁸⁰ Brazil Superior Electoral Court, [Voter registration](#)

⁸¹ Ecuador National Electoral Council , Article 11, [Code of Democracy](#) (pdf)

⁸² Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Nicaragua: UK statement on presidential elections](#)

⁸³ Cyprus Mail, [Cabinet approves bill to lower voting age to 17](#)

⁸⁴ Article 156, [Estonia Constitution 1992 \(rev. 2015\)](#)

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