

In 2024, turnout in the General Election was 59.9%. This narrowly avoided the 2001 historic low of 59.4%. Not only are voters not turning out, but there is evidence of a widening turnout gap between younger and older voters. The British Electoral Study finds that (in reported turnout which tends to over-estimate) 65.4% of 18- to 24-year-olds voted in 2024, compared to 88.6% of those aged 66 and over.¹

From the 1990s onwards, the turnout gap has been expanding² and we see lower levels of turnout in constituencies which have larger proportions of young people.³

Lowering the franchise is an opportunity to nurture more active citizens for the future. By giving 16- and 17-year-olds a vote we can engage the next generation in politics and improve the future health of our democracy.

Democratic habits

Research has shown that the younger people are engaged in voting, the more likely they are to carry on voting later in their lives. In Austria, Scotland and Germany, those who were enfranchised at 16 or 17 were more likely to turn out to vote into their twenties compared to those who first voted at 18.⁴

Enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds also tend to turnout to vote in greater numbers than those voting for the first time aged 18 and over.⁵ This is likely because younger voters are better supported through their first experience of voting whilst they are at home and in education.

When 18-year-olds (or 19, 20, 21 year olds) are first entitled to vote, many have already left home or are at university where they are likely to be moving home more frequently and will find it harder to register to vote or to know where to vote. Registration levels for 18- and 19-year-olds are just 60% compared to 96% of those aged 65 and over.⁶

Engaging younger voters in the process of voting creates positive voting habits for the future.

Trust in politics

The 2024 British Social Attitudes survey, conducted after the general election of that year, recorded a new low in level of trust, with only 12% of people saying they trust governments to put the interests of the nation above their own party.⁷

Research from countries around the world suggests that enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds has an impact on their trust in politics and satisfaction with democracy.

In Austria, those who were enfranchised at 16 and 17 had consistently higher levels of external efficacy (lower cynicism) and were more satisfied with democracy compared to older voters.⁸ In Latin American countries that have adopted votes at 16, research found that early enfranchisement is strongly associated with higher levels of trust in parliament and political parties and, though to a lesser degree, satisfaction with democracy.⁹

Wider impacts

Support for Votes at 16 increased considerably after its introduction in Scotland. From two-thirds of adults opposing votes at 16 (in line with the rest of the UK) up to 60% in favour after being introduced.¹⁰

There is also evidence, from Germany, of younger voters having an impact on family discussion on politics – a form of reverse socialisation. And when 16- and 17-year-olds are given the vote, they are more likely to seek information on the election, discuss political issues with family and friends and to use voting advice applications which consequently led them to feeling better informed.¹¹ The enfranchisement itself causing younger voters to become more engaged.

Evidence from Scotland suggests that lowering the voting age can help to address democratic inequalities initially. Differences in political participation by social background within young cohorts were less pronounced in Scotland after the introduction of votes at 16 than in the rest of the UK; newly enfranchised young people of all social groups in Scotland were equally likely to be politically engaged.¹²

Votes at 16 in the UK and the world

Across the world many countries allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in elections but it is also the norm for many voters in the UK. Both Scottish and Welsh 16- and 17-year-olds are already enfranchised to vote in devolved and local elections.

This creates an inequality where Scottish and Welsh 16 & 17-year-olds can vote in elections, but their English and Northern Irish counterparts are barred from voting entirely. Lowering voting to 16 years old across the UK is not extending the franchise but rather equalising the rights of 16- and 17-year-olds across the UK. The voting age is 16 for all elections in Austria, Malta, Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man and for local elections in Estonia, European elections in Belgium, and in Germany, for European elections and some State and local elections.

Electoral impact

Enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds is highly unlikely to have a direct impact on electoral outcomes. Research in 2017 showed there was around 1.5 million 16- and 17-year-olds in the UK (the current figure stands at 1.6 million¹³). If enfranchised this group would make up around 3% of the voting age population. The small size of this cohort would have little impact on vote shares even if they achieved 100% turnout and all voted the same way.¹⁴ ONS research from 2017 showed that with only 1.5 million extra voters UK-wide, there were only 88 constituencies in which the proportion of newly enfranchised 16 and 17 year olds was greater than the winning margin, at the 2017 general election.¹⁵ This is not to say that in those constituencies the election outcome would change however, as we do not know whether all these new voters would turn out to vote nor their party preference.¹⁶ Evidence from around the world shows that young people have diverse attitudes, do not vote as a uniform bloc and do not change the broader political landscape.¹⁷

Enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds would not drastically change the electoral landscape, but it would allow young people to have a voice in the decisions that are made for them every day at local, regional and national level.

Implementation is key to making votes at 16 a success

Democratic education

Votes at 16 creates an opportunity to improve democratic education, providing a seamless transition from learning about and discussing politics in the classroom to engaging in elections. Democratic education can provide younger voters with the confidence, efficacy and interest to get involved whilst gaining the right to vote increases young people's desire to learn about political issues.

Registering to Vote

Introducing Automatic Voter Registration alongside the enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year-olds would enable new voters to be moved onto the register whilst they are still attending school or college. The Department of Education and local authorities hold information on pupils including name, date of birth and address making it an ideal point in which to utilise both data sources to bring onto the register millions of students. This is also the moment at which young people will be given their National Insurance number creating another opportunity to use national data to help get people registered to vote.

Voter information

It is vital that young people are supported with early awareness and information campaigns. Lessons from the introduction of votes at 16 in Wales show the importance of timely interventions on awareness, registration and mobilisation that need to start earlier with young people, not least because they are often in exams during the election period.¹⁸

Automatic voter registration, improved voter engagement and democratic education can help make votes at 16 a major moment of democratic change and renewal in the UK.

Endnotes

- 1 British Election Study data, 2024 (N=31,091). <https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/graph/?id=38404>
- 2 House of Commons Library research briefing, *Turnout at Elections*, 2023. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8060/CBP-8060.pdf>
- 3 IPPR, *Half of Us: Turnout Patterns at the 2024 general election*, 2024. <https://www.ippr.org/articles/half-of-us>
- 4 Huebner, C., and Eichhorn, J., 'Evidence and Good Practice on Lowering the Voting Age to 16'. <https://www.jrrt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Votes-at-16-report-FINAL.pdf>
- 5 *ibid*
- 6 Electoral Commission, *Who is and isn't registered to vote*. <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/electoral-registration-research/explore-data-who-and-isnt-registered-vote>
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- 12 Huebner, C. & Eichhorn, J. (2022). *The Tide Raising all Boats? Social Class Differences in Political Participation among Young People in Scotland*. Scottish Affairs, 31(2), 165–189.
- 13 Office for National Statistics, *Census data 2021, 16–17 year old population* <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/timeseries/jn5p/lms>
- 14 Huebner, C., and Eichhorn, J., *Evidence and Good Practice on Lowering the Voting Age to 16*. <https://www.jrrt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Votes-at-16-report-FINAL.pdf>
- 15 Office for National Statistics, *What impact could lowering the UK voting age to 16 have on the shape of the electorate?*, 2017 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/elections/electoralregistration/articles/whatimpactcouldloweringtheukvotingaget16haveontheshapeoftheelectorate/2017-07-14>
- 16 *ibid*.
- 17 Huebner, C., and Eichhorn, J., *Evidence and Good Practice on Lowering the Voting Age to 16*. <https://www.jrrt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Votes-at-16-report-FINAL.pdf>
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