

youth

citizenship commission



Old enough to make a mark?
Should the voting age be lowered to 16?

Old enough to make a mark?
Should the voting age be lowered to 16?

Consultation Paper
Published on 20.10.2008
The consultation will end on 20.01.2009

A consultation produced by the Youth Citizenship Commission
This information is also available on the Youth Citizenship Commission's website:

www.ycc.uk.net

Contents

Foreword by Jonathan Tonge, Chair of the Youth Citizenship Commission	3
Executive Summary	4
Questionnaire	6
About you	7
Contact details/How to respond	8
1 Introduction	9
2 Current legal position	11
3 International Comparisons	13
4 Engagement amongst young people	14
5 Citizenship Education in Secondary Schools	16
6 Implication of introducing votes at 16 or maintaining the status quo	18
7 Other independent reports into engagement and participation	21

Elections provide insights into the health of our democracy. In recent years, falling turnout has been most acute amongst young people, suggesting that they may be increasingly becoming disengaged from the political process, at least in its electoral form. Some have called for the voting age to be reduced, whilst others have argued for the retention of the status quo. There are strong arguments for and against enfranchising 16 and 17 year olds and proponents of the different views have been both robust and thorough in putting forward their arguments. This review aims to consider the issues objectively, and the findings and recommendations of the Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC) will be based on the evidence and materials it gathers during the period of consultation.

Although voting is only one component of participation, research shows that young people are less likely than adults to take part in traditional political processes, such as contacting their MP or joining a political party. Alternatively, evidence also suggests that young people are active citizens; taking part in informal politics such as campaigns, protests and boycotts. Young people are not apathetic. They are equally interested in their life prospects, their education, their health, their neighbourhood and crime. This translates to being interested in politics although it does not always translate to formal political participation.

The YCC was set up to explore how to reengage with the diverse range of young people that make up our society. Considering whether to reduce the voting age is only one aspect of the vision of meaningful engagement with young people. The challenges for those with responsibility in the political field, government, the media and this Commission are many but

not insurmountable. We must ensure that young people understand the political process and the various avenues for engagement. We must strive to ensure that there are innovative ways for young people to express their views and opinions and ensure that this is fed into the political process. Young people have to be encouraged to take part in the formal and informal political processes and we have to devise and be alert to new modes of engagement and communication.

More importantly, young people themselves have to be a part of shaping the agenda. It is important for the Commission to hear the views and thoughts of young people on whether the voting age should be reduced; this is why the Commission, as part of its wider work into engaging with young people, is holding engagement events across the UK. These events will explore and facilitate a cross generation dialogue on whether the voting age should be reduced, amongst other topics.

J Tonge

Chair
Youth Citizenship Commission

The Governance of Britain Green Paper published last year highlighted the importance of engaging young people as citizens, so they are able to take an active part in society.

The Youth Citizenship Commission was established to consider ways of reengaging young people in the political process. The Commission was also asked to lead a consultation on whether the voting age should be lowered to 16. The Commission has therefore published a consultation paper and seeks views by Tuesday 20 January 2009.

Current legal position

In the United Kingdom, a person must be 18 years of age or older before they can vote. This requirement is contained in the Representation of People Act 1983, although it was first enacted in 1969.

In the UK, there is no standard age at which young people get to make all their own choices and decisions. There are different minimum ages applying in relation to different activities. For example, the age of criminal responsibility is 8 in Scotland and 10 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The minimum age for having sex is 16. At 17 young people can legally drive a car or light motorbike and at 18 they can buy alcohol and smoke.

International Context

In most countries around the world, the voting age is 18. There are however some variations within countries, e.g. a higher voting age for senior elections and a lower voting age in local elections. In 2006, the Isle of Man lowered its voting age to 16. The Channel Island of Jersey lowered its voting age to 16 in 2007, and in the same year, Austria became the first country in the European Union to adopt a voting age of 16. Unfortunately, the relatively new experiences of these countries provide us with little lessons as to what impact a reduction in voting age has had in these territories.

Engagement amongst young people

It is estimated that just 37% of 18 -25 year olds voted in the 2005 election. Levels of turnout in all elections have been a cause of concern since the 1997 general election. There are numerous reasons for abstaining from voting, some of these include, not knowing enough about politics, thinking that it makes no difference who wins, the view that politics is not for young people and the view that an individual vote will not make a difference.

Although turnout amongst young people is low, we know through research that young people are not apathetic. They are active in informal politics such as campaigns, protests and boycotts.

In 2002, citizenship education was introduced as a compulsory subject in all schools in England. It was seen as one way of improving young people's knowledge and awareness of the political process. Some have argued that lowering the voting age would be the logical conclusion of citizenship education in schools. It has been argued that young people are denied the opportunity to put into practice the knowledge gained from citizenship classes for at least two years following compulsory citizenship education. However, different approaches to citizenship education are being taken in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In addition, the success or otherwise of Citizenship in the National Curriculum in England has proven contentious.

Implication of introducing votes at 16 or maintaining the status quo

The overall effect of lowering the voting age would be to increase the number of people eligible to vote. There is insufficient evidence that lowering the voting age would favour any particular political party.

There are a number of different types of elections in the UK, all of which impose a minimum age of 18. One consideration would be to seek views on whether the voting age should be retained for general elections, but lowered in local elections. This would include reduction in the age in which young people can vote in Council and Parish elections and Referendums.

A recent 'Audit of Political Engagement 5' (the 2008 report, Hansard Society) noted that a clear majority of the public declared themselves satisfied with having a minimum age of 18 for general election. In addition, young people themselves seem divided on whether the voting age should be reduced.

Changing the voting age has a number of resource and administrative implications such as educating a new generation of those eligible to vote, additional government funding to enable administrative changes to be made. The Commission seeks further information on the resource and administrative implication of change.

Other independent Reports into engagement and participation

Electoral Commission

In July 2003, the Electoral Commission conducted a review of the voting age and in its subsequent report into its findings, it recommended that the voting age be retained at 18.

Power Report

In February 2006, the Power Report which investigated why people were disengaged with democratic politics, recommended that the voting age should be reduced to 16.

Russell Report

In July 2002, the Electoral Commission published a research report: Voter engagement and young people, by Russell et al. The authors of the report identified some key influences on young people's decisions about whether to vote. These included: Apathy, Level of Voter Registration, Alienation and Personal or convenience issues.

Councillors Commission Report

In December 2007, the Councillors Commission produced a report which reviewed the incentives and barriers that encourage or deter people from standing as councillors. The Commission recommended that the voting age be reduced to 16.

Arguments for and against reducing the voting age

The main argument supporting the status quo has been that most voters under 18 would not be sufficiently mature to use those rights properly. On the other hand those who argue for a reduction in the voting age note that 16 year old are entrusted with other important responsibilities and also should be able to have a say in the governance of their country.

Questionnaire

We would welcome responses to the following questions set out in this consultation paper. Please email your comments to: ycc@justice.gsi.gov.uk or fax: 08707 395 927. You can also submit your comments via our website: www.ycc.uk.net

1	Do you think the voting age should be lowered?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	Please tell us why:	
2	Do you think the voting age should remain at 18?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	Please tell us why:	
3	Do you think the voting age should be lowered to 16 in all elections?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	Please tell us why:	
4	Do you think the voting age should only be lowered in local elections?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	Please tell us why:	
5	Do you think lowering the voting age might encourage young people to take part in elections?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	Please tell us why:	
6	If the voting age were to be lowered, what measures should the Government take to ensure young people register and exercise their right to vote?	
	Please tell us why:	
7	What more can be done to encourage new electors to vote?	
	Please tell us why:	
8	What other issues may arise if the voting age is lowered to 16? What are the issues for:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Funding and administration of electoral registration?• Administration of elections?• Education, advice and information for young people?	
	Please tell us why:	

About You

Please use this section to tell us about yourself:

Mr Mrs Miss Ms Other (please specify):

Full name

Company name/organisation

Job title

Address

Postcode

Email

Contact phone number(s)

Date

If you are a representative of a group, please tell us the name of the group and give a summary of the people or organisations that you represent:

Please tick this box if you would like us to acknowledge receipt of your response.

Address to which the acknowledgement should be sent, if different from above

Please send your response by 20 January 2009 to:

Lola Bello
Youth Citizenship Commission
7.35
102 Petty France
London
SW1H 9AJ

Extra Copies

Further paper copies of this consultation can be obtained from the address and it is also available on-line at www.ycc.uk.net

Alternative format versions of this publication can be requested from ycc@justice.gsi.gov.uk and via telephone on 020 3334 3767.

Publication of Response

A paper summarising the responses to this consultation will be published within three months of the closing date of the consultation period. The response paper will be available on-line at www.ycc.uk.net.

Representative groups

Representative groups are asked to give a summary of the people and organisations they represent when they respond.

Confidentiality

Information provided in response to this consultation, including personal information, may be published or disclosed in accordance with the access to information regimes (these are primarily the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA), the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004).

If you want the information you provide to be treated as confidential, please be aware that, under the FOIA, there is a statutory Code of Practice with which public authorities must comply and which deals, amongst other things, with the obligations of confidence. In view of this it would be helpful if you could explain to us why you regard the information you have provided as confidential. If we receive a request for disclosure of the information we will take full account of your explanation, but we cannot give assurance that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the Commission.

The YCC will process your personal data in accordance with the DPA and in the majority of circumstances; this will mean that your personal data will not be disclosed to third parties.

1. Introduction

Purpose

This consultation paper, seeks evidence and views on whether the voting age should be lowered to 16.

Responses must be received by 20 January 2009.

Why the Youth Citizenship Commission is consulting on reducing the voting age

There are worrying signs that young people are increasingly uninterested in formal political processes. There is evidence that points to low numbers of young people getting involved in our democracy. For instance, compared with older people, young people are less likely to attend political meetings, contact their MPs or join a political party.

In addition, analysis and research of past general and local elections has shown that young people are less likely to vote than adults. In the 2001 and 2005 general elections, the estimated turnout of 18 to 24 year olds (the youngest group of voters) was 39% and 37% respectively (Mori/The Electoral Commission 2001 – 2005).

On the other hand, we know that research also shows that young people care about the issues that affect their lives and that they are involved in informal political activities like voluntary work, single issue campaigns, signing petitions and going on marches. What seems to be missing is a connection between what young people care about and the formal political process.

The Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC) was set up to examine ways to encourage more young people to get interested in using the power of politics to change the things they care about. Reviewing the minimum age for voting is part of a package of engagement measures which the Commission is considering.

In July 2003, the Electoral Commission (an independent body set up by the UK Parliament to regulate political parties and election finance and set standards for well run- elections) published a consultation document on whether the voting age should be lowered in July 2003, called 'How Old is Old Enough?' The minimum age of voting and candidacy in UK elections, July 2003. This paper thoroughly considered the issues, and the report that followed 'Age of Electoral Majority report and recommendations', April 2004, provided a detailed look at the issues. You can find these two documents at www.ycc.uk.net. The YCC's consultation paper draws on the insight from these two documents.

The YCC's aims

The YCC wants to hear from people who can offer evidence and other materials to help inform its findings and recommendations to the Government. The Commission also wants to find out what both young people and adults think about lowering the voting age. We understand that people have strong personal beliefs on this issue and that these are important too.

Scope

The Commission is consulting on the minimum voting ages for all public elections across the United Kingdom, including parish/community council and European Parliament elections.

This review is being undertaken as a discrete project, separate from the YCC's other work. However, this paper is informed by the Commission's wider review into political participation by young people.

Consultation Process

This consultation paper sets out the legal position with the minimum voting age in the United Kingdom and internationally. The paper also looks at some implications of changing the voting age or keeping things as they are and sets out young people and adults' views on reducing the voting age.

The Commission has held workshops to consider a wide range of views and its methodological approach. The YCC is also holding events, with young people and adults, across the UK, to give a wide mix of people a chance to have their say. Whether the voting age should be reduced is being explored at these events.

The consultation paper has been sent to a wide range of people and organisations who are interested in the issues across the UK.

A summary is available at www.ycc.uk.net.

In addition, readers can respond to the consultation document via the website and in writing to Lola Bello, 7.35, 102 Petty France, London, SW1H 9AJ.

The Commission will take all evidence, opinions and comments received into account. Once the evidence and comments have been analysed, we will publish a summary document which will be placed on www.ycc.uk.net. We will then develop our conclusions and publish a report on this issue which will be submitted to the Government for consideration.

2. The current Legal Position

Most modern democracies have a minimum age which a young person must reach before they are able to vote. In the United Kingdom, a person must be 18 years or over before he or she can vote in any public election. Age is not the only factor which determines a person's eligibility to vote. Citizenship and or residency in the country are other factors commonly taken into consideration.

In 1918, The Representation of the People Act gave women over 30 years old the right to vote. This Act also abolished the property qualification rules which specified that only men over 21, who satisfied certain property qualifications rules could vote.

In 1928, The Equal Franchise Act 1928 equalised the minimum voting age for both men and women, so that all people age 21 and over had the right to vote.

In 1969, The Representation of the People Act 1969 reduced the voting age from 21 to 18, although this did not take effect until 1970.

The current minimum voting age remains 18 for all levels of public elections in the UK. This can now be found in a single piece of legislation – section 1 of the Representation of the People Act 1983.

Other minimum ages

There is no standard age at which young people get to make all their own choices and decisions. There are arguably good reasons for why there are different ages for different responsibilities. One of the strongest may be that maturity is a process rather than a specific event, so young people's capabilities develop over time. Therefore, the responsibilities young people gain and the activities they can take part in should build over time.

This is reflected in laws which state different minimum ages for different activities. For example, there are minimum ages for when young people can drive, when they can legally smoke, drink and have sex, amongst many others. These minimum ages are generally imposed to protect young people as well as society in general. For example, the minimum legal age for having sex is intended to protect the health of young people and to prevent them being intimidated or coerced into having sex.

Listed below are some of the legal thresholds currently operating in the UK:

AGE	ACTIVITY
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can be charged with a criminal offence in Scotland
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can be charged with a criminal offence in England, Wales, Scotland and N.Ireland
13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can be employed for a certain number of hours a week
14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can go to the pub, but you cannot drink or buy alcohol You are responsible for wearing a seat belt
16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can leave school (although in March 2007, the Government published a green paper titled 'Raising Expectation: Staying in education and training post -16'), indicating that it is considering extending the school leaving age to 18 You can choose your own doctor You can claim social security benefit You can work full time You can have sex You can leave home with your parents' consent You can get married with one parent's consent You can join the armed forces with your parents' consent You can drink wine or beer with a meal in a restaurant You can hold a licence to drive a moped You can buy a ticket in the National Lottery
17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can hold a licence to drive any vehicle except certain heavy ones You can engage in street trading You can buy an air rifle You can leave home without your parents' consent
18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can buy cigarettes or tobacco You can appear before adult courts You can get married without your parents' consent You can vote You can act as an executor of a person's will You can bet You can buy fireworks You can change your name You can apply for a passport You can own houses and land You can apply for a mortgage You can sit on a jury You can be a blood donor You can buy alcohol You can drink alcohol in a pub You can hold a licence to sell alcohol
21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can drive larger and more powerful motorbikes, public buses or Heavy Goods Vehicles

3. International Comparisons

This section looks at how the minimum age for voting in the UK compares with other countries. The chapter will look at the voting age in countries around the world and in countries which the UK generally compares itself with e.g. other European countries, the U.S.A and some British Crown Dependencies.

Voting age in other Countries

The vast majority of countries around the world, including the majority of the member states of the United Nations have a minimum voting age of 18. There are, however, some exceptions:

- 16 in Austria , Brazil, Cuba and Nicaragua
- 17 in East Timor, Indonesia, North Korea, Nauru, Taiwan and Tunisia
- 21 in Central Africa Republic Fiji, Gabon, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, Maldives, Monaco, Morocco, Pakistan, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Tokelau and Tonga.

There are slight variations to the voting age in some countries. For instance, in Italy, individuals cannot vote in elections to the Senate (the second chamber of the national parliament) until the age of 25. Some states in Germany have reduced the voting age to 16 in municipal (local elections). For instance, voting age elections in Lower Saxony was reduced from 18 to 16 in 1995. Other areas, such as the Lander of Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania, North–Rhine Westphalia, Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein subsequently followed. In the United States of America, nine states allow 17 year olds to vote in primary elections (a primary election is an election in which voters in an area select a candidate/s for a subsequent election) if they will be 18 years old by the general election.

Isle of Man and Jersey

The Isle of Man was the first part of the British Isles to lower the voting age from 18 to 16 in February 2006. Although it is not officially part of the United Kingdom, the Isle of Man recognises the Queen as its Head of State and its citizens are British.

The Channel Island of Jersey lowered its voting age from 18 to 16 in July 2007. Like the Isle of Man, Jersey is not part of the United Kingdom, but again its citizens are British. The change will potentially add 2,000 names to the electoral roll and will mean those aged 16 and over will be able to vote in the 2008 election of senators and deputies to the State.

Lessons from other countries

Unfortunately, the experiences of Germany, Austria, the Isle of Man and Jersey provide us with very little information on the effects of lowering the voting age. The changes in Jersey and the Isle of Man are relatively recent, but there is limited evidence to suggest that voter registration amongst 16 year olds, in the Isle of Man was low after the voting age was reduced, despite a school-led registration campaign that left few eligible 16-17 year olds unaware of their new right to vote. The Commission is interested in receiving data/research and or additional information on the experiences in Germany, Austria, Isle of Man and Jersey or in any other country or territory where the age of voting has been lowered.

4. Engagement amongst

Young People

It is estimated that just 39% of 18-24 year olds voted in the 2001 election. This fell even further, to 37% in 2005. Also, levels of turnout in local, European and some parliamentary by-elections have been a cause of concern since the 1997 general election. In addition, young people are less likely than adults to take part in traditional political processes. Although, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that young people are concerned about political issues and are active in informal politics such as campaigns, protests and boycotts, young people's involvement in "politics" and formal political processes such as registering to vote and actual voting is much lower than the average. It also appears to be on a downward trend. As attitudes and habits in relation to voting can get set early and continue into later life (and also influence the next generation in turn) it is important for a healthy democracy that we work out the underlying causes and tackle them.

Previous research suggests that when young people get involved in democratic activities on their own terms, they are often more active than older people. The overall picture suggests that there is a broad spectrum between those who are actively involved, to others who seem to be cynical or wholly indifferent. Somewhere in between are those who take a general, but passive, interest in current affairs and those whose political interest is limited to the issues that affect them personally. Typically young people's biggest concern is that adults would appear to involve them, but would not really listen to, or act on their wishes. So, ineffective involvement may be worse than none at all.

Election Turnout amongst young people

Voting is arguably the most obvious form of political participation, although it is only one form of political engagement. In Britain, turnouts in elections have been shown to vary according to factors such as where people live, their gender, ethnicity, social class, education and age. For example, the well educated are more likely to vote than the less educated. It should, however, be noted that research by Gerber, Green and Shachar (Voting may be habit forming: Evidence from a randomised field experiment. *American Journal of Political Science*, 2003) found that the influence of past voting exceeds the effects of age and education.

Although low election turnout is probably the most tangible evidence of a continuing problem in democracy, however, in terms of youth engagement, it is only one aspect of the failure to include fully the youngest section of the electorate in the political process. Lowering the voting age does not mean that young people will be engaged in other areas of the political process.

Falling turnout, and in particular, turnout amongst young people is not a problem which is exclusive to the United Kingdom. Research (Blondel et al, 1998, *People and Parliament in the European Union*, Clarendon Press, Oxford. Dalton, 1996, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Western Democracies* (2nd edn), Chatham House) suggests that turnout seems to be falling among the youngest voters in most democratic countries.

Reasons for not voting

There are numerous reasons for abstaining from voting, some are:

- **Knowledge** - Not knowing enough about politics to cast a vote
- **Disillusion** - thinking that it makes no difference who wins (Some argue that there are few policy differences between the major political parties)
- **Inconvenience** - voting is too time consuming
- **Alienation** - the view that politics is not for young people
- **Impact** - the view that an individual vote won't make a difference
- **Apathy** - the lack of interest in politics (although the prevailing opinion is that young people are not apathetic as such, as they tend generally to be interested in informal politics and specific political issues).

In addition, it has been argued that political interest generally increases with age, so that young people will develop more interest in politics as they grow older. Researchers such as Park (Young people and Political Apathy, British Social Attitudes, 1999, Vol.16, Sage, London) argue that when people start paying tax, mortgages, household bills etc their interest in politics develops.

Park's view and evidence is consistent with studies that show that young people have always expressed less interest in politics than their elders. It has however been said (Park 1999) that the gap in participation by 18-24 year olds and adults got wider in the 1990s. Park's study suggests that the youngest age groups in the 1990s seem less engaged than first time voters in 1983. This may mean that

even if young people's interest in politics develops with age and responsibility, today's young people could be starting from a much lower base than their counterparts pre 1990. In 2002, the University of Manchester carried out a survey and literature review (for the Electoral Commission), which strongly suggested that the youngest group of voters are more sceptical about party politics than first time voters were a generation ago.

It is not yet clear whether the differences in attitudes between young people and the rest of the electorate is the result of the generational divides mentioned above. The YCC is interested in any further research/evidence which looks at this issue, either in support of these views or contradicting them.

Research also shows that young first time voters are dissatisfied with their first electoral experience. First time voters often complained of a lack of or too little information about the candidates, parties and policies in the 2001 election.

If politics is viewed as extending beyond Westminster, then young people are engaged. Young people are involved in a range of voluntary and informal activities. However, young people feel alienated from the formal political structures, including elections and believe that politicians do not listen to their concerns.

It is important to understand the causes of the falling levels of involvement in politics and work out what can be done to stop and reverse the trend. Considering whether or not lowering the voting age might help is important, but the challenge of attempting to re-connect young people with politics is a much larger issue.

5. Citizenship Education in Secondary Schools

Citizenship education in England

Citizenship education was seen as one way of improving young people's knowledge and awareness of the political process. In August 2002, Citizenship Education became compulsory in England for 11-16 year olds. For children in primary schools, (5-11 year olds) citizenship is part of a non-compulsory framework for personal, social and health education and citizenship.

The Curriculum in England

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority revised the current secondary curriculum following a comprehensive review. The revised curriculum has been implemented from September 2008. It aims to develop understanding of key citizenship concepts such as democracy, justice, rights and responsibilities, identity and diversity as well as key skills such critical thinking and enquiry, advocacy and representation and taking informed and responsible action.

Schools must cover:

- The operation of parliamentary democracy in the UK and other forms of government beyond the UK
- The actions citizens can take through democratic and electoral processes to influence decisions
- Central and local government, public services and voluntary sector
- The Role and operation of law and justice system
- The UK's role in the world including Europe, the EU, commonwealth, UN
- Political, legal and human rights and freedoms
- Policies and practices for sustainable development and the impact on the environment
- The economy in relation to citizenship including decisions about resources and use of public money

- Consumer and employer/employee rights and responsibilities
- The origins and implications of diversity and changing nature of society in the UK including values, identities and the impact of immigration
- The challenges facing the global community including international disagreements and conflict, debate about equality and inequality, sustainability and the use of the worlds resources.

Citizenship Education in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

The UK is a multi-national state whose devolved institutions (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) have, particularly during the past 10 years, played a crucial part in influencing concepts of citizenship and the political engagement of young people. Different approaches in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have emerged to the teaching of citizenship within each national education system.

In Wales, citizenship is not a distinct subject and is usually delivered through the Personal and Social Education Framework, which became a compulsory element of the Welsh curriculum in September 2003.

In Scotland, citizenship is delivered primarily as a cross-curricular or whole school theme. However, the amount of attention given to political education varies from school to school. The main curriculum vehicle in Scotland remains Modern Studies, though only about 30% of students select this optional subject.

In Northern Ireland, citizenship education was introduced as a compulsory subject in September 2007 and its focus reflects the past conflict and particular political circumstances of Northern Ireland by emphasising local and global citizenship.

The different ways the subject is taught rightly reflects the rich political diversity and plurality across the UK, though there are some concerns as to the extent this complements or contradicts efforts to promote a common UK citizenship. In particular, the potential for a range of voting ages in various UK and devolved elections could prove problematic when considering citizenship education programmes across the UK.

How is Citizenship Education Working

The success or otherwise of Citizenship in the National Curriculum in England has proven contentious. There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that schools in England are taking the provision of Citizenship more seriously and are developing comprehensive citizenship-rich programmes. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (2007, 'Vision versus Pragmatism: Citizenship in the Secondary School Curriculum in England') notes that citizenship education is still evolving, with schools becoming more familiar with programmes of study, staff expertise developing, and greater levels of resources being allocated. Furthermore, the short course in Citizenship Studies is the fastest growing GCSE. The quality, consistency and profile of Citizenship as a subject in the curriculum and a framework for schools to embrace in communities appears to be growing every year since its introduction.

However, government inspectors have identified a range of areas of concern linked to the way citizenship education is organised and taught, its content and assessment. Schools have interpreted the statutory orders to teach Citizenship in many different ways and there remain considerable doubts for many as to its aims. Despite its statutory status, not all schools in England provide citizenship education as a subject on its own, with other approaches including it within Personal, Social and Health Education and teaching it as theme

across the curriculum or on special 'citizenship' days when other lessons are suspended. Ofsted (2006, 'Towards a Consensus: Citizenship in secondary schools') suggests that about a quarter of schools still provide inadequate programmes, and some suggest Citizenship is the worst taught subject in English secondary schools. There is confusion regarding its place in the curriculum, the quality of teaching, and the best way to assess it. Most teachers of citizenship are specifically subject-trained and many report difficulties in teaching controversial issues or current affairs, including not being confident enough in their own political knowledge. The NFER (2007) has noted that over half of all teachers in England have not received any citizenship-related training.

Does Citizenship Education bolster the argument for lowering the voting age?

Citizenship classes are now provided in all secondary schools, which should increase knowledge and awareness of our political system, enabling pupils to make informed voting decisions. However, the link between being given citizenship classes and propensity to vote has been disputed (Paul Whitely 2008, 'Can Voting be Taught?').

It has also been argued that at present, young people are denied the opportunity to use the knowledge gained from Citizenship Education for at least two years following compulsory education. It is suggested that lowering the voting age would allow a seamless transition from learning about democracy to putting such knowledge into practice.

There has been little research to assess whether citizenship education has had a significant impact on the attitudes and behaviour of young people, or the extent to which they are likely to become active citizens.

6. Implication of introducing votes

at 16 or maintaining the status quo

The overall effect of lowering the voting age will be to increase the number of people eligible to vote. The move would increase the electorate by 1.4million voters (3%), an increase in the total general election electorate to 46.5 million.

There is insufficient evidence that lowering the voting age would favour any particular political party. However, among 18-24 year olds at the 2005 general election, support for the main parties was markedly different to that found among the over-65s (MORI figures):

Party	% support	
	18-24	Over 65
Conservative	28	41
Labour	38	35
Liberal Democrats	26	18

By 2011 the average age of the UK population is expected to be 40.3. Of the 61.4 million people expected to be living in the UK in 2011, 53.3m will be 16 and over. (Population Trends 118).

Given a continued growth in life expectancy, those over-65 will make up a larger share of the electorate. The likelihood of someone voting increases with age and the over 65s are the most likely to vote (75% did in the 2005 general election). The impact upon elected institutions is likely to be negligible, although more research is needed on whether younger voters are more likely to vote for younger election candidates. If this is the case, the demographic balance of our elected bodies might be affected.

The minimum age to be a candidate in local and general elections was recently reduced to 18, following a recommendation from the Electoral Commission's 2004 report. The same report rejected the idea of lowering the voting age from 18.

Different ages for different elections?

There are a number of different types of elections in the UK, but the voting age of 18 has been the same across all parts of the UK since its reduction from 21 in the Representation of the People Act 1969. The types of elections are:

- General elections to elect the UK parliament
- National elections for the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly (the latter two are more commonly referred to as Assembly elections)
- Council elections, to district, county and unitary authorities representing defined local areas
- Parish (council) elections, to small, highly localised, representative bodies
- Referendums - votes on a specific issue. Examples include the UK's EEC membership (1975); the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly (1997); the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland (1998); and on local issues (e.g. the forthcoming vote across Greater Manchester on the congestion charge).

Vairable ages

As noted above, some other countries use different ages for different elections, for example, Bundeslander in Germany use a lower voting age for municipal elections than for state or federal elections.

Some argue for the introduction of different ages for different elections, as they believe that it would not attract as much opposition as an 'across the board' change might. Those supporting this approach see participation in local elections as a useful induction, before young people take part in general elections. It has also been suggested that lowering the voting age for local elections could be the natural next step forward from local youth council and young mayor elections and that this might lead to reengagement at a local level.

However, others argue that if young people are mature enough to vote in local elections, then there is no reason to prevent them from voting in general elections. It has also been noted that this position will only be appropriate if the intention is to provide a trial period, before giving full voting rights in the near future. Opponents of this approach have also noted that this multi-layer approach could be perceived as patronising and might alienate young people further; their perception perhaps being that they would be allowed to vote in the election no one really cares about.

Young People's Views

Public opinion does not seem to support a reduction in the voting age. 78% of adults believed the voting age should remain at 18 (ICM, for the Electoral Commission's Age of Majority report, 2004). One-third of 18-24 year olds believed the voting age should be lowered compared to only 5% of over 65s. Among 16 and 17 year olds, less than half (43% and 44% respectively) supported keeping the voting age at 18. ICM calculated a 'mean age' preference on when voting should start. This ranged from 17.4 among 15-19 year olds to 18.5 among 55-64 year olds and the overall mean was 18. More recently, the Audit of Political Engagement 5 (the 2008 report) noted that a clear majority of the public declared themselves satisfied with having a minimum age of 18 for a general election. This poll did not include the views of people under the age of 18.

Barriers to Change

The barriers to change can be summarised as:

Legislative

The voting age for elections to devolved parliaments and assemblies in the UK requires primary legislation at Westminster. Attempts to lower the voting age through Private Members Bills at Westminster have been defeated.

Political

There is a lack of agreement across the political parties on a reduction of the voting age. This contrasts with the greater consensus during the late 1960s over a reduction in the voting age from 21 to 18 (see Steven Fielding, 2003).

Public Opinion

There appears to be opposition among the general public to reducing the voting age

Electoral

If a reduction in the voting age is likely to lead to an even lower proportion of young people voting the rationale for change may be undermined, whilst the democratic legitimacy of elected institutions might be seen as being further damaged.

Enablers to Change

The enablers to change can be summarised as:

Legislative

The Scottish Parliament may gain the power to change the voting age for elections to that body and for Scottish council elections (the parliament has already changed the voting system for local elections).

Comparative/international

In the 1970 general election, the UK was the first country to offer votes for 18 year olds. Most other countries adopted the change introduced in the UK. Already, a number of countries have reduced their voting age to 16. No country which has reduced its voting age has ever returned to the former age limit.

Financial Implication and Impact of reducing the voting age

In the Electoral Commission's report (Age of electoral majority, report and recommendations, April 2004), the Electoral Commission considered whether there would be any technical and financial complications for the administration of elections were there to be changes to the minimum voting age.

The Electoral Commission noted the Electoral Matters Panel of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives which stated that:

Technically, there would be no real problems for electoral registration officers, as the names of such attainers [i.e. people aged one or two years younger than minimum voting age] already appear on the register, we would have to make one or two changes and probably have 15 year olds as attainers, but this does not seem an insurmountable difficulty.

The Electoral Commission also noted that:

Financial analysis suggested that there would be a marginal increase in the running costs of the registration process currently borne by local authorities (to reflect the larger number of eligible electors) and there would be some initial implementation costs to address the changes to registration software and fund a public awareness campaign to inform those newly able to register their rights.

It must however be noted that the assessments above recognised that there might be further implications or complications if the UK introduces a system which allows for flexibility, such as allowing 16 year olds to vote in local and not general elections.

The YCC welcomes additional information on the resource and administrative implication of reducing the voting age to 16, in general or local elections; particularly, on any complications or implications that might arise if the voting age was to be reduced in local but not general elections.

7. Other Independent Reports into engagement and participation

In July 2003, The Electoral Commission conducted a review of the voting age with a period of public consultation over the summer of 2003. The consultation document looked at the minimum voting ages for all public elections across the United Kingdom.

In April 2004, the Commission published its findings. It found that although most responses to its consultation paper supported a voting age of 16, more general opinion polling suggested strong support for keeping the present minimum. The Commission recommended that the minimum voting age should be retained at 18, but qualified its recommendation:

However 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 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.

Reasons the Electoral Commission recommended retaining the status quo

Minimum age for other social and civic activities:

The Commission noted that the examination of the ages for other social and civic responsibilities was a consideration and that although many important legal rights and responsibilities come to play at 16, many do not do so until 18. The Commission however emphasised that the age at which electoral rights are assigned should be assessed in their own specific context.

International comparators:

Although the fact that a clear majority of countries have a minimum voting age of 18, was a determining factor in the Commission's decision. The Commission noted that a well argued case, based on evidence of the particular circumstances pertaining in the UK, can justify a departure from what may be the norm elsewhere.

Infancy of Citizenship Education:

The Commission recognised the argument that enforcing a gap of two or more years between the end of compulsory citizenship education and voting may be counter-productive and even encourage disaffection from the democratic process. However, it placed emphasis on the fact that Citizenship Education, as at 2003, was in its infancy and was not a specific curriculum subject outside of England. The Commission also noted that assessment of the delivery of the subject highlighted some shortcomings in quality.

What the public think

Although most responses to the Electoral Commission's consultation supported a voting age of 16, more general opinion polling suggested strong support for keeping the current minimum. The Commission noted that even young people seemed divided on whether they were ready to be given voting rights at 16.

The Power Report

The Power Commission funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust was asked to investigate what was happening to British democracy, specifically, why people were disengaged with democratic politics. In February 2006 the Commission produced its findings and recommendations on how to increase political participation (Power to the people, Power Commission, February 2006) One of the recommendations was for the government to reduce the voting age to 16:

Recommendation 16

Voting and candidacy age should be reduced to sixteen (with exception of candidacy to the House of Lords)

The report explained why it made the recommendation:

Our own experience and evidence suggests that just as 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 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.

The report argued that it was important to include young people in the political process as early as possible in order to create a basis for greater engagement as they grow older. The report also considered the argument that reducing the voting age would have an effect on turnout at elections:

We have 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 result 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.

The Power report also argued that citizenship education was likely to be weakened as a result of those leaving school at 16 having to wait until they were 18 and possibly longer before they vote.

Russell Report

In July 2002, the Electoral Commission published a research report: Voter engagement and young people, by Russell et al. The authors of the report identified some key influences on young people's decisions about whether to vote. These included:

- apathy
- levels of voter registration
- alienation
- personal or convenience issues.

The report stated:

Young people are some of the people least likely to turn out and vote. In 2001 MORI estimates that only 39% of 18-24 year olds voted, compared to 70% of those aged 65 (Voter Engagement and Young People, by Russell et al, Electoral Commission, July 2002, page 6).

Councillors Commission Report

In December 2007, the Councillors Commission produced a report which reviewed the incentives and barriers that encourage or deter people from standing for elections as councillors (Representing the Future: The Report of the Councillors Commission, December 2007). The Commission recommended that the voting age be reduced to 16 and stated:

As we have said, one of the strengths of citizenship as a school subject is that it has immediate practical resonance. Through local government, young people can be shown what citizenship means by discovering how councillors engage with the public or make decisions on contested issues. Allowing young people the chance of voting at 16 would give them a personal stake in citizenship at a time when they were studying the subject at school. We believe, however, that young people will be more likely to vote if they have been persuaded of its importance and have ownership of the chance.

The majority of Commissioners therefore propose in recommendation 15 the introduction of voting for 16-17 year olds, so that those young people who want to exercise their vote can do so. If people start voting young they are more likely to continue doing so; we are convinced that, allied to an appropriate citizenship curriculum, many would exercise the chance to vote.

Arguments for and against reducing the voting age to 16

- 1 One opposing argument is that young people are not mature enough, that their personalities are not fully developed and that the process of socialisation is not finished at 16. They argue that young people are not able to comprehend and judge political issues, contexts or relations. There would also be the risk of election campaigns taking place in schools or youth centres. They point out that young people already have the chance to articulate their political views at platforms like youth parliaments, children's parliaments or youth forums, in a proper way.
- 2 Proponents argued that the maturity criteria should be rejected in any democratic perspective. The State has to ensure that the flow of information during electoral periods also reaches young people in schools or youth centres. They argue that it is this information that makes the voting decision possible. They emphasise the fact that the right to vote may not be compensated by any other kind of participation. Advocates argue that youth forums and parliaments are 'pseudo – institutions' without any real competences in the decision making process.

Representation

- 3 Some argue that young people should have a say in shaping the policies that directly affect them; this includes having a vote. Many argue that as many 16 year olds are in full time employment and so pay income tax and national insurance contributions, they should be able to vote for the people who set those taxes. Others say that other taxpayers do not have the vote – e.g those who do not qualify on nationality grounds. Additionally, everyone who spends money of whatever age is a taxpayer as most goods and services are subject to VAT. Also, many people who do not pay income tax have the right to vote. So, it could be argued there is no linkage between paying income tax and the right to vote.

Responsibility

- 4 Some argue that a lack of maturity could lead to irresponsible voting by 16 year olds. Others however argue that irresponsible voting can apply equally to older voters.

Citizenship education

- 5 Proponents of lowering the voting age to 16 argue that enforcing a gap of two or more years between the end of compulsory citizenship education and voting may be counter-productive and even encourage disaffection from the democratic process. However, opponents emphasis that Citizenship Education is in its infancy, with varying quality in different schools. They also note that it is not a specific curriculum subject outside of England.

Minimum age for other social and civic activities:

- 6 Opponents of lowering argue that although many important legal rights and responsibilities come to play at 16, many do not do so until 18. Some also argue that there is a trend towards increasing the age in which young people can partake in certain activities, for example, the age at which young people can legally buy tobacco was raised from 16 to 18 in 2007, and there are plans to raise the school leaving age to 18 by 2013 in England.

Questions

- 1 Do you think the voting age should be lowered? Please tell us why.
- 2 Do you think the voting age should remain at 18? Please tell us why.
- 3 Do you think the voting age should be lowered to 16 in all elections? Please tell us why.
- 4 Do you think the voting age should only be lowered in local elections? Please tell us why.
- 5 Do you think lowering the voting age might encourage young people to take part in elections? Please tell us why.
- 6 If the voting age were to be lowered, what measures should the Government take to ensure young people to register to vote and exercise their vote? Please comment
- 7 What more can be done to encourage new electors to vote?
- 8 What other issues may arise if the voting age is lowered to 16? What are the issues for:
 - funding and administration of electoral registration?
 - administration of elections?
 - education, advice and information for young people?Please comment.

