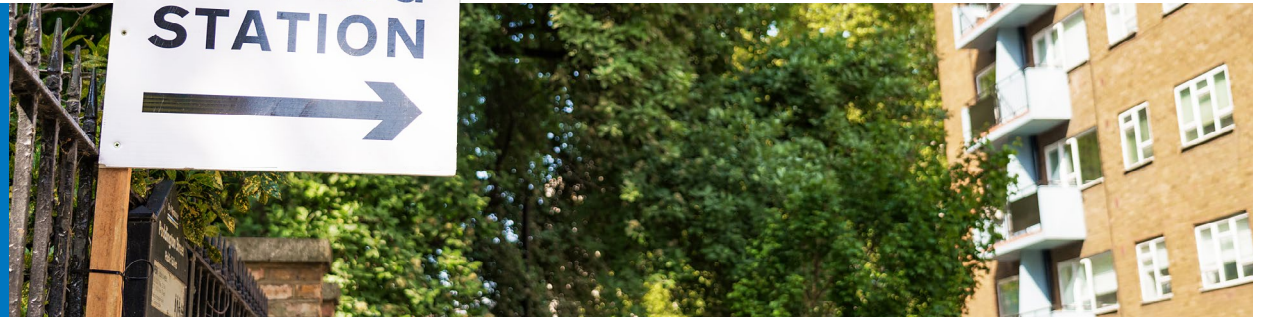


# SHOULD THE VOTING AGE BE LOWERED TO 16?



Before the end of January 2025, most British citizens aged 18 and over will be able to vote in a general election. The vote will decide which politicians will form the next UK Government. There are 650 Members of Parliament (MPs) in the UK Parliament. Each one stands for their constituency (a geographical area) and represents their constituents (local residents) in Parliament.

The last general election was in 2019, but since then we have had three prime ministers: Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and currently Rishi Sunak. The date of the next general election has not been announced. A new law passed in 2022 means that the prime minister can call an election at any time within each five-year term. Previously, this was set to a fixed general election every five years. So the current



After the general election, either Labour's Keir Starmer (left) or the Conservatives' Rishi Sunak (right) will most likely be prime minister

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak can decide he wants to hold an election any time before January 2025.

In the 2019 general election, some MPs were hoping to make it the first general election in the country with votes allowed for 16 and 17-year-olds. The proposal did not really get off the ground, but the Labour Party has long supported this idea, and it forms the next Government, it is likely to introduce the change.

Currently, only those aged 18 and over can vote in elections across the UK except for two – the elections for the Scottish Parliament and Scottish councils. The voting age for those elections is 16. In the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence (leaving the UK), 16 and 17-year-olds were also allowed to vote. In Wales, the voting age was lowered to 16 in time for the 2021 assembly election. The Welsh Government also allows 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in local council elections.

Professor Philip Cowley, an election expert from Queen Mary University of London, wrote to the Welsh Assembly saying evidence from other countries with a lower minimum voting age suggests overall turnout would drop, because turnout for 16 and 17-year-olds tends to be lower than other groups. He said that to encourage younger voters to vote, a lot of time and money has to be spent encouraging them to do so, as was the case in the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. Professor Cowley said: "If young voters are ready to vote, then we should not need to allocate specific resources to mobilise them." However, in the 2021 Welsh assembly election, when 16 and 17-year olds could vote, the turnout was the highest it has ever been since it was established.

**DEFINITION:** turnout – the number of people who vote in an election

*"Eighteen is widely recognised as the age people become an adult. Below the age of 18 you are treated as a minor in both the foster care system and the criminal justice system. Full citizenship rights, including voting, should be gained at adulthood."*

**Statement by ex-Prime Minister Boris Johnson's official spokesman**

*"Increasing the range of voices in an election debate can only be a good thing for our democracy, a democracy which our young people should be able to play a full part in as equal, active citizens."*

**Professor Sally Holland, the Children's Commissioner for Wales**

*"Even some of the things you used to be able to do at the age of 16, say ten or so years ago, you can no longer do, things like smoking, buying a firework, for example, going into a tanning booth. All of these have changed recently and if they've changed at all, they've tended to change upwards towards 18."*

**Professor Philip Cowley, Queen Mary University of London**



**VOTE**



## FACTS & FIGURES



- **47,074,800** people were registered to vote in the 2019 General Election. They were all **18+**.

- Women over **30** were given the vote in 1918. It wasn't until **1928** that women and men got equal voting rights (and they all had to be **21** or older to vote).

- In **1969**, the then Labour Government lowered the voting age from **21** to **18**.

- At the parliamentary and local elections in Scotland, **16 to 18-year-olds** tend to vote in larger numbers than **18 to 25-year-olds**.

- There are around **1.5 million** 16 and 17-year-olds in the UK.

- Many people don't bother to vote. Turnout in the 2019 general election was just **67.3%** of all eligible voters. In 1950, it was **83.9%**.

- Turnout at the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, where 16 and 17-year-olds could vote, was **84.6%**.

- The lowest voter turnout ever for a UK general election was **59.4%** in 2001.

- The turnout in the Welsh assembly vote in 2021, where 16 and 17-year-olds voted, was **57%** – the highest since it began.



A Labour Party poster from 1950 – the UK election with the highest turnout ever



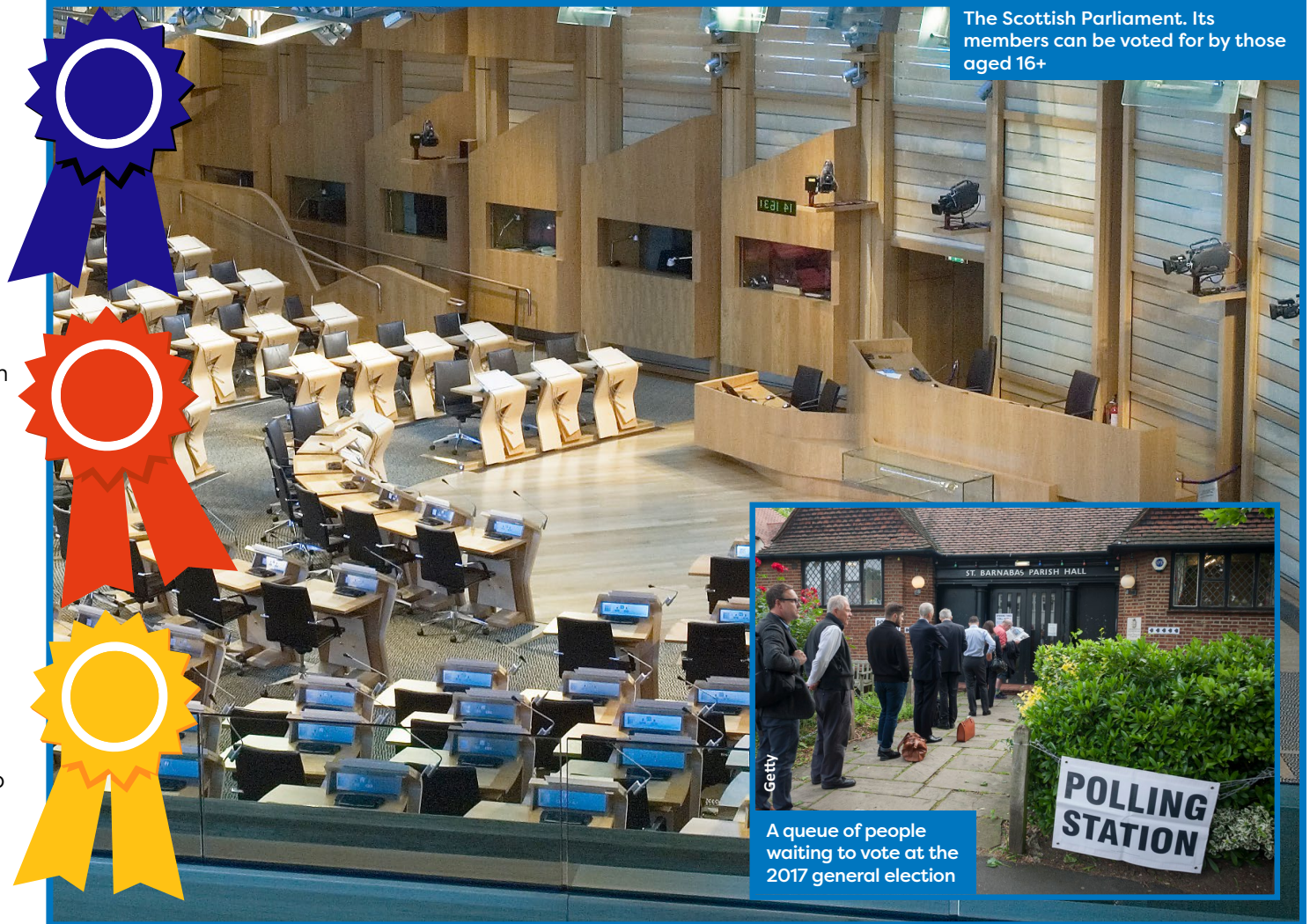
## ELECTIONS IN THE UK

**General elections** – Usually held every four or five years, a general election allows British citizens aged 18 and over to choose their Member of Parliament. This is the politician who will represent their constituency in the House of Commons. The party with the most MPs usually forms the Government. To win a majority, a party needs to have more MPs than the other parties put together. The leader of the winning party becomes Prime Minister. The 2017 General Election returned a hung parliament. That's when no single party has a majority of MPs. As a result, the parties talk to each other about forming a coalition (a government of more than one party) or about striking a deal (where a party promises to support the party in government).

**Local government elections** – Also known as council elections, these take place every four years. In local elections, voters choose their councillors. These are the politicians who make decisions about local services, such as libraries, care homes, leisure centres and parks. You must be 18 or over to vote – apart from in Scotland and Wales, where you must be 16+.

**Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, Northern Ireland Assembly and London Assembly elections** – These political bodies have the powers to create rules or laws and decide how money is spent. In Scotland and Wales, the parliamentary elections are open to people age 16+. In London and Northern Ireland, voters must be 18+.

**Referendums** – These are very rare in the UK. The most recent referendum was on the UK's membership of the European Union, which took place in 2016. In a referendum, voters are asked a question and usually respond 'yes' or 'no'. Voters in nationwide referendums must be 18+. The Scottish independence referendum was open to voters aged 16 and over.



The Scottish Parliament. Its members can be voted for by those aged 16+

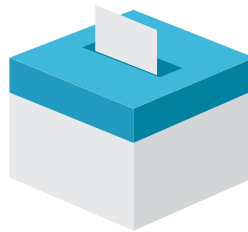
A queue of people waiting to vote at the 2017 general election



## WHAT YOU CAN DO AT 16

Although you are legally a child until the age of 18, you gain lots of new rights when you turn 16 in the UK.

- You, not your parents, can consent to medical treatments, such as surgery
- You can leave school (although you must stay in some kind of education until you are 18), work, pay tax on what you earn, claim benefits, order your own passport, have sex and serve in the armed forces with parental consent (though you can't take part in battle)
- You can also rent your own home and drink beer, wine or cider with a meal in a pub or restaurant if you are with an adult
- You can play PEGI 16-rated video games
- You can start taking driving lessons at 15 years and nine months, but you can only drive certain vehicles, such as mopeds, at 16. You can only take your driving test for a car, and start driving, from the age of 17



The Palace of Westminster, which contains the House of Commons and House of Lords



You can get a job and pay taxes on your income at 16

iStock

## NO VOTE

Although the vast majority of over-18s can vote, there are some exceptions. These people are not allowed to vote in any elections:

- Most prisoners
- People who are kept in a psychiatric (mental health) hospital as a result of criminal activity
- Some people convicted of corruption at a previous election
- Members of the House of Lords, which is the second chamber in the Houses of Parliament
- Although it is not forbidden by law, the King and his family do not vote in elections in order to remain neutral



## MATURE ENOUGH?

Opponents of lowering the voting age – including some Conservative Party MPs – argue that young people have not formed clear, mature ideas on politics at age 16. They think that voting should be for adults only, because by 18 people are more likely to have formed their own thoughts and principles, and can better understand issues such as the National Health Service, the economy and immigration.

But the counter-argument is that, if 16-year-olds are mature enough to leave school, get a job, pay tax and join the army, then they are mature enough to have a say over which political party makes decisions for them. Giving younger people the vote is also an opportunity to inform and educate teenagers about politics and the big issues affecting the country. If the law is changed, schools and colleges could teach young people about elections and the voting process before they sit their GCSEs, so that they are better prepared to vote at 16.



## AROUND THE WORLD

In most democracies, people are allowed to vote from age 18. But votes at 16 are already allowed in some countries, while in others you cannot vote until you are 21! Here are some of the countries with voting ages that aren't 18.



Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, Austria, Malta



Cameroon, Nauru, Taiwan



East Timor, Indonesia, Greece



Oman, Samoa, Singapore, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Lebanon

Three territories (not countries) for which the UK is responsible have votes for 16-year-olds: the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey. Certain states in Germany allow 16-year-olds to vote in local elections. Certain regions of Norway and Switzerland also allow 16-year-olds to vote.

## BOOST TO DEMOCRACY

Politicians of all parties agree that turnout needs to be higher in UK elections. The more people who engage with politics and vote, the better, because it means they have a say on their future and the election result better reflects what the nation is thinking. The lowest turnout ever was in 2001, when just 59.4% of the electorate bothered to vote at the general election. Just four years earlier, it was 71.4%.

A law passed in 2022 extended the vote to British people who have been living abroad for more than 15 years. This increased the number of people able to vote in UK general elections by 3.5 million. It is the biggest increase to the number of eligible voters in over a century. However, young people living in the UK aged 16 and 17 remain ineligible.

Would extending the vote to younger people boost turnout? That's the argument often used by people in favour of lowering the voting age. The truth is it's hard to know for sure, but the evidence so far shows it hasn't made a

huge difference. According to a survey after the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, turnout among 16 and 17-year-olds was about ten percentage points lower than overall turnout. So 75% of 16 and 17-year-olds voted, and 84.6% of the entire electorate voted. But turnout was higher among people aged 16-17 than those aged 18-24.

In Austria, it's a similar story: the turnout for 16 and 17-year-olds in elections is usually higher than for 18 to 20-year-olds, but lower than the overall turnout. Elections expert Professor Philip Cowley says evidence from other countries with a lower minimum voting age, such as Austria, suggests overall election turnout would fall, because turnout for 16 and 17-year-olds tends to be lower than other groups.

Professor Cowley admits the voting age in the UK will probably drop to 16 soon, but says he doesn't think "any of the advantages that are being claimed for it" will actually turn out to happen.





## YES, THE VOTING AGE SHOULD BE LOWERED TO 16



### 1. TEENAGERS HAVE A RIGHT TO BE HEARD

It's perfectly simple: if you can work at 16, make your own medical decisions and pay taxes, you should be allowed to vote for the politicians who control employment laws and the National Health Service, and who spend your taxes.

### 2. IT WILL MAKE THE POPULATION MORE INFORMED

Today's 16 and 17-year-olds are more clued up than previous generations of teens. They are able to easily keep up with news and current affairs, and make an informed decision. And with schools and colleges preparing them for voting in elections, we will have a more informed, educated voting population. They could even teach their parents a thing or two!

### 3. IT CREATES A BIGGER, HEALTHIER DEMOCRACY

The more people who vote, the more an election result represents what the country wants. It can only be a good thing to expand the vote – just as it was when it was lowered from 21 to 18 by the Labour Government in the 1960s.

## NO, THE VOTING AGE SHOULD NOT BE LOWERED TO 16



### 1. TEENS DON'T VOTE IN BIG NUMBERS

There simply isn't the evidence that there is much demand for votes at 16. Only two EU countries have allowed those aged 16+ to vote, and those teenagers are not turning out to vote in huge numbers compared to the general population.

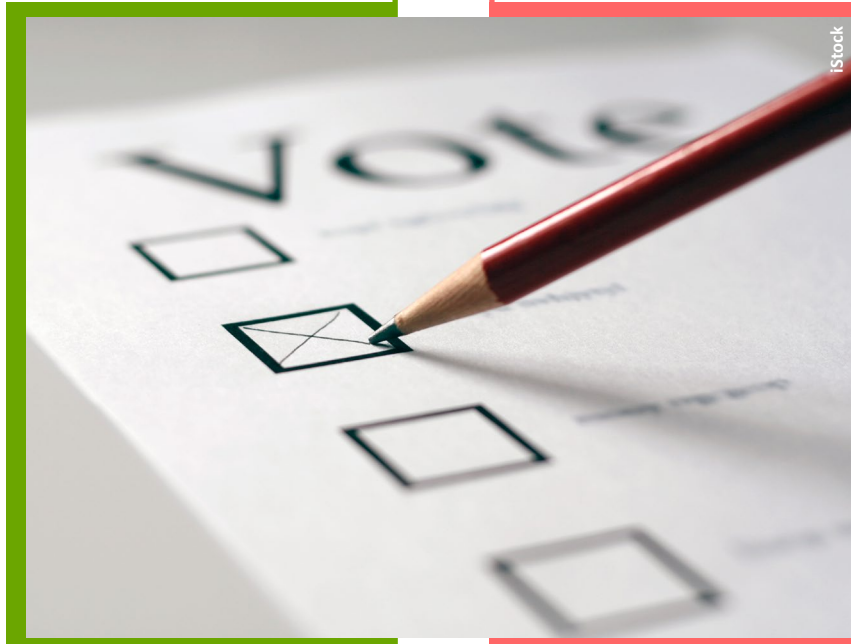
### 2. YOUNGSTERS AREN'T POLITICALLY MATURE

To have a say on the country's economy, armed forces, immigration policy and more, people need to be informed and able to make a mature decision. There's a big difference in life experience between 16 and 18, and adults are more likely to be able to

form mature opinions than younger teenagers.

### 3. ADULTHOOD STARTS AT 18

Eighteen is the age at which we legally become adults. It's when we become totally in control of our lives. It makes sense, therefore, that 18 should be the age when we get to choose who represents us in the UK Parliament.





### QUESTIONS



Does it matter if people vote or not? Why?

Do you think you know more about politics and current affairs than some grown-ups?

Why do you think some politicians are in favour of lowering the voting age?

Do you think politicians would work harder for 16 and 17-year-olds, if they were allowed to vote?

At what age do you think voting should be legal?

Why do you think some politicians are against lowering the voting age?

Will you vote when you are the right age?

If you could vote in the general election on 12 December, which political party would you vote for? Why?

Is it right that Scotland, and possibly Wales soon, allow votes at 16 in certain elections, but England and Northern Ireland don't?

In some countries, it is compulsory to vote. Should it be compulsory in the UK, too?