How old is old enough?

The minimum age of voting and candidacy in UK elections

Current legal position

The Commission believes that the time is right to review the current minimum age at which people can take part in elections. The Commission has therefore published a consultation paper and seeks views on the issues outlined here by Friday 31 October 2003.

The minimum age of voting and candidacy in UK elections

To vote in all elections in the UK an individual must be at least 18 years old. This requirement is now contained in the Representation of the People Act 1983, although it was first enacted in 1969.

To stand as a candidate, an individual must be at least 21 years old. This is found in different legal provisions, dependent on the body or office for which the election is being held.

In the UK, there is no standard legal 'age of majority'; with different minimum ages applying in relation to different activities. For example:

- 10 (8 in Scotland): criminal responsibility;
- 13: part-time employment;
- 16: leave education, enter full-time employment, have sex, smoke, play the National Lottery, join a trade union, apply for a passport, pay tax and National Insurance, and (with parental consent) join the armed forces, get married, or leave home;
- 17: drive a car or light motorbike;
- 18: buy alcohol without a meal, gamble in a betting shop or casino, be tried in an adult court, serve on a jury, and do without parental consent those things exercisable at 16 only with;
- 21: drive larger and more powerful motor vehicles.

International context

Most Western democracies have a minimum voting age of 18, although there are some variations within countries, e.g., a higher voting age for senior levels of government and a lower voting age for local elections. The international picture is more mixed in relation to candidacy. Many countries have the same minimum age for candidacy and voting (i.e., often 18), but again with some variations by seniority of the elected office.

Young people and democratic engagement

The Commission is particularly concerned about declining participation rates in UK elections, especially among young people. Estimated turnout at the 2001 general election among 18-24 year-olds fell to just 39%.

Young people often take an interest in specific issues, but can be alienated from political structures, including elections, for a number of reasons. These reasons include a perceived failure of politicians to listen to and act upon young peoples' concerns.

Recent developments that might strengthen the link between young people and the democratic process include the introduction of Citizenship Education in secondary schools and the increasing use of elected school councils. Some suggest that allowing voting at 16 would be the logical conclusion of citizenship education in schools. However, different approaches are being taken in
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England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the curriculum changes are still new.

Some people believe that lowering the minimum ages would be a clear statement that politicians trust young people and take their views seriously. Others say a better approach is to involve young people more directly, for instance through local authority forums.

- Do you think that lowering the voting age, or allowing younger candidates to stand for election, might encourage young people to take part in elections?
- Do you think that lowering the voting age, or the age for standing as a candidate, would increase the levels of trust between young people and politicians?
- If you are a young person, teacher or parent - in your experience, is citizenship education changing young peoples’ knowledge of and interest in elections and democracy?

Time for change?

Neither the Labour Party nor the Conservative Party have an official party policy on the minimum voting and candidacy ages. Many other parties do: the Liberal Democrats, SNP Plaid Cymru, the Greens, and the Scottish Socialists all back lowering the voting and candidacy age. Both the Local Government Association and the Mayor of London also support a lower voting age of 16.

Three independent commissions have recently recommended lowering the voting age and/or the candidacy age for local elections: the Kerley Working Group in Scotland; the Commission on Local Governance in England; and the Sunderland Commission in Wales. In Northern Ireland, the Human Rights Commission has also suggested a voting age of 17.

The main argument supporting the status quo has been that most voters under 18 and candidates under 21 would not be sufficiently mature to use those rights properly, because they would: have insufficient understanding of the issues; be more likely to act irresponsibly; and be more easily influenced by others. When lowering the voting age to 16 was voted on in the House of Commons in December 1999, it was heavily defeated.

Results from straw polls we have conducted recently indicate young people themselves are fairly evenly split on whether or not the minimum ages should be lowered. However, a significant number of youth and democracy organisations have joined together in a ‘Votes at 16’ campaign launched in January 2003.

- Do you want to see a change in the current minimum age for voting (18)? Why?
- Do you want to see a change in the current minimum age for standing as a candidate (21)? Why?

Options for change

There is a school of thought that believes there should be no fixed minimum age, but most supporters of change accept there should be some fixed age at which voting is permitted, usually 16 or 17.

- If the voting age were to be reduced, what age do you think it should be reduced to? Why?
- Would you advocate the same minimum age for all levels of election in the UK?

Further information

The full consultation paper and a ‘young people’s version’ entitled ‘16-18-21?’ are both available on The Electoral Commission’s website www.electoralcommission.org.uk or in hard copy from the Commission’s offices.