

THE CONVERSATION

UK to lower voting age to 16 – a once-in-a-generation opportunity to secure the future health of British democracy

17 July 2025, Andrew Mycock, University of Leeds

The UK government has announced that the voting age will be lowered to 16 at the next election as part of a wider effort to restore trust in and “**future-proof**”¹ democracy.

Votes at 16 has grown from **a niche concern**² to become a **salient**³ – if contentious – issue supported by most UK political parties and electoral reform groups. The Conservative party remains **a holdout**⁴.

This is a policy response to **concerns about declining youth democratic engagement since the late 1990s**. Since 1997, the UK general election turnout rate for those aged 65 years and over has consistently been at least 20 percentage points higher than for those aged 18-24.

Some opponents argue that the Labour government is lowering the voting age to 16 for its own electoral interest, but we should remember this was **a clearly stated election manifesto**⁵ **commitment**. Votes at 16 was part of the package that delivered Labour to government in 2024 on a huge majority.

That said, **public opinion remains steadfastly**⁶ **opposed**. The government will need to handle this **tension** carefully, ensuring that 16- and 17-years-olds are not treated as second-class members of the electorate as this debate pushes forward.

As when the voting age was universally lowered to 18 in 1969, the case for change has pivoted on perceptions of maturity and markers of adulthood. There was considerable political and public consensus in the 1960s that 18 was the appropriate age of majority and enfranchisement. This link has endured, and **many people continue to think under 18s are too socially and politically immature to vote responsibly or regularly**.

Supporters of reform emphasise the need to align enfranchisement⁷ **with other rights realised before or at age 16** – such as paying tax, medical consent, working, autonomy to make decisions about future education and work lives, and undertaking military (if not frontline) service.

¹ Protéger pour l'avenir.

² Une préoccupation de 'niche'/isolée.

³ Marquant, essentiel.

⁴ Une résistance, une opposition.

⁵ Un manifeste, un programme électoral.

⁶ Fermement.

⁷ [ɪnˈfræntʃaɪzmənt] Ici, le droit de vote. Plus généralement, l'émancipation.

Opponents respond by noting the age of majority remains 18, and that the minimum age for many protective and social rights, such as marriage and leaving full-time education, has been pushed upwards to 18 in the past decade or so.

But while 18 remains the legal marker of adulthood, transitions from youthhood to adulthood have become extended and complex. There is no single age point at which young people realise all the social and economic rights and responsibilities associated with adulthood.

Biological maturation extends from late-stage childhood until early adulthood (mid-20s). Traditional markers of adulthood such as financial independence, owning a property, or getting married and having children are occurring later in life than in previous generations.

Lowering the age is just the start

Now that 16- and 17-year-olds are part of the electorate, we can hope that political parties will improve their responsiveness to the interests of young people.

Unfortunately, where the voting age has already been lowered, we've not yet seen parties address their **skewed**⁸ decision-making, representation or electoral behaviour, which continues to favour older voters. The average age of elected representatives has remained around 50 years of age in all UK national and devolved parliaments, and higher in local government. Few young people join political parties or are active in their campaigning.

There is also significant evidence that, regardless of whether the voting age has been lowered or not, young people are not appropriately supported to be **politically and media literate**⁹ to understand how and when to vote, and to make informed and independent voter choices.

So, lowering the voting age should only be the first step in a more concerted effort to improve political literacy and democratic engagement as young people grow up. This should begin in primary, not secondary, school and continue through further and higher education.

Elected representatives should hold regular **school surgeries**¹⁰ where they meet children and young people, and listen and respond to their issues and concerns. Young people need to learn to discuss political issues in school settings, and political parties should host **election hustings**¹¹ in schools and colleges. Young people should also be involved in decision-making in their schools and communities.

Lowering the voting age offers an opportunity to reinvigorate how we host elections to ensure young people enjoy voting for the first time – and encourage their future participation.

Making electoral registration automatic, as the government has promised, will help. But **joining the electoral roll**¹² is a significant civic moment in young people's lives. Schools should host

⁸ Biaisé.

⁹ Éduqué/Sensibilisé aux médias et à la politique.

¹⁰ Des groupes de parole. *Surgery* = chirurgie.

¹¹ Des meetings électoraux.

¹² S'inscrire sur les listes électorales

electoral registration ceremonies where pupils are welcomed into the electorate by local elected representatives, and automatically given a voter authority certificate so they have an appropriate piece of voter ID.

Political parties need to embrace this once-in-a-generation opportunity that voting age reform presents to secure the future health of British democracy.

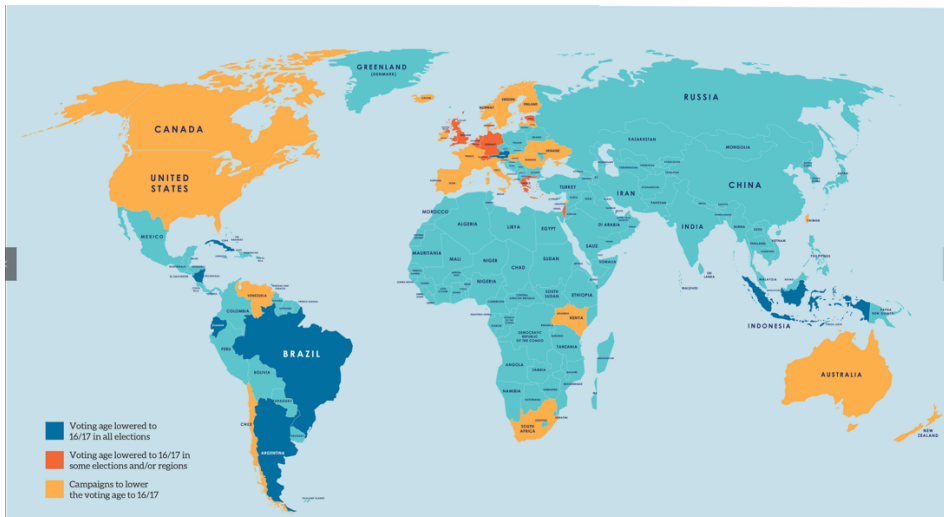
🎯 Objectifs pédagogiques

- **Compréhension** : analyser un texte argumentatif sur une réforme politique récente au Royaume-Uni.
- **Lexique/thématique** : citoyenneté, démocratie, jeunesse, droits et responsabilités.
- **Expression** : développer des arguments nuancés à l'écrit et à l'oral sur la question de l'âge du droit de vote.
- **Méthodologie** : entraînement au résumé, à la reformulation, à la prise de parole structurée.

📌 Déroulement de la séquence

1. Mise en contexte Mise en perspective rapide

- **Voting age map. Describe and comment.**



- **What do you think of lowering the voting age to 16?**

2. Compréhension et expression écrites

- **Read the title and the first paragraph, then explain the central piece of news we learn in it.**

The British government, led by Keir Starmer and the Labour party, has announced that British citizens would be able to vote at 16 in the next election. The announced goal is to restore trust in democracy.

- **Read the whole text. Pick out the arguments in favour of this measure and the arguments against it.**

16-year-olds have other rights or duties, like working and paying taxes, so it seems necessary to align all the voting age with that. However, the general opinion frowns upon this measure. They see youngsters as too immature to vote and insist on the fact that the age of majority hasn't changed, and that one needs to wait until 18 to do a number of things, like getting married.

- **Throughout the text, find the political implications of this reform (Labour vs Conservatives, public opinion).**

There are clear political implications in this change. First, although most political parties agree with it, it is not the case for the Conservatives. Besides, some argue that Starmer's Labour Party may be doing that as they are more popular with the young electorate.

In addition to that, according to the author, lowering the voting age is only the first step on a path to including the young more broadly into politics.

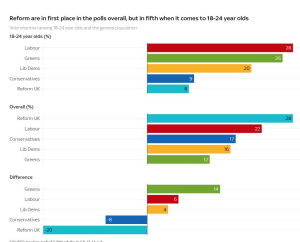
- **Identify the solutions proposed by the author of the article (political literacy, school surgeries, ceremonies, etc.).**

Indeed, political education should start as early as possible for schoolchildren, who should be included in the schools' decision-making process. Politicians should also organize events in schools both to educate children and to present their platforms. Eventually, he thinks voting registration should be automatic and become a true stepping stone towards adulthood.

- **What word is repeated 4 times in those solutions, and helps us understand them as such?**

Should, a modal.

- **List the other modals you know, and the meaning they have. Practical application: write a short paragraph using modals, to answer the following question: do you think it would be appropriate for politics to be taught in schools? Try and defend both sides of the question.**
- **Survey analysis: impact of the change on the political parties. Remember the political implications of the measure. Now look at this graph and comment upon it, to verify what was implied.**



This poll reveals a sharp contrast between national preferences and the views of young voters. Reform UK, leading overall with 28%, struggles to attract the 18–24 age group. Instead, Labour, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats dominate among younger voters. Conservatives also lose ground. These figures show the youth vote could significantly reshape future elections, as it overwhelmingly favors progressive parties while rejecting the current frontrunner.

When younger voters are allowed to vote, the Greens will probably benefit the most, while Reform UK will be the biggest loser.

○ **Activité lexicale : relever et classer le vocabulaire par champ lexical :**

Scan the text to find the English translation of the following words: *protéger pour l'avenir ; une préoccupation de 'niche'/isolée ; marquant, essentiel ; une résistance, une opposition ; un manifeste, un programme électoral ; fermement ; le droit de vote (plus généralement, l'émancipation) ; biaisé ; éduqué/sensibilisé aux médias et à la politique ; des groupes de parole ; des meetings électoraux.*

3. Expression orale – Tables rondes (1h30)

- Mise en scène de “**school hustings**” (comme suggéré dans le texte) → chaque groupe incarne un parti politique s’adressant à des 16-17 ans. **Conservatives, Labour, Reform UK, Liberal-Democrats, the Greens.** Les groupes ne s’expriment pas en même temps devant toute la classe mais devant un petit groupe d’élèves qui circulent de parti en parti.

MP*-MPI* : 3 élèves par parti, 2 ou 3 par groupe de 16-17 ans.

ECG1 : 2 élèves par parti, 1 ou 2 élèves par groupe de 16-17 ans.

BCPST1 : 3 élèves par parti, 2 ou 3 par groupe de 16-17 ans.

BCPST2 : 4 élèves par parti, 5 ou 6 élèves par groupe de 16-17 ans.

- **Activité préparatoire : If you represent a political party, do some research on the political agenda of the party you will represent, without going into caricature. Then briefly present your ideas to a group of youngsters. If you're a student, list a number of questions you might ask a political candidate.**
- **Once the husting is over, ask each group of students who they would vote for based on the ideas they heard, and justify.**

Based on the platforms we have heard, we would vote for ... because...

Support complémentaire possible (ECG et MP*-MPI*)

Do you think 16 and 17 year olds should or should not be allowed to vote in UK elections?

Age (5538 GB adults - 17 July 2025)

	All	18-24	25-49	50-64	65+
Should	32%	42	40	29	15
Should not	57%	44	47	62	78
Don't know	11%	14	13	9	7

YouGov | What the world thinks

yougov.co.uk

- **Look at this YouGov survey and summarize its conclusions.**

This July 2025 YouGov survey investigates British public opinion on lowering the voting age to 16. **Overall, a majority (57%) opposes the idea.** Attitudes vary strongly across age groups: **younger adults are more favorable**, with 42% of 18–24-year-olds in favor, compared to just 15% among those aged 65+. **Conversely, opposition increases with age**, peaking at 78% among seniors. These findings suggest **a generational divide**, with younger people more inclined to trust teenagers with voting rights, while older groups largely reject the proposal. However, it is to be noted that **even a slight majority of 18–24-year-olds don't approve of this change.** (105 words)

1. Evolution of the voting age at 16 in the United Kingdom

- Since 2015, Scotland has already allowed 16- to 17-year-olds to vote in local elections and the Scottish Parliament, thanks to the Scottish Elections Act 2015 (Wikipedia).
- Thanks to the current bill, expected before the next general election (by August 2029 at the latest), the United Kingdom will extend the voting age to 16, making rights uniform across the country (House of Commons Library + euronews).

2. Comparable countries and observed impacts

- Several countries, such as Austria, Brazil, Ecuador, and Argentina, have already lowered the voting age to 16. Studies often show a sustained increase in voter turnout from the first vote, with better long-term engagement rates (Encyclopaedia Britannica + Wikipedia).
- Particularly in Scotland, Norway, and Austria, young people tend to be more politically engaged (votes, turnout, democratic awareness) (Wikipedia).

3. Statistics on young voter turnout

- In 2019, the voting rate among 18–25-year-olds was only 47%, compared to 74% among those 65 and over (if.org.uk).
- Considering the consequences of this low turnout: in some constituencies, a mere 10% increase in youth turnout would have been enough to reverse the 2024 general election (if.org.uk).
- In the 2024 UK general election, the overall turnout was 59.7%, the lowest since 2001 (euronews + CBS + Newselectoralcommission.org.uk).

4. Political Arguments and Democratic Issues

- Governments in favor of this reform emphasize that 16- and 17-year-olds can pay taxes, work, and even serve in the military, and therefore deserve a political voice. (GOV.UK + Indiatimes + The Guardian).
- According to official sources, the state wants to modernize democracy through automatic voter registration and the ability to use a bank card as an ID. (The Times + Financial Times + Government Business + Al Jazeera).
- Opponents denounce the measure's "confused" nature: allowing voting at 16 while certain other civil rights, such as marriage or the purchase of alcohol, remain reserved for those 18 and over. (The Times + Indiatimes + The Independent + euronews).
- Finally, the editorials point out that giving young people a voice is a strong symbolic act for their inclusion, provided that it is accompanied by civic education and the fight against disinformation (The Guardian + Encyclopaedia Britannica).