



How old is old enough?

The minimum age of voting and candidacy in UK elections.

Response from the British Youth Council – October 2003

The British Youth Council BYC is the national youth council in the UK and is an umbrella body for youth organisations - ranging from local youth councils to large youth organisations such as the Scouts, the National Union of Students and youth wings of Trade Unions.

BYC seeks to promote the active citizenship of young people and helps them to develop the skills and abilities to participate fully within decision-making organisations, the communities in which they live and society as a whole.

We aim to do four things:

- Provide a voice for young people;
- Promote equality for young people;
- Help young people be more involved in decisions that affect their lives;
- Advance young people's participation in society and civic life;

Over the last few years annual BYC Council meetings have adopted a number of policies that highlight the concerns and views around the rights of young people. These policies are outlined below:

- BYC believes that young people have not yet taken their rightful place in the political nation. By this, it is meant that young people do not presently play the role that they should in government, political debate, and other decision-making, either at local, national, or international levels.
- Young people are very often not given the credit for the contribution they make to society.

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- BYC would like to see the age of majority for all political and social rights, including the right to vote, lowered to 16. It is unjust that 16 and 17 year olds, who for example pay tax and can join the armed forces, cannot take part in the election of the government that will spend their taxes and direct those armed forces.
- At 16, a person is required to take on adult responsibilities and should be entitled to adult rights.
- Similarly BYC believes that at the age of 18 a person may hold elected office. A candidate's breadth of life experience is something that can be evaluated by the electorate.
- The ages at which the law currently regards young people as capable of taking on adult rights and responsibilities vary greatly. Among the results of these widely varying ages are homelessness, unemployment, and low wages.
- BYC also believes that rights to benefits (including the Minimum Wage) should be equalised at 16. Discrimination on the grounds of age is as objectionable as discrimination on grounds of gender or race.

The British Youth Council welcomes the Electoral Commissions consultation and was involved in the development of the young people's version of the consultation document. We are happy for our response to be quoted and published by The Electoral Commission. A copy of this response will be available on our website at www.byc.org.uk

The British Youth Council is part of a coalition of organisations that supports the Votes at 16 campaign. The aim of the Votes at 16 campaign, is that the voting age in all public elections should be lowered to 16. The campaign is targeted at the Government and aims to influence Parliament, the devolved institutions, the Electoral Commission, local councils and councillors, the media, academics and the general public. The campaign believes that the most effective case for change is to be made by young people themselves, and young people led organisations are at the heart of the campaign. The British Youth Council is a signatory to the Votes at 16 joint response.

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Reasons for supporting the Votes at 16 campaign include:

Equality of Expression

- Not letting 16 and 17 year olds express their political views through the ballot box gives the impression to young people and to the rest of society that young people's views are not valid and young people are not real citizens. This contributes to the disconnection that many young people feel from the political process and structures.

Consistency

- Young people can leave home, leave school, enter work full time, pay taxes, join the armed forces and receive social security benefits all 16, and should also be able to vote.

Citizenship Education

- With the introduction into the national curriculum of citizenship education from the ages of 5-16, at 16 a person has the ability to make an informed choice in an election. Yet 16 and 17 year olds are currently denied the right to use this knowledge.

Moral Rights

- The arguments put forward for denying 16 and 17 year olds the vote are the same as those put forward to deny women and working classes the right to vote - that they are too innocent of the world and that those who have the right know what was best for them. Those arguments are as wrong now as they were then.

Votes at 16 campaign membership:

Article 12, Barnardo's, British Youth Council, Care Leaver's Alliance, Carnegie Young People Initiative, Charter 88, Children's Society, Children's Rights Alliance for England, Electoral Reform Society, Green Party, Liberal Democrats (and LDYS), Liberal Party, Local Government Information Unit, London Young Labour, National Black Youth Forum, National Union of Students, The National Youth Agency, National Children's Bureau, New Politic Network Plaid Cymru, Scottish National Party, Scottish Youth Parliament, UK Youth Parliament, YMCA England.

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Response to specific Electoral Commission consultation questions:

The British Youth Council's submission is informed by a number of BYC policies around the rights of young people, our experience of working with young people involved in democracy on a local, national and international level, past and recent research carried out with our members and a debate on 'Listening To Tomorrow Voters Today', held with young people and parliamentarians in Westminster.

Q1. 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?

BYC strongly supports lowering the age of voting to 16, but argues that young people should have the right to vote regardless of whether it will increase voter participation.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) advocates children and young people's participation; despite this, children's views are not generally respected. Article 12 outlines the rights of children and young people under 18 and clearly states that they should be able to express their views freely in all matters that affect them and their views should be taken seriously.¹

Despite the low voter turn out of young people between 18-24 in the last general election, evidence suggests that young people do want to be more involved in public affairs.

Yvote? Ynot? found that most young people would be interested in becoming more involved in politics if they believed they would be taken seriously and could make a difference. Young people in the Yvote? Ynot? report asked the government and the Electoral Commission to seriously consider lowering the age of voting and providing young people with the information and understanding they need to become more involved.²

The government have implemented citizenship education into the national curriculum and our educating our children and young people about democracy and the political process. It would therefore make sense that they are then able to put this knowledge into practice at the age of 16, rather than having to wait a further 2 years before they can vote and engage in the political process.

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The British Youth Council (BYC) argues that young people have not yet taken their rightful place in the political nation. Young people are not able to play the role that they should in government, political debate, and other decision-making at local, national, or international levels. BYC believes that the time is right to address this, by lowering the age of voting to 16.

Q2. 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?

We know that many young people currently feel disengaged from national politics because they are not able to vote. Not letting 16 and 17 year olds express their political views through the ballot box gives the impression to young people and to society that young people's views are not valid, or not as valid as the views of older citizens.

One of the key issues for young people is the lack of consistency – they can leave home, leave school, work full time, pay taxes, I join the armed forces and receive social security benefits all at 16, but are not vote. Young people feel that by receiving the vote at 16, politicians will be recognising the valuable contributions that young people make in society.

BYC's survey 'Listening to the Unheard' questioned 10,000 young people and found that 47.8% of young people didn't feel that they have enough opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives in their communities and 51.7% on a national level. They also said that they saw Politian's as "remote, untrustworthy, self interested and unrepresentative of young people".³

Devon Youth Council surveyed 241 young people between the ages of 15 - 25 in 1996. 68% of the young people questioned felt that 'Politicians do not take young people seriously' and one young person commented '*At the moment politics does not mean that much to me as I feel that it is not geared to give people my age a say in it*'. Another young person said '*People are making decisions for you, and you have no say*'.⁴

BYC recognises that young people do want to engage with parliamentarians in a meaningful way but are rarely given the opportunity. To help address this BYC holds a number of 'Young People in Parliament Events' throughout the year to give young people the chance to meet with MPs at Westminster and debate issues of importance to them.

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BYC is also involved in other initiatives with the Youth Voting Network and the All Party Group on Youth Affairs to provide parliamentarians with the tools and knowledge to effectively engage with young people⁵. It is these initiatives that will help young people to trust MPs, but the onus is on the MPs to take forward the recommendations from these initiatives.

BYC believes that if young people are given the vote MPs will have more incentive to engage with young people and take them seriously. We believe this will go some way to building better relationships between young people and parliamentarians.

Q4 and Q6. Do you want to see a change in the current minimum age for voting (18)? If the voting age were to be reduced, what age do you think it should be reduced to? Why?

BYC policy, determined by young people within our membership, states that BYC would like to see the age of majority for all political and social rights, including the right to vote, lowered to 16. BYC have been campaigning to lower the age of voting to 16 for two decades.

BYC conducted a survey of 10,000 young people between the ages of 15-24 in 2001. 52% of young people said that they would or would like to be able to vote in a general election. The report, BYC 'Listening to the Unheard' also highlighted that young people feel they should be given a say at the ballot box at an earlier age³

For the purpose of this consultation response BYC conducted an online poll among its members. 86% of the young people who voted said that they want the age of voting lowered to 16.⁶

As part of local democracy week 2003, BYC and the Local Government Association (LGA) held a Young People in Parliament Event, 'Listening to Tomorrows Voters Today' in Westminster, which was attended by 120 young people. Young people at this event called on the Rt. Honorary Alun Michael MP, Annette Brooke MP and Tim Boswell MP to support the Votes at 16 campaign.

"Young people can choose to leave compulsory education at the age of 16. Why are young people not classed as adults then, why can we not vote at the age of 16?" Question from a young person at the event.

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Many young people choose to leave education and go into full-time work at the age of 16 and a significant number are fully participating as adults in society. BYC believes that there should be consistency around this and voting age. If a young person can work, pay taxes, fight for their country, or continue to participate in education, then they have a right to choose who sets the policies and taxes and who calls them to defend their country.

Many of the arguments opposing lowering the voting age are about the innocence and inexperience of voters. These are the same arguments that historically denied women and the working classes the vote. BYC argues that they are no more valid now than they were then.

BYC believes that citizenship education plays a significant role. The introduction of citizenship education in schools has led to the increased political awareness of young people. As the national youth council, BYC has recently seen clear examples of politicisation of young people, particularly in the demonstrations about the war in Iraq. Young people do understand the issues and are educated about their society and their roles within it. To deny the right to vote once compulsory education is complete at 16 is to devalue that education, and devalue young people.

Voting at 16 should be a right. BYC believes that the voting age should be lowered soon. If this fails to happen, we will see voter apathy increase along with further disengagement of young people.

Q5 and Q8. Do you want to see a change in the current minimum age for standing as a candidate (21)? If the minimum wage for standing for elections were reduced, what age do you think it should be reduced to? And why?

BYC policy, determined by young people from our member organisations, states that BYC would like to see the age of majority lowered to 18. If the candidacy age of 21 is based on the person having a breadth of life experience, BYC believes that the candidates experience and suitability for the role is something that can be evaluated by the electorate.

BYC conducted an online poll on lowering the age of candidacy to 18 and 88% of those that voted, wanted the age of candidacy to be lowered to 18.⁶

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Q7. Would you advocate the same minimum age for all levels of election in the UK?

BYC would strongly advocate the same minimum age of 16 for all levels of election in the UK. BYC is an umbrella body for youth organisations across the UK and would also argue for parity across the 4 countries of the UK. Young people from all four countries of the UK should be able to vote in local, national and European elections at the age of 16.

Many young people contribute greatly to their communities through local youth councils and other groups and have the best interests of their communities at heart. They should be given the right to decide who governs the society in which they live. Giving young people the vote will show that their views are valid on a national and local level. This will reconnect young people with their communities and the political process.

BYC Conclusion

BYC strongly believes that the age of voting should be lowered to 16 and candidacy age should be lowered to 18 for all the reasons outlined in this submission.

Contact

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References

¹ United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, ratified in UK Dec.1991.

² Yvote? Ynot? - CYP. 'Young People and Politics' 2002.

³ Epps, G. 'Listening to the Unheard' - The National Youth Consultation for the European Youth Policy. British Youth Council, 2001.

⁴ Devon Youth Council. 'Bite the Ballot – Report of the findings of the Devon Youth Council's survey of attitudes to politics among young people in Devon'. 1996

⁵ Youth Voting Network. 'A Young person's agenda for democracy – one year on – A report from the Youth Voting Network'. October 2003.

⁶ BYC Online poll, October 2003.