

Why I support votes at 16

In the run up to the UK General Election, children's rights activist Adam Roberts (17) shares his views on lowering the voting age.

A person who doesn't vote is a person without a say in how their country is run: without a say in what laws they live under, or where their taxes go, or what their taxes are even. British turnout at the European elections in 2009 stood at just 34%: in a country where men and women – as recently as human memory – laid down their lives to protect our freedom and our right to a vote, entirely aside from those who campaigned and died for the cause of suffrage.

That's not my argument, and I wouldn't say low turnout is an obvious reason to lower the voting age, either in terms of boosting actual vote numbers or scaring certain types with the improbable threat of a government pandering to the every enfranchised whim of the modern youth. But it does point towards a key issue: disengagement with our political system.

Whether it's expenses, lobbyists or cash-for-honours, we've lost faith in Westminster: perhaps rightly so. And yet politics isn't any less important: all we've lost is our voice.

A lower voting age is important both as a right and as an opportunity to get young people involved. There are those who say young people aren't mature enough. First, we need to accept that that's a generalisation, and then to ask: who would we expect to vote? Would it be those who don't care, or would it be those already showing a maturity and public-spiritedness through their local youth groups, their school councils, the UK Youth Parliament: the 40% who volunteer? Arguing young people aren't mature says more about our modern attitude towards all things youth than it does about young people.

Others say those 16 and 17 don't have the 'life experience' to know which way to vote. But then what about 18? And what about bigger differences: what about someone who's 80 and someone half their age at 40? Where do we draw the line? And, of course, what's an election for? Isn't it about voting for the party that best represents you, rather than you in 2 or 20 years' time?

Perhaps the biggest issue is whether young people have the knowledge to vote. It's a question equally applicable to anyone, whatever their age, but that doesn't make the point any less valid: after all, it can be hard to pick out the differences and decipher the rhetoric at the best of times. But when you've got compulsory citizenship education, the burden of being a first-time voter, and now TV debates too, perhaps it's not as big a problem as it seems.

Britain wouldn't be the first to lower the voting age, and practical examples overseas prove many common fears unfounded. At the end of the day, we live in a country where you can marry or enter a civil partnership with your MP, get sent to fight for your country by your MP and you even have to pay for their second home. And yet, after all that, you still can't vote for them. Sound odd?

CRAE is a founding member of the Votes at 16 Coalition.
We campaign for the voting age to be lowered to 16 in all
UK public elections.

For more information visit www.votesat16.org.uk

