

Why I support votes at 16

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

Teenagers particularly celebrate turning 16, because we suddenly have a much greater degree of independence than ever before: we can marry and have children; get a full-time job and even join the army. Given that the state judges that we are now responsible to make these important decisions, including dying for our country in war and having to pay taxes if we work, it seems ridiculous that we cannot choose the party which sends us to war or spends our taxes.

People have been campaigning for votes at 16 since the 1970s and ever since 2003 there has actually been a Votes at 16 Coalition. Opponents of lowering the voting age argue that the majority of the voting population don't want to extend the voting age, and that not even half of 16 and 17 year-olds want the vote: it would be pointless to extend the vote. However, such arguments are flawed. When the vote was extended to women over 21 in 1928, and later from 18 years-old in 1968, the vast majority of current voters opposed it; yet it would be absurd to suggest that these reforms should not have happened. Moreover, of course there is a minority of 16 and 17 year-olds who do not want the vote, many persuaded by media coverage hostile to young people's opinions. However, the majority have taken a more informed view, and want the voting age raised. This surely shows that we are capable of weighing up options and reaching a conclusion: if 16 and 17-year-olds can do this on issues like the voting age, surely we can decide which political party to vote for.

Moreover, the voting turnout has been decreasing with every general election, suggesting the general enfranchised population are politically apathetic. Ever since 2001, citizenship education has been compulsory in schools, with the result that 16 and 17 year-olds should be if anything more politically minded than the rest of the population. If the voting age were extended to 16, there would be more chance of engaging voters when they were young for life, perhaps reversing the current trend of political apathy.

Currently, it is all too easy for politicians to ignore the petitions of teenagers because we have no political standing whilst we cannot vote. It is often said that young people are difficult to contact, but if the voting age were lowered to 16, politicians would have a vested interest in visiting schools and listening to potential supporters.

Moreover, especially in the light of the financial down-turn, the policies of whichever party is voted into power in May will have long-term consequences on Britain. In 10 years time, when today's 16 and 17-year-olds will be a crucial part of our workforce, we are still likely to be contending with the results of 2010's policies and as such, 16 and 17-year-olds should definitely have the right to vote.

Ultimately, there are currently over 1.5million 16 and 17 year-olds denied the right to vote and it's time we gained this basic right. It is wrong that 16 year olds can die for their country without choosing the government that sent them to war. Extending the vote would bring many positives to our society and would perhaps reverse the current trend of political apathy: the time is right to extend the voting age.

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

