

Lowering the Voting Age to 17

Background

Elections have become a defining feature of modern democracy. Elections will vary across countries depending on:

Whether they are free and fair,

The type and number of political offices which they are used to fill,

How the votes are cast and,

Who can vote?

Suffrage is the word used to describe a person's right to vote at an election.

Over the centuries, the rules which set out who is allowed to vote have changed. In the past, voting rights were often restricted on the basis of gender, wealth, race and status but suffrage campaigns sought to dismantle these discriminations. Most prominently, the suffragette movement campaigned to achieve voting rights for women. New Zealand became the first country to give full voting rights to women in 1893. In 1922, the Irish Free State extended the suffrage rights of women giving them equal voting rights with men. At that point, all men and women over the age of 21 were eligible to vote in elections.

During the 1970s there was a further wave of suffrage reform and many countries reduced their voting age from 21 to 18. The British parliament reduced the voting age to 18 in 1969 while the voting age in the USA was lowered in 1970. Ireland passed a

referendum in 1972 to reduce the voting age to 18. The voting age is 18 in a majority of countries in 2013.

In the last decade campaigns have emerged in a number of countries wanting to reduce the voting age even further. Campaigners have been motivated by a number of concerns which include declining turnout at elections, fewer young people voting and broadening interpretations of democracy. Austria became the first EU country to reduce the voting age to 16 in 2007. It was followed by the Isle of Man, Jersey, Guernsey and Argentina. Ireland is not alone in considering proposals to reduce the voting age. Denmark, Finland and the UK have all started discussions on the voting age and a decision on reducing the voting age at the Scottish Independence referendum is expected in the coming weeks.

Arguments in Favour of Reducing the Voting Age

Legal Rights

Young people gain legal rights at different points. 17 year olds already have important responsibilities and legal rights. 17 year olds can drive cars, engage in sexual activity, leave school, get married (with a court exemption) and pay tax. However, they do not have any influence on when and how they gain these rights because they cannot vote.

Increasing Turnout

Turnout at elections is declining among young people in many countries. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that voting may be habit based. People who begin voting at an early stage are more likely to continue this pattern for the rest of their lives. Allowing young people to vote at 17 would engage them with the political process at an earlier stage, give them greater political influence and could encourage a life long habit of voting. Keeping 17 year olds outside the electoral process leaves them disconnected from the political process and may reduce their motivation to become involved in future years.

Citizenship Education

In many countries, including Ireland, citizenship education has become part of the school curriculum. Young people are more informed about the political system and their rights and responsibilities as citizens. This prepares them for earlier engagement with the political process. Lowering the voting age would allow young adults to put their academic experience into practice. They would move from learning about elections in their Civic Social and Political Education (CSPE) course to registering and become voters once they reach age 17.

School

Lowering the voting age to 17 would mean that many young people would engage in the political process while still in formal education. Registration and voter education could be organised within, or in parallel, to the formal education system, providing a supportive environment for young people to acquire voting information. Second level students usually still live at home and this would add to the supportive and structured environment which encourages voting participation among young people. Evidence to support this argument has been provided by Mark Franklin (2004) for many established democracies. He has also argued that at age 18, young people are finishing school, may be moving onto further education or finding work and that this is a time of great change in their lives and may make the steps towards first engagement with voting more unlikely.

Representation

The representativeness of those elected to public office is increased by broadening the electoral base. Including 17 year olds is a small step but it will increase the number of young people who can have their voice heard through the electoral process. This argument is also related to changes in the population. European populations are getting older As a result; older age groups will increase as a percentage of the total electorate. Voting research tells us that older people are more likely to cast their votes and this may have an effect on the types of candidates which are successful at elections and on the public policies which are given priority by our political institutions. Reducing the voting age would be one small way of trying to maintain the age balance in the voting public.

Arguments against Reducing the Voting Age

Public Support

Only small amounts of data are available on the public's position on the voting age. One recent Irish opinion poll showed that just 30% were in favour of reducing the voting age while 56% were against and 14% had no opinion. The National Youth Council of Ireland and the youth wings of all of the major political parties have advocated reducing the voting age at various times but the picture is more mixed among wider civil society groups. The Irish Association of Care Workers argues that reducing the voting age could increase the 'adultification' of children.

Incorrect Diagnosis and Prescription for the Political System

Surveys of young people indicate that they are less interested and at times, disaffected by politics. Levels of trust in political institutions and politicians have declined. Young people are also less likely to vote. Interest in the reasons why young people are not becoming involved in politics, is common in established democracies. However, there are many reasons why young people can be dis-engaged from politics. The international research tells us that the difference in turnout rates in some countries (including Ireland) between young people and the rest of the voting population has only become pronounced in the last 20 years. Reducing the voting age to 17 will not be a cure-all solution to concerns about young people and politics.

Favouring Specific Political Parties

Concerns have been expressed in other countries where the voting age has been lowered that the decision was taken to favour particular political parties. As the

transition to lower voting ages is a relatively recent one, there is insufficient evidence to say whether this does happen in practice.

Maturity

There is no agreement on whether young people acquire political maturity at age 16, 17 or 18. Indeed picking one of these ages does seem somewhat arbitrary. Young people mature at different paces and early adult life can be a challenge. The Youth Citizenship Commission in the UK described maturity as a process rather than an event. Minimum age limits are usually imposed to protect young people and asking young adults to engage in voting is adding another task to their already busy lives.

Why Not 16?

Many countries are discussing the voting age but most are looking at a reduction to age 16. Austria has already lowered the voting age to 16 and the debate in the UK is also based on votes at 16. The option of votes at 17 could be seen as a conservative proposal which does not go far enough. If the international campaign for votes at 16 is successful, Ireland could find itself having to re-visit this issue because its first reform was not ambitious enough.

Possible Administrative and Political Issues

Lowering the Voting Age to 17 would require a constitutional referendum.

Registration changes would have to be made to ensure that 17 year olds would be recorded on the voting register. There is already considerable concern about the

process of voter registration and calls for its reform have been avoided by the political establishment for some time.

Citizenship education in school is only available up to the junior certificate. Politics and Society has not been launched as a subject on the leaving cert curriculum and perhaps the decision on the voting age should wait until the development of a comprehensive citizenship education programme is complete.

Decision

The major question is whether the voting age should be reduced to 17?

Arising from this, there are a number of further options which could also be considered. Some of these have been suggested by the Council of Europe in 2012 in its report on lowering the voting age.

1. Should the voting age be reduced for all elections (as in the case of Austria) or just some elections (as in the case of Germany, Switzerland and Israel)?
2. Should the act of voting be linked to employment or marital status for those under 18?
3. Should candidacy and voting age be set at the same age or should candidacy be fixed at 18 but the voting age reduced?

Links to further information on the voting age

Franchise Information for the Republic of Ireland

<http://www.viron.ie/en/LocalGovernment/Voting/>

Joint Houses of the Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution

Hearing on the Voting Age (13 – Jan – 10)

<http://debates.oireachtas.ie/CNJ/2010/01/13/printall.asp>

Taskforce on Active Citizenship

Final Report (2007)

<http://www.wheel.ie/sites/default/files/Report%20of%20the%20Taskforce%20on%20Active%20Citizenship.pdf>

Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly

Report - Expansion of Democracy by Lowering the Voting Age to 16 (2011)

<http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewHTML.asp?FileID=13110&Language=EN>

Youth Citizenship Commission

Consultation Paper – Old Enough to Make a Mark? Should the voting age be lowered to 16?

<http://www.youth.cwunortheast.org/downloads/ycc.pdf>

Final Report – Making the Connection, Building Youth Citizenship in the UK (2009)

http://voteat16.eu/files/YCC_Main_Final_Report.pdf

House of Commons Library

Parliament and Constitution Centre Standard Note – Voting Age (2012)

www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/sn01747.pdf

Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

Report - Youth Voter Participation: Involving Today's Young in Tomorrow's Democracy (1999)

http://www.idea.int/publications/youth_participation/index.cfm

Votes at 16

UK campaign launched in 2003 to lower the voting age to 16

<http://www.votesat16.org/>

European Youth Forum

Brussels based youth platform representing groups from across Europe

<http://www.youthforum.org/>

Selected Books and Journals

Mark N Franklin (2004) *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

Pippa Norris (2002) *Democratic Phoenix, Reinventing Political Activism*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge (2012) 'The Party Politics of Youth Citizenship and Democratic Engagement', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2012, 65.1, 138-61.

Appendix

Further Examples of Countries with Voting Ages below 18

	Voting Age - 16	Voting Age - 17
Country	Argentina	East Timor
	Austria	Indonesia
	Brazil	North Korea
	Cuba	Nauru
	Ecuador	Seychelles
	Guernsey	Sudan
	Isle of Man	Taiwan
	Jersey	Tunisia
	Nicaragua	

Israel, Germany, Norway and Switzerland have voting rules which allow participation in some local and state elections. Slovenia and Hungary have conditional rules which allow participation based on elements which include marital status and employment.

There are also countries which have the voting set above age 18 and some countries in this group include Fiji, Gabon, Monaco, Morocco, Pakistan and Samoa.

Candidate Minimum Age Requirements at Elections in the Republic of Ireland

	Candidate Minimum Age Requirement
Election to a Local Council	18
Election to Dáil Éireann	21
Election to Seanad Éireann	21
Election as President of Ireland	35
Election to the European Parliament	21