



Wise in 5: Voting Age

Wise in 5 is a snapshot comparative guide to a public policy issue across the nations of the UK and Ireland. It helps you be PolicyWISE (Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England) in 5 (it takes just five minutes to read).

This briefing was published in April 2025. It includes a summary of the latest policy developments across the nations, as well as related research from PolicyWISE, The Open University and PolicyWISE's university partners.

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	Voting age UK/ Irish Parliament elections	Voting age local elections	Voting age devolved elections**	Voting age Police and Crime Commissioner elections	Voting age European Parliament elections
England	18 *	18 *	N/A	18 *	N/A
Northern Ireland	18 *	18 *	18 *	N/A	N/A
Republic of Ireland	18	18	N/A	N/A	18
Scotland	18 *	16	16	N/A	N/A
Wales	18 *	16	16	18 *	N/A

* UK reserved elections.

** The voting age for referenda is normally in line with the voting age of the administration running it, e.g., in Scotland the voting age for the European Union membership referendum was 18 as it was controlled by UK Parliament, but the voting age was 16 for the Scottish independence referendum as it was controlled by the Scottish Parliament.

Wise in 5: Voting Age

Overview

Voting age has become a topic of increasing public and policy interest in the last few years. The current Labour UK Government (elected July 2024) included in their [election manifesto](#) the policy of lowering the voting age to 16 for all applicable elections. While this was not taken forward in the first King's Speech of the new Parliament (July 2024), the Government has stated that they still intend to legislate for this [within this parliament](#), with the Prime Minister Keir Starmer [stating in April 2025](#) "We will definitely get it done, it's a manifesto commitment... I think if you're old enough to go out and work, if you're old enough to pay your taxes, then you are entitled to have a say on how your taxes are spent. And also we do have voting at a younger age in different parts of the United Kingdom and the sky didn't fall in."

Debates on the merits for reducing the voting age to 16 have increased following the decisions made in Scotland and Wales for their national elections. As a result, 16 and 17 year olds can vote in some UK nations but not others, and in certain elections within different nations but not all. This complex situation has led to calls for a unified voting age across the UK for all elections, as well as opposition to such a change. The issue has also become a topic of debate in the [Republic of Ireland](#).

The impact of devolution in Scotland and Wales:

A person's right to register to vote is based on three things: residence, nationality, and age. As a result of UK devolution, the age at which a person can vote is different in England and Northern Ireland compared to Wales and Scotland, but only for some elections.

Reserved elections, which is those where the UK Parliament is responsible for setting the rules, are set at 18 years old – this includes UK Parliament elections, local elections in England, Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales, and all elections in Northern Ireland.

Devolved elections are those where the responsibility for setting the rules have been passed to the Scottish and Welsh administrations. These include elections to the Scottish Parliament (Pàrlamaid na h-Alba) and Welsh Parliament (Senedd Cymru), as well as local elections in Scotland and Wales.

To note, the Crown dependencies of the Isle of

Man (in 2006), Jersey (in 2007), Guernsey (in 2007), Alderney (in 2022), and Sark (in 2022) have all lowered the voting age to 16 for their elections.

Arguments for votes at 16:

There are various arguments made for lowering the voting age to 16. A key starting point often made by campaigners is the [argument](#) that 16 year olds already have various other rights enacted at 16, such as the right to have sex, the right to change their name, and the right to a National Insurance number – and thus the responsibility to pay national insurance if earnings are high enough (in fact, the responsibility to pay tax applies at any age, including for children), so why not the right to vote.

Sometimes campaigners against lowering the voting age cite what's been called the 'maturity argument', the idea that 16 and 17 year olds are too immature to vote. However, as [research](#) points out, this is inconsistent with voting rights more generally, in that we don't assess the capacity of other age groups, such as older people.

Some campaigners believe the situation we currently have in the UK is confusing, re different voting ages in different nations/for different elections, and simplification would be created by lowering the age in all nations. Where 16 year olds are allowed to vote there is often a [high turnout](#) and they are [more likely to vote](#) from then on than people who have their first vote at 18. So, it can be argued it creates [more engaged voters](#) plus improved attitudes to politics, such as an [increase in trust](#), increased discussion about politics with others, and a greater likelihood of searching for information about politics. There is also evidence of limited [impact on election results](#). Research also suggests that [people support a lowered voting age](#) once it is actually enacted, as [shown in Scotland](#).

Arguments against votes at 16:

People opposed to lowering the voting age to 16 argue those under 18 year olds are too immature to vote; and 18 is the age when someone is legally considered an adult in all four UK nations (with some [complexity in Scotland](#)).

It is sometimes claimed that rights gained at 16 are [subject to qualification](#), in that it depends on the issue and there can legitimately be differences between types of rights, and for some things you need parental approval (such as joining the army). [UNICEF has also highlighted](#) that lowering the voting age to 16 could lead to arguments to reduce child protection thresholds. There have also been concerns that lowering the voting age would [entrench inequalities in voter participation](#), because at that age most young people still live at home and may therefore be influenced by the voting habits and support of their parents, reflecting the trend that more affluent people are more likely to vote.

Some research suggests that the [majority of people oppose](#) lowering the voting age, although this does differ by age group with younger people more likely to support. Other research does still suggest [a significant proportion of 18-26 year olds oppose](#) lowering the voting age. Concerns have been expressed by some that attempts to lower the voting age are an effort to [skew the vote](#) towards Labour or other left leaning parties.

Barriers:

Some barriers to voting apply across all age ranges, and some are [specific to young people](#), such as issues with voter registration (awareness of how to do it and having appropriate ID), lack of media and political party engagement relevant to young people's interests and concerns, and the timing of elections (such as during exam periods).

Further barriers to lowering the voting age include the lack of support from the public overall, the lack of media support or interest, and the disinterest of some political parties (for either public policy reasons, or because of the perceived impact on their likelihood of winning/their margin).



"I think if you're old enough to go out and work, if you're old enough to pay your taxes, then you are entitled to have a say on how your taxes are spent. And also we do have voting at a younger age in different parts of the United Kingdom and the sky didn't fall in." – Sir Keir Starmer, Prime Minister, 8 April 2025, Liaison Committee, House of Commons.

Nation by Nation

England

The voting age in all English elections is 18. This includes UK Parliament elections and all local elections. This has been the position since the [Representation of the People Act 1969](#) when the voting age was reduced from 21 to 18. Before 1918 you had to be 21, male, and a property owner to be allowed to vote. In 1918 the franchise was extended to all men over 21 and most women over 30 (those who met certain property requirements). In 1928 the vote was extended to all women over 21, equalising the franchise.

In the 2024 General Election the Labour Party included in its [manifesto](#) a commitment to reduce the voting age to 16. While this was not mentioned in the UK (Labour) Government's subsequent first King's Speech, the Government [says it remains committed](#) to legislating to reduce the voting age this parliament, as [emphasised by Keir Starmer in April 2025](#). The Conservative Party does not currently support votes at 16, although some individual Conservative MPs have spoken out in favour. The Liberal Democrats and Green Party are in favour of lowering the voting age (the former from as long ago as 2001). Reform has no public policy position currently.

Northern Ireland

The voting age in Northern Ireland is currently 18 for all elections. While not a major policy issue at time of writing, [in 2024](#) there was a discussion and vote in the Northern Ireland Assembly on a private member's motion (tabled by Sinn Féin, amended by Alliance Party) which called for the voting age to be lowered to 16. The motion was supported, although some Unionist members (Democratic Unionist, Traditional Unionist Voice) spoke against it. This followed an Assembly vote in [2012](#) in favour of lowering the voting age to 16.

Republic of Ireland

The voting age in all elections in the Republic of Ireland is 18, including European Parliament elections and the 2025 Presidential election. There has been some discussion about lowering the age to 16, such as the Thirty-ninth Amendment of the Constitution (Right to Vote at 16) [Bill 2021](#) (Fianna Fáil sponsored), which lapsed with the dissolution of the parliament (Dáil Éireann). In 2024, the Education Minister (Fianna Fáil) [said](#) lowering the voting age to 16 was 'a discussion worth having'. Sinn Féin also supports a lowered voting age in the Republic of Ireland.

Scotland

In Scotland 16 is the voting age for all devolved elections, following the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) [Act 2015](#). 16 and 17 year olds were also able to vote in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. For UK Parliament elections 18 remains the voting age, due to its reserved nature. Labour, the Scottish National Party, the Scottish Green Party, and the Scottish Liberal Democrats support votes at 16 for UK Parliament elections.

Prior to the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum around [80% of eligible 16 and 17 year olds registered to vote](#), and polling suggests [75% voted](#) (higher than 18–24 year olds at 54%, but lower than over 55s at 92%); the high turnout was [no doubt assisted](#) by the Scotland-wide advertising plan in national and social media run by the Electoral Commission, work in schools and colleges and other institutions, the involvement of youth organisations, and the generally very successful attempt to encourage discussion.

[Research suggests](#) people aged 16–17 were more likely to vote in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections than those who first became able to vote aged 18 or older.

Wales

Following on from the Senedd and Elections (Wales) [Act 2020](#) and Local Government and Elections (Wales) [Act 2021](#), 16 and 17 year olds can vote in Welsh Parliament and Welsh local elections. As with Scotland, the voting age for UK Parliament elections remains 18. Labour, Plaid Cymru, the Green Party, and the Welsh Liberal Democrats support votes at 16 for UK Parliament elections.

Voting rates for 16 and 17 year olds in Wales are not particularly high, with [research indicating](#) only around 20% registered to vote ahead of the 2022 local government elections, with turnout lowest in that age group. In the 2021 Welsh Parliament election, [around 50%](#) of newly eligible 16 and 17 year olds registered to vote.

To note, turnout generally at Welsh Parliament elections (46.6% 2021) is lower than Scottish Parliament (63.5% 2021), Northern Ireland Assembly (63.61% 2022), and UK Parliament (59.8% 2024) elections.

Open University research:

[Open University research](#) highlights how patterns of UK-wide youth political behaviour have attracted notice in the last few decades, as research into political engagement – such as voting, political party membership, and civic responsibility – consistently seem to suggest that young people are turning away from formal political processes – defined as political participation connected with institutions. However, while young people in the UK are more likely to be dissatisfied with democracy and less likely to participate in formal politics overall, such as voting and joining a political party, [they may participate in other forms of political life](#).

Open University research suggests that [key to engagement](#) in formal and informal political processes is education – at both school and post-school – including a more specific focus on political education and active citizenship/political action, public information campaigns, a focus on how the various strata of local, national, and UK-wide government agencies differ/impact daily lives and who and what is responsible for tackling political concerns, as well as socio-historical and cultural constructions around this, and how individual political concerns are understood and felt at a localised, geographical level . Listening to the opinions of young people about voting age and barriers to voting is also crucial.

Read more about the Open University in Wales's [Changemakers research](#), and [Active Citizenship Hub](#), a collection of free resources to help promote active citizenship in Wales.

Wise up – 5 policy points to take away

Five key points from what we have learnt above, which could be considered as part of further policy development and delivery in any or all of the nations.

1. A lack of consistency in voting age across the UK nations and Ireland has led to criticism from some quarters. There would be clear benefits for the UK Parliament, Irish Parliament, and Northern Ireland Assembly learning from the impact of lowering the voting age in Wales and Scotland.
2. Similarly, the parliaments that have already lowered the voting age (Wales and Scotland) would benefit from a full/rolling impact analysis, to fully understand the effect on younger voters in terms of voter registration and voting, and democratic engagement more generally.
3. There would be benefit in all political parties fully engaging with debates about lowering the voting age, including commissioning or engaging with research and opinion from all sides of the debate.
4. The opinions of young people (under 18, so those whom a change in voting age would impact) on lowering the voting age should be sought by political parties and parliaments, including measures needed to increase/encourage formal political engagement as well as general feedback on lowering the voting age.
5. Barriers to voting should be addressed, whether specific to young people or more generally. A more specific focus on political education at school and post-school (including adults) could lead to improvements in formal political engagement. Some administrations, such as the Welsh Parliament, can build on the work they are already doing in this area; others, in turn, can learn from Wales.



This briefing was led by Dr Donna Smith, Senior Lecturer in Politics based in the School of Social Sciences and Global Studies with support from the PolicyWISE team.



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Wise in 5

The only regular snapshot comparative guide to public policy issues across the nations of the UK and Ireland.

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