

SENATOR FOR A DAY MOCK LEGISLATION

Senate Bill 9 – Changing the Required Voting Age to 16 years old

[The U.K. will lower its voting age to 16. Could the U.S. follow suit? | WYSO](#)

By: Rachel Treisman

The British government says it will introduce legislation to lower the voting age from 18 to 16, as part of a slew of reforms aimed at modernizing U.K. democracy.

Officials announced a number of what they called "seismic changes" on Thursday, which include allowing bank cards to be used as voter ID and tightening rules on political donations.

The most headline-grabbing shift, however, is that 16- and 17-year-olds will be allowed to vote starting in the next general election. It must be held by August 2029, though the prime minister can choose to call one sooner.

"We cannot take our democracy for granted, and by protecting our elections from abuse and boosting participation we will strengthen the foundations of our society for the future," Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner said in a statement.

The Labour Party campaigned in part on lowering the voting age last year — in an election with just 59.7% turnout, the lowest since 2001. The reforms must pass Parliament to become law, which appears likely since the Labour Party has a majority in the House of Commons, and the House of Lords traditionally does not block bills promised in the governing party's platform.

Scotland and Wales already allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in certain local elections. This newly proposed change will permit some 1.6 million teenagers to vote in all U.K. elections, according to Reuters.

About 90% of countries and territories around the world have a voting age of 18 or higher, according to UNICEF. The U.K. joins a small but growing list of those that have reduced it to 16 and/or 17, including Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Greece and Indonesia.

A third of U.S. states allow 17-year-olds to vote in primary elections if they will be 18 by the time of the general election. And a dozen U.S. cities — most of them in Maryland — allow people as young as 16 to vote, either in school board elections or all local elections, according to the National Youth Rights Association, which advocates for young people.

Alberto Medina, the communications team lead at the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), a Tufts University program focused on the political life of young people in the U.S., is encouraged to see Britain expanding young peoples' voice and participation in the political process.

"It's exciting to see this happening at a national level," Medina says. "And I think it's something definitely worth paying attention to as we think about how to continue improving youth participation here in the U.S."

What are the pros and cons?

Lowering the voting age is a divisive issue, both in the U.K. and the U.S.

The general criticism is that 16-year-olds are not mature enough to participate in elections, both in terms of brain development and political knowledge.

It's also a politically touchy subject because of concerns that younger voters will support liberal parties over conservatives, in line with recent generational trends. Though Medina notes it's not necessarily that clear cut, especially in the U.S.: While voters under 30 have long been a bastion for Democrats, they swung heavily towards President Trump in 2024.

Advocates for lowering the age say 16-year-olds may be equally or even better informed than other voters because they're in school, where they can learn about elections, discuss current events and get support for registering.

And they say that if 16-year-olds can drive, work and join the military, they should be able to cast a vote. The Vietnam War, which drafted millions of Americans as young as 18, was a big factor in lowering the voting age from 21 to 18 in 1971, Medina notes.

In the U.K., it is legal for 16-year-olds to join the Army as soldiers (with parental consent) and work full time, meaning some already pay taxes. That's one of the main arguments in favor of the change.

"I think if you pay in, you should have the opportunity to say what you want your money spent on, which way the government should go," Prime Minister Keir Starmer said on Thursday.

But critics, including in the Conservative Party, have pointed out that 16-year-olds cannot legally buy a drink or a lottery ticket, get married or run for office in the U.K. And they doubt the change will actually drive more young people to the polls.

A recent poll of 500 16- and 17-year-olds by Merlin Strategy for ITV News found that only 18% said they would definitely vote if there was an election tomorrow. But support for lowering the voting age was more evenly split, with 51% in favor.

What does the data say?

In the U.K., a study looking at the 2021 Welsh Parliament election — the first in which 16- and 17-year-olds were allowed to vote — characterized it as a "false start," arguing the timing of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted both the education system and the election process.

But a 2023 study from the University of Edinburgh found that younger first-time voters in Scotland "retain a habit" of voting in elections once they start, and participate in greater numbers than older first-time voters.

While data about the impact of younger voting is relatively limited — because it's so rare — Medina says "the field has known for a very long time that voting is habit-forming."

"The younger you start, the more likely you are to continue doing it throughout your life," he says. "And we have evidence that when young people get involved in this process earlier, especially while they're still in school ... It increases participation. It increases turnout."

That's also backed up by studies out of Denmark and Austria. And in the U.S., six of the seven states with the highest youth voter turnout in the 2024 election allow voter pre-registration at age 16, according to CIRCLE's analysis.

"There is a little bit of data out there that shows that when young people, 16- or 17-year-olds are given the chance to do this, that they step up and they participate at least at the same or even higher levels than older adults in the community," Medina says.

What's the state of play in the U.S.?

The U.S. doesn't seem poised to follow in the U.K.'s footsteps anytime soon.

"If you look at the national political landscape, it's harder to see a change of this magnitude succeeding," Medina says.

Public opinion polling — while scarce — shows considerable opposition to lowering the voting age. A 2019 Hill-HarrisX survey finding that 75% of registered voters opposed enfranchising 17-year-olds (and even more opposed 16-year-olds being able to vote).

Democratic lawmakers have repeatedly introduced legislation that would lower the U.S. voting age from 18 to 16 in recent years, without success.

And expanding ballot access may be even harder under the Trump administration and a Republican-controlled Congress, which have come under fire for passing laws that voting rights' groups say will do the opposite.

But change is happening on the local level, with cities in California to New Jersey among the latest to embrace lower age limits.

That's a win for advocates, who say young voters should be able to weigh in on the issues that are closest to home, from school funding to community safety. The local focus is more than just a political feasibility, Medina says.

"It's a way to give young people a voice in our democracy and to acknowledge the fact that they are already impacted by policies," he says.

[Britain is lowering the voting age to 16. It's getting a mixed reaction - Los Angeles Times](#)

By: Jill Lawless

LONDON — There has been a mixed reaction in Britain to the government's announcement that it will lower the voting age from 18 to 16 before the next national election.

The Labor Party administration says it's part of a package of changes to strengthen British democracy and help restore trust in politics. The opposition says it's a power grab by the left.

Experts say it's complicated, with mixed evidence about how lowering the voting age affects democracy and election outcomes.

The biggest change since the 1960s

Britain's voting age last fell in 1969, when the U.K. became one of the first major democracies to lower it from 21 to 18. Many other countries, including the United States, followed suit within a few years.

Now the government says it will lower the threshold to 16 by the time the next general election is held, likely in 2029. That will bring the whole country into line with Scotland and Wales, which have semiautonomous governments and already let 16- and 17-year-olds vote in local and regional elections.

A handful of other countries currently have a voting age of 16, including Austria, Brazil and Ecuador. A few European Union countries, including Belgium, Germany and Malta, allow 16-year-olds to vote in elections to the European Parliament.

The case for votes at 16

Supporters argue that 16-year-olds in Britain can work and pay taxes, so should be allowed to vote.

"If you pay in, you should have the opportunity to say what you want your money spent on," Prime Minister Keir Starmer said.

Pro-democracy organizations welcomed the lower age, and a move toward automatic voter registration, saying it would help increase voting rates. Turnout in the 2024 election was 59.7%, the lowest level in more than two decades.

The age change is part of a package of electoral reforms that includes tightening campaign financing rules and broadening the range of documents that can be used as identification at polling stations.

Supporters argue it will increase democratic participation by getting teenagers into the habit of voting at a time when most are still in school.

"Younger people who are in full-time education and often still live at home can make for better, more engaged first-time voters compared with 18- to 20-year-olds, who often experience their first

election in a highly transitory phase of their lives,” Christine Huebner, a social scientist at the University of Sheffield who has studied youth voting, wrote in the Guardian.

Critics call it a cynical move

Opponents argue that 16- and 17-year-olds should not be given the vote because in most ways they are not considered adults.

“Why does this government think a 16-year-old can vote but not be allowed to buy a lottery ticket, an alcoholic drink, marry, or go to war, or even stand in the elections they’re voting in?”

Conservative lawmaker Paul Holmes asked Thursday in the House of Commons.

Mark Goodwin, a senior lecturer in politics at Coventry University, agreed the move could seem paradoxical, because “socially, if anything, we’re moving in the opposite direction.”

“Increasingly the age of majority, the age at which you become a fully capable and responsible adult, is moving more towards 18,” he said.

The government’s political opponents on the right argue that Labor hopes to benefit from 1.5 million new potential young voters who generally lean to the left.

Nigel Farage, leader of the hard-right party Reform UK, said Labor was trying to “rig the system.”

Conservative former foreign secretary James Cleverly said the government had cynically announced the change because it is “tanking in the polls.”

Labor Party can’t take youth votes for granted

Experts say enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds is unlikely to dramatically change election results, because they are a relatively small group with diverse views. And it’s far from clear that Labor will reap most of the benefits of a bigger youth vote.

U.K. politics, long dominated by Labor and the Conservatives, is becoming increasingly fragmented. Polling suggests younger voters lean left, but they are split among several parties including Labor, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats. Farage’s embrace of TikTok has built his brand with youth, and Reform has some support among young men.

Goodwin said that in many parts of the world, “young people are abandoning the center-left in droves.

“And in many cases, they’re lending their support to parties of the populist right, or challenger parties, outsider parties, independents, more alternative parties,” he said.

“If it is a cynical ploy to get more Labor votes, there’s certainly an element of risk about where those votes would ultimately be cast.”