

## Section A (90-minutes)

- This section has one question only.

### Instructions:

Write a response to the following essay question:

*Should the UK reduce the minimum voting age from 18 to 16?*

- You should use the information in the extracts below to outline the debate and to explain/justify your answer.
- You should not copy sentences/phrases directly from the texts. Instead, you need to put the information into your own words.
- You should aim to write at least 500 words.

### Context:

In England and Northern Ireland, the minimum voting age is 18. However, in the Scottish Parliament and local elections and in the Welsh Parliament (Senedd) and local elections, the minimum voting age has been reduced to 16. This raises the question of whether the UK, as a whole, should reduce the minimum voting age from 18 to 16.

Proponents of reducing the minimum voting age argue that it will encourage young people to be politically active, that the voices of young people need be heard because they have more of a stake in the future than older generations, and that it is inconsistent to deny 16-year-olds the vote but allow them to take on responsibilities like joining the army.

Those who are not convinced of the need to reduce the voting age cite psychological studies which suggest the period of adolescence among Gen Z has extended – “25 is the new 18” – and argue that 16-year-olds are not politically aware, mature, or independent enough to make informed electoral choices.

**Extract One: Sarah Birch, Professor of Comparative Politics, University of Glasgow**

In my view there are significant benefits to reducing the voting age to 16, and this is a measure that should be seriously considered for all UK elections.

The main reason I think voting at 16 is a good thing is that we need more young people to vote so that politicians pay greater attention to their interests and their concerns.

As most people know, turnout among young people is far lower than turnout among older groups. This means that politicians of all stripes have little incentive to pay attention to the needs of the younger sector of the population.

So, we have rising university fees but a triple lock on pensions. We have free bus passes and winter fuel allowances even for well-off pensioners, but the elimination of the Education Maintenance Allowance and cuts to other benefits that are mainly used by young people. Thus, our political system is inequitable.

The most effective way of addressing aged-based political inequality is to get more young people to vote. Short of requiring them to vote by law, the best way of doing this is to reduce the voting age to 16.

The resulting influx of young people into the electorate would make politicians of all parties sit up and start paying attention to the concerns of those who will inherit the country for whom they are making policy.

In addition, there is evidence from many parts of the world that have lowered the voting age to 16, that 16- and 17-year-olds are actually more likely to vote than 18-year-olds. This is undoubtedly because many of them live at home with their parents and go to the polling station as part of a family group.

We also know from a number of studies that voting is habit-forming, and that if people vote at the first election for which they are eligible, they are more likely to continue voting throughout their lives.

This means that if people start voting at the age of 16, there is a greater chance they will vote at their first election and keep on voting.

The combined effect of this would be a gradual improvement in turnout figures and a reduction of the turnout gap between older and younger groups.

For all these reasons, I believe it is time to take the idea of voting at 16 seriously.

Birch, S (2014) Expert voices: Is it time to lower the voting age to 16? *LSE British Politics and Policy blog* <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/expert-voices-is-it-time-to-lower-the-voting-age-to-16/>

## **Extract Two: Olivia Utley, Political Reporter, GB News**

The spectre of votes for 16-year-olds has become a depressing fixture of our politics. No discussion of future elections seems complete without some “progressive” politician carping on about the “disenfranchised young”, or a naked effort to change the rules at the final hour, as the government’s opponents have attempted.

The most popular arguments trotted out for Votes at 16 are tediously familiar: 16-year-olds are allowed to join the army, get married, and pay taxes, claim advocates. Why should they be prevented from exercising their democratic rights? But not only would this be a cynical, scrutiny-free attempt to tinker with the franchise for electoral gain, it is doubly illogical when you consider how our society – through a combination of nanny state policies and paranoid parenting – otherwise infantilises young adults.

Take, for example, the argument that 16-year-olds can get married. Technically, of course, they can – with parental permission<sup>1</sup>. But in practice, very few do. The average age for first marriage in the UK has risen successively each year, and in 2019 it stands at 32 (among the highest in the world). Those who marry in their twenties are now in a minority - while teen brides and grooms are vanishingly rare. As for joining the army, though it may be true that 16-year-olds can sign up, no progressive worth his salt would argue that they should be deployed to the frontline like their adult peers.

Meanwhile, the proportion of people aged 20 to 34 who live with their parents has risen from 19.48% in 1997 (2.4 million people) to 25.91% in 2017 (3.4 million). Of course, the blame for that lies squarely at the feet of politicians - who have manifestly failed to tackle the housing crisis - but the fact is that mollycoddled young people have far fewer responsibilities than they had 20 years ago.

And the picture is the same in work. Back when large numbers of teenagers and young adults were employed and paying into the system, there were reasonable arguments to give them the vote. But over the years, young people have moved towards staying out of the workplace for as long as possible. A record percentage of 18-year-olds are now in full time higher education. Indeed, you now have to be in some form of education or training until 18, and some MPs want to raise the official school leaving age from 16. “No taxation without representation” may be a compelling argument, but it applies to fewer and fewer youngsters in practice.

Many sixth-formers will benefit from the extra time in school, but the idea that we should now start treating them like adults seems absurd. If they can no longer be trusted to decide whether or not to take A levels - not to mention whether to smoke, drink or hold down a Saturday job - why should they have a say in who runs the country? Given that scientists now believe that adolescence lasts until 24, there are probably better arguments for raising the voting age than lowering it.

Utley, O (2019) There are better arguments for raising the voting age than lowering it *The Telegraph* <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/authors/o/ok-oo/olivia-utley/>

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<sup>1</sup> The minimum age of marriage has now risen to 18 in England and Wales

### Extract Three:

In November 2017 the House of Commons debated a private members' bill on reducing the UK voting age to 16. The quality of the debate, however, was disappointing and failed to engage with the range of research conducted recently on the topic. Many proponents brought normative points<sup>2</sup> forward about young people's engagement and the responsibilities they otherwise have.

The reliance on normative points means that empirical rebukes are not engaged with critically. Two commonly cited concerns about reducing the voting age are to do with turnout and public acceptability. With regard to the former it is frequently – and mostly correctly – said by those against letting 16-year-olds vote that the youngest age group of voters (typically 18-24 or 18-29) shows the lowest level of voter participation. In the 2017 General Election, for example, just 43% of 18-24s bothered to vote. Thus, we might expect that 16- and 17-year-olds do not want to take part in elections.

Yet this does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. It is a mistake to extrapolate from the behaviour of those between 18 and 24 to 16- and 17-year-olds. Indeed, the younger first-time voters are, the greater their participation. This can be observed in the Scottish context where the participation rate for 16- and 17-year-olds (75%) was much higher than for 18-24-year-olds (54%). Voting earlier, while still being in school and more likely to live at home, is likely to increase voter participation, not reduce it.

The other often-cited criticism is that the majority of the population opposes the prospect of 16-year-olds having a vote. Early enfranchisement<sup>3</sup> is only supported by roughly one third of the UK population. This was also the case in Scotland *before* people experienced young people taking part in the voting process. However, support has now nearly doubled with roughly 60% of the Scottish population agreeing with the reduced voting age.

For the Scottish context, we also find that 16- and 17-year-olds show substantially higher levels of engagement with representative democracy (through voting) as well as other forms of political participation (such as signing petitions and taking part in demonstrations); and they engage with a greater range of information sources about politics and reflect greater levels of political efficacy. The findings suggest that earlier enfranchisement had a positive impact on young people.

Adapted from: Eichhorn, J (2017) Beyond anecdotes on lowering the voting age: new evidence from Scotland *British Politics and Policy at LSE* <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/votes-at-16-new-evidence-from-scotland/>

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<sup>2</sup> Normative points or arguments make claims about which things are good or bad, and which actions are right or wrong.

<sup>3</sup> Enfranchisement means the giving of a right or privilege, especially the right to vote.

#### **Extract Four: Changing views of adulthood**

Most countries have a legally defined age to determine when a person is considered an adult. In the UK, the age of majority is 18. However, the idea of adulthood - when it happens and how it is defined – is being challenged.

Determinants of adulthood traditionally focus on a person taking increasing responsibility for their lives in various ways such as leaving home, commencing full-time employment, getting married and parenthood (Zacares, Serra, & Torres, 2015). Many of these milestones are now achieved at later ages.

For example, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) says that over the last two decades, there has been a 50% increase in the number of young people aged 20-34 living with their parents, with the number increasing from 2.4 million in 1999 to 3.6 million in 2019 (Sharfman & Cobb, 2022).

Working patterns have also changed, largely because more people are staying on at schools and colleges and progressing to university. Between 1998 and 2018, for instance, the average age people left full-time education increased from 17.8 years to 19.3 years. And the youngest age groups work less than they did 20 years ago. In 1998, 47.5% of 16 to 17-year-olds worked. In 2018, this had fallen to 25.8% (ONS, 2019).

The age at which people are getting married and having children has increased. In 1973, the average age at marriage for men marrying women was 28.8 years and 26.1 for women marrying men. By 2019, however, the average age for men marrying women stood at 38.4, and 36.1 for women. The average age of first-time mothers has been rising for the last forty years: in 1991, it was 27.7; by 2021, it was 30.9 (Clark, 2023).

Due to these social changes, our expectations of young people and their level of social responsibility have changed, and some argue that 16-year-olds are not responsible enough to have the vote (Levenson, 2004). In addition, scientists have announced that adolescence, previously thought to end at 19, actually stretches to 24 (Stetka, 2017).

Indeed, social scientists Tak Wing Chan, PhD, and Matthew Clayton, DPhil, say that 16- and 17-year-olds wouldn't be competent voters because "research in neuroscience suggests that the brain, specifically the prefrontal cortex, is still undergoing major reconstruction and development during the teenage years," and added that the prefrontal cortex is what "enables us to weigh dilemmas, balance trade-offs and, in short, make reasonable decisions in politics" (Chan & Clayton, 2006).

#### **Sources:**

1. Chan, T. W., & Clayton, M. (2006). Should the voting age be lowered to sixteen? Normative and empirical considerations. *Political studies*, 54(3), 533-558.
2. Clark (2023) Marriage and weddings in the UK – Statistics & Facts *Statista* <https://www.statista.com/topics/5012/marriage-and-weddings-in-the-uk/#:~:text=At%20the%20same%20time%20there,38.4%2C%20and%2036.1%20for%20women>.
3. Levenson, E (2004) The voting age should be raised not lowered *The Independent*

4. Office of National Statistics (2019) Milestones: journeying into adulthood *Office of National Statistics*  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/milestonesjourneyingintoadulthood/2019-02-18>
5. Sharfman A & Cobb P (2022) Families and households in the UK 2021: Data and Analysis from Census 2021 *Office of National Statistics*  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2021#toc>
6. Stetka, B. (2017). Extended adolescence: when 25 is the new 18. *Scientific American*, 19.
7. Zacarés, J. J., Serra, E., & Torres, F. (2015). Becoming an adult: A proposed typology of adult status based on a study of Spanish youths. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 56(3), 273-282.