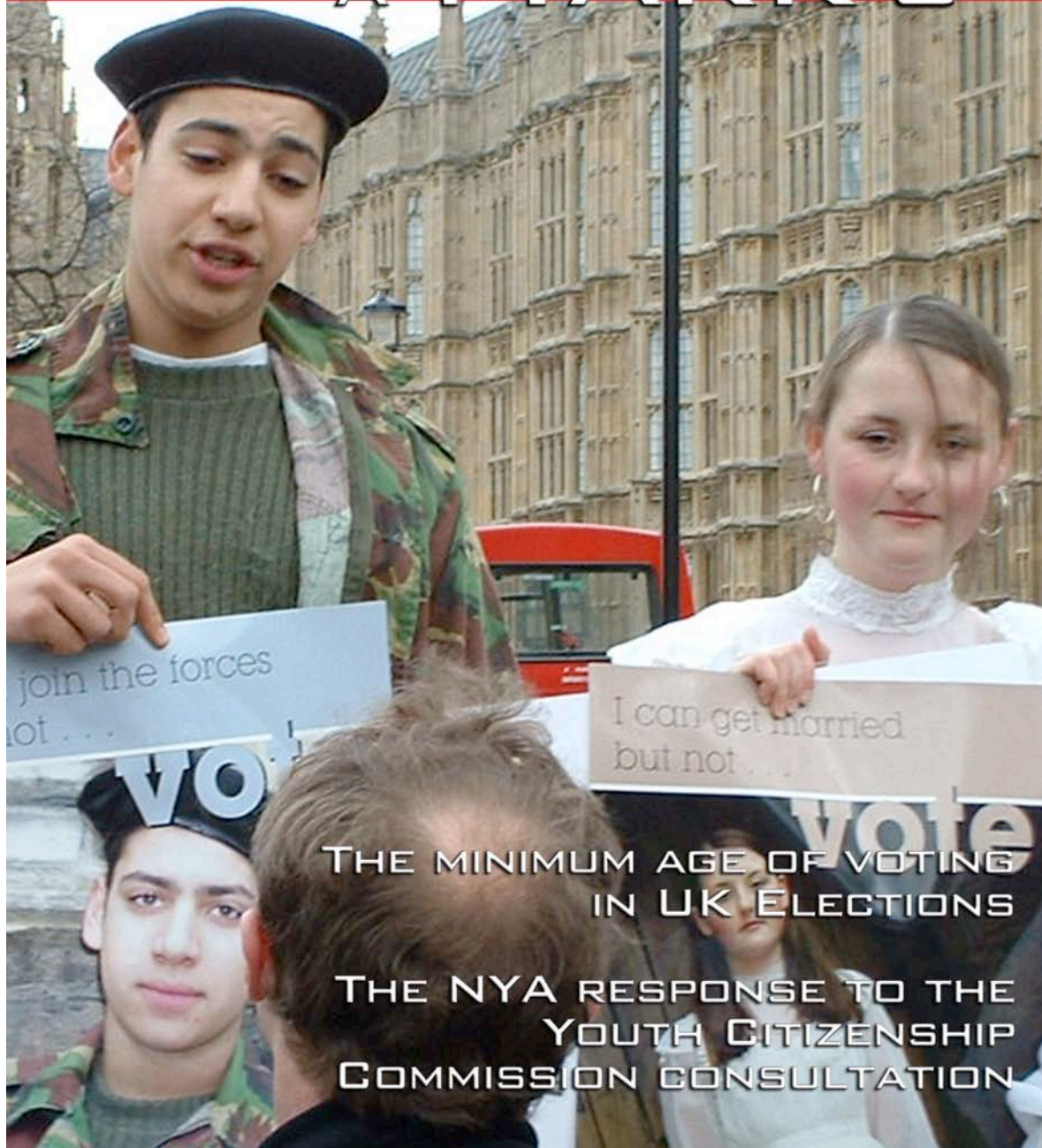


The National Youth Agency
Getting it right for young people

OLD ENOUGH TO MAKE A MARK?



THE MINIMUM AGE OF VOTING
IN UK ELECTIONS

THE NYA RESPONSE TO THE
YOUTH CITIZENSHIP
COMMISSION CONSULTATION

Old enough to make a mark? The NYA response on voting age

I can fix your car
but not . . .




vote

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For further information contact:
E-mail: info@votesat16.org.uk and www.votesat16.org.uk

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I can join the forces
but not . . .



vote

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I can drive but not . . .



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I pay my taxes
but can't . . .



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I can get married
but not . . .



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We make a valuable
contribution to society –
but we can't . . .



vote

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Old enough to make a mark?

The minimum age of voting in UK elections

The NYA response to the Youth Citizenship Commission consultation

1. Introduction

1.1

The National Youth Agency (The NYA) welcomes the Youth Citizenship Commission's consultation and believes it timely to make possible lowering the voting age in the Queen's Speech in 2009, noting it is now Labour Party policy. The basis of this submission is that made to the Electoral Commission in its similar consultation in 2003. While recommending reducing the age of candidacy, it did not recommend reducing the voting age and this caused great disappointment in the sector and among many young people. Critically some key arguments are only emphasised by the passage of time, with citizenship education embedded, Government increasing young people's legal right to influence decision making, for example through the Children Act, 2004, with the growth of youth led initiatives in grant making and the establishment of more independent youth led organisations such as YouthBank and A National Voice.

1.2

The NYA fully supports lowering the voting age to 16 in all UK elections. We believe from our experience of working with young people in local and national political affairs that young people have amply demonstrated that 16 is indeed old enough to "make a mark" and that many have already done so in astounding fashion.

1.3

The NYA is willing for this submission to be quoted and published by The Youth Citizenship Commission. A copy of this response is available on our website at www.nya.org.uk.

1.4

To inform this response The NYA has drawn upon a range of sources and experience:

- Active membership of the Votes at 16 Coalition since it formed in 2002 – the cover picture was taken outside Parliament at the launch in January 2003 (Appendix1).
- Extensive experience with a wide range of young people's projects involved in local democracy and neighbourhood renewal.
- The NYA's experience as author of *Hear by Right: standards for the active involvement of children and young people* and *Act by Right: skills for children and young people to help make change happen*.
- The NYA young trainers' team and the young people involved in original NYA Votes at 16 poster campaign.
- Over six years of experience including:
 - Consultation with a wide range of partners and young people's groups, including Article 12, Children's Rights Alliance for England, UK Youth Parliament, Electoral Reform Society; British Youth Council;
 - Membership of the Youth Voting Network, which existed over many years and was hosted by the Electoral Commission;
 - Votes at 16 polls previously conducted at www.nya.org.uk, www.messengers.org.uk and www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk
 - Key partners with the Children and Young People's Unit in YVote?/YNot? , the review as recorded at www.ycp.info/yvotereview and the Youth Voting

1.5

The mission of The NYA is to support those involved in young people's personal and social development. It works to enable all young people to fulfil their potential as individuals and citizens within a socially just society. We aim to achieve this by:

- Informing, advising and helping those who work with young people in a variety of settings.
- Influencing and shaping youth policy and improving youth services.
- Promoting young people's participation, influence and place in society
 - In local, regional and national democracy
 - In governance and management of youth-serving bodies, including The NYA
 - In the development of communities and cultures
 - By promoting citizenship and inclusion
 - By supporting young people's informal learning and skills.

1.6

The NYA is an active member of the Votes at 16 Campaign and through the coalition has sought to raise awareness of the case for lowering the voting age among young people, professionals, politicians and the public. Our aims and campaign membership are given in Appendix 1.

1.7

Across a broad spectrum of The Agency's work, it is our privilege to encounter many young people demonstrating a commitment to local and national issues and undertaking practical action, for example through the now ended Neighbourhood Support Fund, the Young People's Development Programme or the Action Speaks Louder grant making programme. All these experience convince us that it is time to reduce the voting age.

1.8

Examples are legion. One such is from the young people on the citizenship programme at the Bolton Woods NSF project who became involved in local democratic decision-making:

"The young people have formed their own committee to fund raise for new premises and try to improve the local area by discussing local issues and identifying ways in which they can help tackle them. They also hosted a polling station for the inaugural Bradford-Keighley Youth Parliament elections. The young people have gained confidence, learnt communication skills at all levels, knowledge about elections, interaction and cohesion and are able to make more informed choices about their own futures and that of the local community." **Carol Woodley, project manager, Bolton Woods NSF project, Bradford**

1.9

YouthBank is an independent organisation led by young people supporting local groups of young people to manage and distribute funds to other local groups of children and young people. As a key partner and the employing agency for YouthBank, The NYA has seen over 81 YouthBank projects established across the UK, run by groups of between ten and 15 young people between the ages of 14 and 25. Their success is testimony to young people's ability to manage, make decisions and be responsible for funding in their communities. Since it started, a young people's advisory board has informed the direction of YouthBank UK. Building on this, in 2004, YouthBank UK became an independent charity, run by young people for young people, with a board of trustees (aged 16 to 25 years) in control of the organisation. Government has recognised the success and power of this movement in its Youth Opportunities Fund and Youth Capital Fund programmes, now leading onto an expectation in the Aiming High ten year strategy that young people will influence at least 25% of local authority spend on children and young people by 2008.

Old enough to make a mark? The NYA response on voting age

2. Response to specific consultation questions

1. **Do you think the voting age should be lowered? Yes**

3. **Do you think the voting age should be lowered to 16 in all elections? Yes**

2.1

Votes at 16: rights as well as responsibilities

The NYA believes the voting age should be lowered to 16. Below, we set out the value of lowering the voting age to promote political engagement, rebuild trust between young people and politicians and embed citizenship education. Being able to vote at 16 coincides with the completion of citizenship education. It also gives recognition to the significant contribution many young people make in society. It will encourage many more to play an active part in local and national affairs.

2.2

In addition, a principle rationale for lowering the voting age to 16 is that of equality for young people. It will help bring some coherence between the significant responsibilities young people are entitled to undertake at 16 and the age of representation. This case has been powerfully argued in *The REAL Democratic Deficit*.ⁱ

2.3

The NYA believes the extension of voting rights to 16-year-olds should not affect the age of majority at 18. 16 and 17-year-olds must retain their right to protection under domestic and international law, relating for example to abuse and neglect, work, involvement in war and juvenile justice. This is not a contradiction. Rights to protection exist for many groups in society who are eligible to vote, relating for example to age, race, gender and disability.

2.4

Young people often take on huge responsibilities but are denied the right to vote. For example, there are 175,000 young carers in the UK undertaking significant caring responsibilities in the home. From the age of ten in England and Wales, children are considered fully responsible for any criminal activity. At 16, young people, with parental consent, are legally permitted to leave home, join the armed forces and get married. They can have sexual relationships, leave school and work full-time. They may pay taxes and pay full fare on public transport. The NYA's own posters, as seen on the first page, graphically make this point. All the young people involved were under 18 and took part in identifying key areas they felt indicated the worst contradictions of the current position. Two of the young people took part in the Votes at 16 launch at the House of Commons in January 2003. Their message is clear-cut:

- I can fix your car but not vote
- I can join the forces but not vote
- I can get married but not vote
- I can drive a car but not vote
- I pay my taxes but can't vote
- We make a valuable contribution to society but can't vote.

4. **Do you think the voting age should only be lowered in local elections? No**

2.5

The NYA fully supports the same minimum age of 16 for all levels of elections in the UK. To not advocate this would be illogical. As one young person said:

"To me that sends a message to young people that local politics are less important than national politics, and therefore a) they can only be trusted to vote in the less important ones but not in the ones that matter - which is a bit demeaning really - and b) what's the point in having an interest in local politics because it's seen as second rate?"

Young person on votes at 16 web discussion, 13 September 2003ⁱⁱ

Old enough to make a mark? The NYA response on voting age

5 Do you think lowering the voting age might encourage young people to take part in elections? Yes

2.6

Voting: the right of citizenship

The participation of children and young people is enshrined in international law in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)ⁱⁱⁱ. Article 12 sets out the rights of all those under 18 to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and that these views be taken seriously. The UK Government is committed to the fullest possible implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition, children and young people's right to be listened to and consulted is also established in both specific domestic legislation (Children Act 1989, Education Act 2002, Children Act 2004) and in a range of policy and guidance.

2.7

There is current discord between this commitment to include children and young people in the decision-making that affects them and the age of representation. The ultimate right of citizenship in a democracy is the right to vote. This should be extended to 16-year-olds as a fundamental right, without needing to be justified on other grounds, such as increased trust and voter turnout. However, The NYA does believe reducing the voting age and age of candidacy will encourage young people to take part in elections and increase the chances of this becoming a life-long habit.

2.8

Being taken seriously locally

A range of studies illustrates the current gap between the ambitions of engaging young people and the reality of many young people's experience. Over 600 children and young people in one survey set out their priorities to tackle violence and improve their physical environment. They wanted to take an active part themselves in making where they live a better place.^{iv} Despite such commitment, children and young people tell us they are often not listened to, feel treated with disrespect, given limited information about their rights. The authors of the consultation, *It's Not Fair!*, concluded there was significant *"concern at the lack of participation in key decisions at home, in their communities and within local and national politics."*ⁱⁱⁱ

2.9

YVote?/YNot?^v found that most young people think formal politics is dull and boring and that politicians do not understand or care about young people's concerns. Many suggested that this was a direct result of those under 18 not having the vote and politicians consequently feeling no pressure to respond to their needs and rights. Lowering the voting age to 16 would be a strong step toward tackling this democratic deficit.

"Lowering the voting age would concentrate policy makers' minds about services for young people. One of the reasons they can get away with cutting youth services and things that really matter to young people, or talking about youngsters in a particular way, is because they don't have the vote. So politicians aren't worried about offending them. Young people need to be engaged in shaping local services as well as the high politics of national interest." **Tom Wylie, former Chief Executive, The NYA**

2.10

Disenfranchised, not apathetic

Despite the low voting turnout, research has consistently indicated that young people want more involvement in public affairs. Research indicates that the biggest barrier is often the political process itself. The study by the Electoral Commission^{vi} showed many factors inhibiting young people from voting, including not knowing how to register, or where to register if moving house, for example to university, feeling intimidated in the polling station and not being able to ask.

2.11

The National Centre for Social Research found that young people consistently referred to their feelings of powerlessness and the limited opportunities for them to engage in politics until the age of 18.^{vii} YVote?/YNot? found that most young people would be interested in becoming more involved in politics if they believed they would be taken seriously and could make a difference. A poll conducted in June 2001 found that 71 per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds wanted more say in decisions affecting them,^{viii} while a NYA study of young people's involvement in local government concluded that young people demonstrated a "genuine enthusiasm" for playing a part in decision-making.^{ix}

2.12

Tinkering at the edges

Poor recent electoral turnouts have spawned much activity to promote young people's democratic engagement. A review by some young people of the YVote/YNot? initiative, however, indicated that, without tackling the real democratic deficit in the right to vote, much of this activity is seen by young people as window dressing and tokenism.

2.13

Trust and social inclusion

In The NYA's experience, the more children and young people are in poverty, marginal to their communities and discriminated against due to, for example, race or disability, the less they feel listened to and included, able to participate in the issues that affect them and able to impact on the services they use where they live. It is, therefore, no surprise that only one in five of all young people feel part of their local community or neighbourhood.^x

2.14

This dislocation from the democratic process caused shock waves after the General Election in June 2001. MP Graham Allen caught the mood: "There is no issue as important as the health of our democracy. In the last general election, the very underpinnings of our democracy were seen to be creaking by the very low voter turnout. The bald figures are quite frightening: the overall turnout was down nationally to 59.5 per cent ... I could count the number of people under 30 on the fingers of both hands. The NYA's key finding was that young people considered the election to be irrelevant. If we allow our local activism - that sense of the importance of public service, public duty and community involvement - to atrophy, our national politics will eventually wither. I believe that one of the answers is to restore to local people the strength, resources and powers to enable them to make decisions that affect their own lives. All decisions that should be made locally must be made locally."^{xi}

2.15

The NYA believes that this link between local decision-making and national politics is crucial. However strongly we support lowering the voting age, by itself it will bestow only the democratic right of citizenship. It needs to be implemented along with promoting respect, opportunity and the social inclusion of young people most on the edge. Together these provide the means of rebuilding trust between young people and politicians locally and nationally.

"Votes at 16 should not be an endgame. Votes at 16 should be part of a wider aim to encourage real democracy, participation and political activism amongst young people, on the route to a true democracy where we are not simply asked who we want to represent us in parliament every four year, but instead where all the people can choose how everyday life is run, how goods are produced and how services are provided, in a true democracy."

Young person on votes at 16 web discussion^{xii}

Old enough to make a mark? The NYA response on voting age

8 What other issues may arise if the voting age is lowered to 16? What are the issues for education, advice and information for young people?

2.16

Citizenship

The NYA supports the introduction of citizenship education from the ages of five to 16 into the national curriculum. This should lead to all 16 year olds gaining a better understanding of democracy and the political process and being able to make an informed choice in an election. Yet, 16 and 17 year olds are currently denied the right to use this knowledge.

2.17

Lowering the voting age to 16 is a natural and essential extension to introducing the citizenship curriculum in schools. Without this next step, young people may have to wait up to seven years before they can put into practice their democratic right to vote locally and nationally, by which time citizenship lessons may feel a distant memory and be rusty from lack of use. Lowering the voting age will help establish the habit early either in school or college, and if at university.

“As citizenship education ends at 16, but voting does not begin until 18, you could argue that the gap between learning about society and taking part in it is what causes apathy, rather than apathy being a by-product of teenage-dom.” **Young person on votes at 16 web discussion**^{xiii}

2.18

YVote?/YNot?^{xiv} found that many young people felt they did not have enough information about politics and concluded that increasing young people’s knowledge is a key factor in increasing their engagement. Research into young people’s expectations of citizenship education also highlighted its potential value in their development as political citizens.^{xv} There remains the challenge to ensure citizenship in schools is universally embedded as a culture and experience, not something that is simply part of a lesson plan or assembly. It should include experience of political decision-making as well as learning about social and moral responsibility.

“If there was a proper (citizenship) education system in place for a good few years first then I reckon 16 year olds should be able to vote. But it would need serious, proper support from the education system, not just the 'citizenship' we have at the moment.” **Young person on votes at 16 web discussion**^{xvi}

3. Conclusion

3.1

The NYA strongly supports lowering the voting age to 16 in all public elections in the UK. This standpoint is based on:

- a) Our extensive experience of working with young people in local and national democracy and a recognition of their knowledge, commitment and evident competence to take part in democratic elections;
- b) The importance of local action and local change and how it engenders a wider interest in democracy and politics at all levels;
- c) The need to address the democratic deficit and revitalise our political processes, enabling young people and politicians to build trust;
- d) The importance of addressing the current divide between the age young people are legally entitled to undertake significant responsibilities and their age of democratic representation.

3.2

In 1969, the UK led the way in reducing the voting age from 21 to 18, with France, Italy and the USA soon following. 25 years later, The NYA believes a similar opportunity lies

Old enough to make a mark? The NYA response on voting age

Appendix 1

Votes at 16 Campaign – Statement of Aims

Votes at 16 campaign believes that the voting age in all public election should be 16.

Citizenship

Citizenship Education has been integrated into the national curriculum from the ages of 5-16. At 16 a person will have the ability to make an informed choice in an election. Yet 16 and 17 year olds are currently denied the right to use this knowledge.

This is the first generation of voters who have ever needed to study our democracy, our electoral system and the importance of voting. Yet they are denied the right to use this knowledge for at least two further years – possibly seven years. Lowering the voting age to 16 would allow a seamless transition from learning about voting, elections and democracy to putting such knowledge into practice.

Excluding 16 and 17 year olds worsens poor political participation

There is a growing concern about the lack of political participation by young people with falling rates of formal voting by young people. The exclusion of 16 and 17 year olds from elections is fuelling the disengagement of 18-24 year olds. The longer young people are left unable to become involved, the less chance there is of engaging them ever.

In the 2005 General Election 2005 only 37% of 18 - 24 year olds voted - the lowest turn out of all age groups. Yet young people are politically aware and active - 81% of 12-16 year olds believed there should be a way to give young people a voice in politics^{xvii}. The issue is how to translate the enthusiasm of 12-16 year olds into action via the ballot box. The exclusion of 16 and 17 year olds from elections is fuelling the disengagement of 18-24 year olds - the longer young people are left unable to become involved, the less chance there is of engaging them in the future. Many young people are currently deprived of democratic participation until they are 23. Lowering the voting age to 16 would permit a first engagement with parliamentary democracy for all young people by the time they are 21 years old.

The closer your birthday to an election the more likely you are to vote. The longer the gap the less likely you are to vote. This lottery of birthdays is inevitable, however, we can reduce this gap by reducing the voting age. Those who vote young, vote often and so lowering the voting age to 16, whilst it cannot erase the lottery of birthdays, will ensure that everyone can participate in a general election by the time they turn 21. This will have a knock on affect on future voting patterns thus increasing turnout.

16 and 17 year olds are capable

Many of the arguments put forward for denying 16 and 17 year olds the vote are the same as those put forward previously for denying women and working classes the right to vote. Apparently, they are 'too innocent' and 'we' know what is best for them. Those arguments are as wrong now as they were then.

We agree with the Government that "it is necessary to decide at what minimum age most people are sufficiently politically aware, mature, and independent to make up their minds and choose between the various candidates standing for election".^{xviii} We believe that there are as many 16 and 17 year olds capable of making this free and informed choice in an election as there are 18 and 19 year olds or 56 and 57 year olds. Indeed, many people over the age of 18 who would also fail the tests of maturity which opponents of reform apply to 16 and 17 year olds.

Equality of Expression

Not letting 16 and 17 year olds express their political views through the ballot box gives the impression to young people and to the rest of society that young people's views are not valid and young people are not real citizens and so contributes to the disconnection that many young people feel from the political process and structures.

The past decade has seen an explosion of activity to support children and young people to influence decision making which affect their lives. It is widely accepted that the best authorities on a young person's life and their experiences is that young person themselves. The same argument would support the lowering of the voting age. Extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds would

Old enough to make a mark? The NYA response on voting age

making decisions which affect their lives. Lowering the voting age would be an historic opportunity by which to mark the Government's commitment to young people.

Consistency

There is a great inconsistency about the age at which a person can vote (18) compared to the age at which a young person can pay taxes, leave home, join the armed forces and receive social security benefits (all 16). The time has come to ensure that these responsibilities are balanced by the right to vote.

Whether we like it or not, young people often take on massive responsibilities. By the time they are 16 many young people will be working and paying taxes, but, not allowed to influence how those taxes are spent. Some will be joining our armed services, but, not electing the Government that will send them into conflict situations. Some will have moved out of home, but, won't be able to influence the local council tax rates. If young people are capable of taking on these responsibilities we think they are capable of influencing the Government which affect how they exercise those responsibilities. The current situation ensures responsibilities without rights. It enforces a situation where 16 and 17 year olds are excluded from the crucial decision making process of our democracy which directly impacts on their everyday lives. This is unfair and unjust.

We believe that there should remain different ages for different levels of responsibility and rights. Protective rights which apply to Under 18s should remain – child protection and abuse of trust should not be conflated with democratic rights. Similar precedents remain – whilst women can vote they remain protected by the Equal Pay Act.

Young people want Votes at 16

Thousands of young people have signed up to our aims and want to see the voting age reduced to 16. Major youth-led organisations in Britain are members of our campaign. Young people want to be able to vote and take on the responsibility of voting.

The Electoral Commission's public consultation on the voting age in 2004 found that 72% of respondents favoured a voting age of 16. The consultation attracted huge participation, including nearly 8,000 young people. Late in the process the Commission decided to carry out a separate poll on the issue, because of the overwhelming support for law reform and its concern that the responses it received were not 'representative'. The ICM poll of just 1,200 people found most people supported the status quo. This was not surprising given the loaded question: 'If the choice came down to it, do you think the minimum voting age should be lowered to 16 years or kept at its present 18 years'. When, in this separate poll, people were asked the open question 'At what age do you think people should be able to vote in elections', four of the seven age groups gave a person's 17th year, while three gave a person's 18th year. Despite this, and the massive support for votes at 16 in the public consultation, the Commission did not advocate extending the franchise.

Votes at 16 Coalition members:

Coalition steering group consists of: NYA, ERS, CRAE, NYA, BYC, NUS and Compass Youth
Members include: Article 12, Barnardo's, British Youth Council, Care Leaver's Alliance, Carnegie Young People Initiative, Charter 88, Children's Society, Children's Rights Alliance for England, Electoral Reform Society, Green Party, Liberal Democrats (and LDYS), Liberal Party, Local Government Information Unit, London Young Labour, National Black Youth Forum, National Union of Students, The NYA, National Children's Bureau, New Politic Network Plaid Cymru, Scottish National Party, Scottish Youth Parliament, YMCA England.

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- ^{iv} The Children's Society (2000), "My Vote Counts Too", results available by email from billb@nya.org.uk
- ^v Willow, C. and Dugdale, L. (1999) "Its Not Fair!" (p5), The Children's Society
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