



Policy Brief | 12 November 2025

Lowering the voting age

Politics and Public Administration Section

Issue

Reforms to lower the voting age to 16 are gaining momentum internationally and raise important questions about democratic participation, equity, human rights and the nature of enfranchisement. While support for lowering the voting age varies across political parties and stakeholder groups, emerging evidence from political research and countries that have already enacted such reforms is further informing the debate.

Key points

- A Greens-backed bill to lower the voting age to 16 was debated in 2018. A parliamentary inquiry recommended not passing the bill.
- Several countries have lowered the minimum voting age to 16, including Argentina, Austria, and Brazil.
- The United Kingdom government has announced an intention to lower the voting age to 16. It is currently 16 for some elections in Scotland and Wales.
- Arguments both for and against lowering the voting age encompass principles of equity, human rights, maturity, participation, and also include political reasons.
- The Australian context of compulsory voting adds another dimension to the issue. Advocates for lowering the voting age are split as to whether voting should be optional or compulsory for 16- and 17-year-olds.

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Context

The [Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918](#) states that ‘all persons who have attained 18 years of age ... shall be entitled to enrolment’ (s. 93). The voting age was [lowered from 21 to 18](#) in 1973, partly [driven by the argument](#) that those under 21 serving in the Vietnam War should also be able to vote. This change was part of a global change, with [many countries](#) lowering the voting age to 18 around this time.

The Australian Greens have long advocated for lowering the voting age, [first sponsoring a bill in 1996](#). More recently, a [Greens-backed bill](#) was introduced in 2018 to lower the voting age to 16, with voting voluntary for 16- and 17-year-olds. There was a [parliamentary inquiry](#) by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM), which ultimately recommended not to pass the bill. Labor members of the JSCEM [supported lowering the voting age in principle](#), but did not support the bill because it would make voting non-compulsory for 16- and 17-year-olds. The Greens’ most recent [Electoral Legislation Amendment \(Lowering the Voting Age\) Bill 2023](#) was introduced in February 2023 and remains before the Senate.

In June 2023, a campaign called [Make it 16 was launched](#). It was [supported by federal parliamentarians](#) from the Greens, as well as independents Andrew Wilkie and Monique Ryan, who in July 2025 [further reiterated her support](#) for lowering the voting age in Australia.

The Australian public is overwhelmingly opposed to lowering the voting age. In the 2022 [Australian Election Study](#), 86% of respondents agreed that the voting age should stay at 18 (p. 109).

International cases

In recent years, there has been growing international support to lower the voting age. [Countries with a minimum voting age of 16](#) now include Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Ecuador, Malta, and for [European Parliament elections](#), Belgium and Germany.

[Latin American countries](#) were the first to lower the voting age to 16. For example, Brazil made the voting age 16 in 1988, followed by Ecuador in 2008 and Argentina in 2012.

In Europe, [Austria led the way](#) in 2007, implementing a voting age of 16. The comparative longer history of a younger franchise has made Austria an important country for [research](#) into the consequences of lowering the voting age. [Greece](#) lowered its voting age to 17 in 2016, then [Malta](#) lowered it to 16 for national elections in 2018.

When Scotland held a referendum for independence in 2014, the voting age was temporarily [lowered to 16](#). [This was entrenched](#) for elections to the devolved Scottish Parliament and local elections in Scotland from 2015. Wales then followed, with 16-year-olds able to vote in Welsh local elections and for the [Senedd Cymru](#) (Welsh Parliament) from 2022.

Belgium (in 2022) and Germany (in 2023) [lowered the minimum voting age](#) for European Parliament elections from 18 to 16.

In 2022, the [New Zealand Supreme Court ruled](#) that a minimum voting age of 18 is 'inconsistent with the right to freedom from discrimination on the basis of age'. The Labour government then [promised to introduce legislation](#) to change the voting age to 16 but following its 2023 election defeat, the new National government [ruled out a change to the voting age](#).

The United Kingdom (UK) government recently published a policy paper entitled [Restoring trust in our democracy: Our strategy for modern and secure elections](#). The paper outlines the government's proposed electoral reforms, including lowering the voting age for all UK elections. The government has committed to enacting the electoral reforms in the lifetime of the current Parliament.

The UK's House of Commons Library has published a [research briefing on voting age](#), which outlines the arguments for and against, as well as some history from other jurisdictions.

Arguments for and against

Equity

The most common argument is that young people already have [rights and responsibilities](#) that should allow them an equivalent voice in civic life. For example, 17-year-olds can [serve in the defence force](#), while 16-year-olds can learn to drive (in most states), have sex, work and pay tax. However, they do not have a say in how that money is spent and are subject to laws and policies that they have no influence over.

Alternatively, for most adult activities (consuming alcohol and tobacco, gambling, marrying without parental consent) the minimum age is 18, and there is a view that voting should remain in this category.

Human rights

Several international agreements recognise certain rights relevant to this issue, notably:

- Article 25 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) provides that every citizen shall have the right to vote ‘without unreasonable restrictions’.
- Article 12 of the United Nations [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) states that children have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them, in accordance with their age and maturity.

[UNICEF](#), the United Nations agency for children, has noted that under these human rights instruments, differential treatment due to age must be ‘reasonable and objective’, and that ‘if the evolved capacities of a child match those of an adult, the franchise exclusion may be questioned’.

The [Human Rights Law Centre](#) considers that a minimum voting age of 16 would be an appropriate way for Australia to meet its obligations under international law.

There is also an intergenerational justice argument. A lower voting age may cause policy makers to consider the longer-term effects of their decisions, and how they will affect young people who will be around for years to come. This claim is particularly relevant to [climate change policy](#).

Participation

In overseas jurisdictions where voting is voluntary, a lower voting age has the potential to address low turnout. [Research has shown](#) that people who voted for the first time at 16 (as opposed to 18) are more likely to turn out to vote throughout their 20s and 30s. However, such arguments are less compelling in Australia, where compulsory voting has enabled a turnout of above 90%.

Electoral participation (both [enrolment](#) and [turnout](#)) is consistently lower among young Australians than older cohorts. Since participation of under 18s cannot be measured, [survey data of older voters has been used](#) to conclude that lowering the voting age would not necessarily improve youth turnout.

Since 16- and 17-year-olds are mostly still in school, there is an opportunity for increasing civic engagement of young voters with the support of formal education. [Some people have suggested](#) that lowering the voting age must go hand-in-hand with reinvigorated civics education in school. Youth researcher [Dr Intifur Chowdhury](#) has expressed reservations about lowering the voting age, stating ‘the focus should be on embedding robust civics and citizenship curricula at every stage of schooling’.

According to an interview with social scientist [Christine Huebner](#), ‘lowering the voting age does not have any negative side effects for democracy’.

Maturity

A common argument against lowering the voting age is that young people lack maturity, life experience, interest in politics and knowledge to make an informed vote. Some academic research has indicated [that political interest and knowledge](#) is lower among young people. The [Institute of Public Affairs](#) has argued that improved civic competence must be a precondition to a lower voting age.

Experts recognise that the [human brain does not fully mature](#) until the age of 25, especially in areas involved in higher-order cognitive functions. However, the Human Rights Law Centre has pointed to [research which shows that](#) the type of reasoning involved in voting, known as ‘cold cognition’, is typically well developed by age 16, unlike ‘hot cognition’, which involves decision-making under emotional or high-pressure situations and continues to mature into early adulthood.

A [2021 academic study](#) examined developmental science and empirical evidence to determine if 16- and 17-year-olds have sufficient political knowledge, cognitive capacity, independence, interest, and life experience to vote. The conclusion was that ‘many arguments against changing the voting age are generally unsupported by empirical evidence concerning adolescent development’.

In any case, the [Human Rights Law Centre](#) has pointed out that, whether measuring knowledge or cognitive ability, there is no level of political maturity required for people older than 18 to exercise their right to vote.

Politics

Young people are more likely to vote for progressive-leaning parties. The [Australian Election Study](#) from 2022 showed:

There are major generational differences in voter behaviour. The Coalition has very little support among Millennials and Generation Z. The Coalition’s share of the vote fell in almost every age group, but especially among the youngest cohorts of voters.

Support for electoral reform is influenced by a [party’s values, as well as self-interest and public reaction](#). Table 1 provides an overview of some Australian political parties’ positions.

Table 1 Party positions on lowering the voting age

Australian Greens	The Greens strongly support lowering the voting age as part of their official policy platform . The Greens have sponsored bills in 1996 , 2018 , 2019 , and 2023 .
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Australian Labor Party	<p>In 2015, then-leader Bill Shorten called for the voting age to be lowered to 16.</p> <p>In 2018, Labor members of the JSCEM supported lowering the voting age in principle.</p> <p>In 2023, Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister, Patrick Gorman, said that lowering the voting age was not a priority for the government.</p>
Liberal/National Coalition	<p>In 2022, Liberal Senators James McGrath and James Paterson both argued to keep the voting age at 18.</p> <p>The Young Liberals oppose lowering the voting age.</p> <p>The JSCEM report which recommended the 2018 bill not be passed had a Coalition majority.</p>
Pauline Hanson's One Nation	<p>Senator Pauline Hanson is strongly opposed to lowering the voting age, and has even suggested the voting age should be raised to 21.</p>

Since support or opposition for lowering the voting age correlates with general political orientation, it appears that, regardless of any genuinely held belief on principle, views tend to align with potential electoral support.

Australian context

Compulsory voting

If the voting age is lowered to 16, a major question which arises in Australia is whether voting should be made compulsory for 16- and 17-year-olds. Australia is [one of only 27](#) countries with compulsory voting. In Argentina, Brazil and Ecuador, voting is voluntary for 16- and 17-year-olds but compulsory for those over 18 (until an upper age limit). The 2018 bill would have made it voluntary, and the vast majority of submissions to the related inquiry supported [the position](#) that voluntary voting at 16 and 17 would be a grace period before compulsory voting at 18.

However, academics such as [Professor Lisa Hill](#), [Associate Professor Luke Beck](#), and [Dr Philippa Collin](#) have warned that voluntary voting for some voters risks undermining Australia's longstanding compulsory voting system, and disproportionately privileges the most engaged. To that end, [Professor Hill has stated](#) 'the effects of making it voluntary would likely defeat the reason for lowering the voting age in the first place, which is to revitalize democracy and promote inclusion'.

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