

Reducing the voting age

Introduction

There are people of all ages who openly dislike politics and political campaigns. They begrudgingly line up at the ballot box to cast their vote in what can feel like an endless cycle of federal and state elections, because they are required to do so by law.

But for some young Australians, voting is a privilege that remains out of their reach.

Conversations about who should have the right to vote have been [gaining momentum](#) around the world, with the possibility of reducing the voting age again being raised in countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

Voting in Australia

Voting is described by the *Macquarie Dictionary Online* as expressing or signifying choice in a matter undergoing decision.

There are numerous examples of people being asked to do this. Students may be asked to elect a student council representative; sports players may be asked to choose a captain for their team; and members of the public are routinely given the opportunity to vote for their favourite restaurant, movie, or reality television star.

But one of the biggest choices put to people living in democratic societies, like Australia, is who should govern them and make decisions on their behalf.

In Australia, it is compulsory to vote in [federal](#) elections (which occur every [three](#) years) and in [state](#) elections (which occur every [four](#) years). There is also an option to vote in local council elections.

Yet the law limits this privilege – or burden, depending on your perspective! – to Australian citizens, aged 18 years and over.

Why 18 years of age?

South Australian [law](#) defines a child as being a person under 18 years of age.

But this does not mean young people cannot start to make significant life decisions earlier than that.

They can get their [Learner's Permit](#) from 16 years of age. They have the power to either consent to, or refuse, [medical treatment](#) from the same age. They can apply to join the [Australian Defence Force](#) from 16.5 years of age. And they can legally have [sexual intercourse](#) from 17 years of age.

The law also explicitly treats young people like adults in certain situations.

In South Australia, there is no [minimum working age](#). But if children and young people choose to work, they are still required to [pay income tax](#), at the applicable tax rate, for every dollar they earn above the tax-free threshold.

There are also some circumstances under which young people, who have been [charged](#) with certain [criminal offences](#), can be dealt with as an adult.

The quest to reduce the voting age

A lot of [young people](#) are willing to take on the same responsibilities as adults but would appreciate having access to the same rights in return – including the right to vote.

With [issues](#) such as asylum seekers, same-sex marriage and climate change weighing heavily on their minds, some young people are actively seeking out the opportunity to play a greater role in the political process.

They want to exercise their right – in accordance with Article 12 of the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) – to have their opinions listened to and taken seriously. They want to be recognised as capable individuals who have something meaningful to say; a sentiment that is unequivocally supported by the [Child Rights International Network](#).

But, as with the broader population, other young people are becoming increasingly [disillusioned](#) by, or [disengaged](#) from, mainstream politics. A potentially concerning outcome given they are the generation likely to be affected for the longest by current day political decisions.

Maintaining the status quo

A further percentage of young people are happy to maintain the status quo and not have to worry about voting until they are 18 years old. Balancing school and after school commitments with friends, family and even work can leave some young people feeling [overwhelmed](#). Others '[don't really care about politics](#)' and feel that waiting in line at a polling booth to vote for people whom they know nothing about is a '[waste of a Saturday](#)'.

This logic is not surprising to some experts.

[Child psychologists](#) are increasingly recognising that cognitive development continues well into one's early twenties, while [neuroscientists](#) have found that the brain is not fully developed until approximately [25 years of age](#).

These findings perhaps then offer a degree of support to the arguments of those advocating to keep the minimum voting age at 18, particularly their observations that it would be an '[insult to democracy](#)' to allow young people to be involved in the '[very serious matter](#)' of voting.

Another interesting perspective that has emerged as part of the voting age debate is where to draw the line. As one [commentator](#) cautioned, allowing 16 and 17 year olds the right to vote may trigger questions about whether those under 18 should be able to stand for election or why the same rights should not be offered to even younger citizens.

Case Study: Scotland

After lobbying the government since 1998, young people in Scotland were finally granted the [right to vote](#) in all Scottish council and parliamentary elections in 2014. It was a bittersweet day though because they were simultaneously denied the right to vote in the [European Union membership referendum](#) of 2016!

An alternative way forward?

The Australian government has remained reluctant to lower the voting age, quashing recommendations to do so in both 2007 and [2009](#).

But this has not stopped the dialogue about voting age. Instead, it has led to some interesting suggestions about how to strike a balance between providing young people with an opportunity to actively participate in the political process and maintaining [integrity](#) in the electoral system.

The suggestions have ranged from [eliminating](#) the minimum voting age completely through to allowing young people a vote (even if they are under 18), so long as they can demonstrate an [‘understanding](#) of the voting system’ and have the [capacity](#) to make reasoned choices.

As various countries around the world have grappled with this issue, some have linked the decision about who should be entitled to vote to non-age related factors. For example, in [Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro](#), young people who are employed are entitled to vote; while all married people over the age of 16 are entitled to vote in [Hungary](#).

Other countries have introduced a hybrid system, offering optional voting rights for young people (typically 16 and 17 years of age) while still maintaining compulsory voting requirements for those aged 18 years and above.

Some [young Australians](#) are very supportive of a hybrid system. They like the balanced approach of not burdening those who would prefer not to vote, while still providing an opportunity for those who do want to have their say to demonstrate their political [competence, intelligence and self-awareness](#). Perhaps this is why the 2015 pledge by the Australian Labor Party to [reduce the voting age](#) was so attractive to some young Australians?

Case Study: Canada

The right to vote in Canada currently only applies to those aged 18 years or above. But some young people are very passionate about reducing the voting age to 16. The Federation of French Canadian Youth has been instrumental in calling for 16 and 17 year olds to be given the [right to vote](#), including through its [‘Vote 16’](#) campaign.

Summary

Australia has been reluctant to follow the lead of other nations and reduce the voting age.

Opinions about whether this decision is correct are varied and will likely form the basis of continuing discussion, at least for the foreseeable future.

Although not all young people – or even adults, for that matter! – want to vote, there are some who are very passionate about having their say on topical issues.

This has led to the view that age is [arbitrary](#) and should not be the focus. Instead, the emphasis should be on how to make voting [‘meaningful’](#) and to keep people adequately [engaged](#) with the political system.

After all, [‘participatory democracy’](#) is vital in bridging the gap between the government and the people.
