

Reducing the voting age

Some people complain about political campaigns and having to line up at the ballot box to cast their vote in what can feel like an endless cycle of federal and state elections.

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

Around the world, the desire to provide young people with an opportunity to vote is [gaining momentum](#).

voting

expressing or signifying choice in a matter undergoing decision

Macquarie Dictionary Online (2017)

macquariedictionary.com.au

Voting in Australia

There are numerous examples of people being asked to vote. 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. Although voting is compulsory in Australia, the law limits this privilege – or burden, depending on your perspective! – to citizens aged 18 years and over.

CASE STUDY

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.

Why 18 years of age?

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

But significant life decisions can be made earlier:

- 16** obtain [Learner's Permit](#)
- 16** consent to [medical treatment](#)
- 16.5** apply to the [Australian Defence Force](#)
- 17** legally have [sexual intercourse](#)

Young people may also be:

- Required to [pay income tax](#)
- Tried as an adult when [charged](#) with certain [criminal offences](#).

The quest to reduce the voting age

A lot of [young people](#) are willing to take on adult responsibilities, but want the same rights in return – including the right to vote.

With [issues](#) like asylum seekers, same-sex marriage and climate change weighing on their minds, some young people are looking for the opportunity to play a more active role in the political process.

But others are becoming increasingly [disillusioned](#) by, or [disengaged](#) from, mainstream politics. This is concerning given they are the generation most likely to experience the long-term effects of current political decisions.

So where should the line be drawn?

Young people want to have their opinions listened to and taken seriously (as per Article 12 of the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)) and to be recognised as capable individuals with something meaningful to say (which is unequivocally supported by the [Child Rights International Network](#))



Maintaining the status quo

Allowing 16 and 17 year olds to vote naturally raises further **questions**, such as whether young people should be able to stand for election at the same age and why similar rights should not be offered to even younger citizens.

Making this type of policy change might be viewed cautiously by some. For example, **child psychologists** and **neuroscientists** have found that that the brain is not fully developed until about **25 years of age**.

Equally, there is a percentage of young people who are very happy to not have to worry about voting until they are 18 years old. Balancing school with after school commitments, 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**'.

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.

This has not stopped the dialogue, but instead led to some interesting suggestions about how to strike a balance between allowing young people to actively participate in the political process and maintaining **integrity** in the electoral system.

These have ranged from **eliminating** the minimum voting age completely to allowing young people a vote, so long as they can demonstrate an '**understanding** of the voting system' and have the **capacity** to make reasoned choices.

As countries around the world have grappled with this issue, some have linked voting rights to non-age related factors – for example, young people who are employed (**Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro**), or all married people over the age of 16 (**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 for those aged 18 years and above.

Some **young Australians** are very supportive of a hybrid system, particularly those wanting to demonstrate their political **competence, intelligence and self-awareness**.



CASE STUDY

Scotland

After lobbying the government since 1998, young people 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!

Canada

The Federation of French Canadian Youth has been instrumental in calling for the voting age to be reduced so that 16 and 17 year olds have the **right to vote**, particularly through its '**Vote 16**' campaign.



Key points

- Opinions about whether the voting age should be reduced are varied.
- Although not all young people – or even adults! – want to vote, some are very passionate about having their say.
- Other people think that anyone under 18 years of age is too young to be involved in the '**very serious matter**' of voting and see it as an '**insult to democracy**'.
- Yet others view age as **arbitrary** and believe the emphasis should instead be on making voting '**meaningful**' and keeping people **engaged** with the political system.