

The Learn2Think Young Journalist Competition 2018

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Should children be allowed to vote?

A person must have reached the age of 18 before he or she can vote in a public election. There are over 13 million children in the UK.¹ What if they were given the vote? Many older children are interested in politics and follow the news. I carried out a poll in my class and 18 out of 25 children² thought that children should have the right to vote. Some countries, including Scotland for elections for the Scottish Parliament, have already lowered the voting age to 16. The Labour Party³ and the Liberal Democrats⁴ favour extending the vote to young people across the country. What are the arguments for and against?

I interviewed Councillor Sakina Chenot (Lib Dems, Fortis Green Ward). She noted:

“Older children should have the vote because politics is about making decisions that affects their future, such as education, climate change and Brexit. Politicians are incentivised by their voters.” A democracy is about everyone having equal rights and, arguably, children are just as important as adults. Opponents say that children are not well-informed and smart enough and will simply copy their parents’ voting choices. Interestingly, similar arguments were made by opponents to women’s suffrage in Victorian times: it was said that women would not be interested and would only double their husbands’ vote.⁵ Yet, women did gain the right to vote and now no-one doubts their ability to

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7575869.stm>

² I interviewed all pupils in my Form 6Q at North London Collegiate School (NLCS).

³ <https://labour.org.uk/latest/stories/time-votes-16/>

⁴ <https://www.libdems.org.uk/reform>

⁵ <https://jwa.org/media/pamphlet-distributed-by-national-association-opposed-to-woman-suffrage>

exercise it. Another argument against child suffrage often made is that children do not pay any taxes that would pay for the policies pursued by the parties they vote for. However, this argument could be rejected as many adults – such as the unemployed and retired – do not pay taxes either yet still have the right to vote.

What would be the right voting age? Obviously, very young children who cannot speak, read or hold a pen are unable to vote. Labour and the Liberal Democrats propose a voting age of 16. Councillor Chenot suggested that 16 is the right age as at this age people can leave school, start work and must pay taxes, join the Armed Forces and get married. These responsibilities should be accompanied by the right to vote. In my interview with Mrs Bartram, the NLCS Junior School Deputy Head, she said: “In my experience, at 16 most children are ready to make an informed choice and are interested in politics.” In my class survey, some proposed a voting age as young as 7 but the average age suggested was 13. This age tallies with coming-of-age ceremonies in Christianity and Judaism. There are already lots of ways children can obtain information about politics: The Week Junior and citizenship classes in school. But there is much more that could be done: for example, the political parties could publish simpler versions of their manifestos and current affairs discussions could be added to the school curriculum at a younger age.

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(10 years old)