

UK to Lower Voting Age to 16 for Next General Election in England and Northern Ireland

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The United Kingdom government has confirmed plans to reduce the national voting age from 18 to 16 ahead of the next general election, expanding the franchise to over a million new voters. While the move brings England and Northern Ireland in line with Scotland and Wales, where 16-year-olds already vote in local and devolved elections, it has

drawn criticism from conservative circles over its political and societal implications.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer's Labour government is positioning the change as part of a broader package of electoral reforms aimed at "modernising democracy." Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner defended the measure by stating that young people who work, pay taxes, and serve in certain military roles should also be granted a voice in the nation's future. The reforms also include automatic voter registration, expanded forms of voter ID (including bank cards and Veteran Cards), and enhanced measures to curb foreign interference in UK elections.

Critics, particularly from the Conservative Party, argue the change is politically motivated and may disproportionately benefit Labour or smaller progressive parties, which often poll better among younger voters. Conservative MP Paul Holmes questioned the inconsistency of granting voting rights at 16 while prohibiting access to other adult privileges such as alcohol, marriage without consent, or running for office. Others have raised concerns about the political maturity of voters in this age group.

Despite these objections, international evidence suggests that fears may be overstated. Countries such as Austria, Germany, and Scotland have already lowered their voting age with little disruption. Research shows that 16- and 17-year-olds participate in elections at comparable, and sometimes higher rates than older first-time voters. Academic experts, such as Christine Huebner of the University of Sheffield, argue that when paired with civic education, early enfranchisement can help cultivate a generation of more engaged citizens without skewing electoral outcomes.

From a center-right perspective, the decision represents a significant constitutional shift that must be approached with caution. While broadening democratic participation is commendable in principle, such moves should be carefully implemented, with robust safeguards to ensure informed engagement and prevent exploitation by political campaigns.

In summary, lowering the voting age to 16 introduces a substantial change to the UK's democratic landscape. The long-term success of this policy will depend not only on its electoral impact but also on the government's ability to implement balanced voter education and uphold public confidence in the integrity of the system.