

Make it
 16

Lower the Voting Age.

The case for 16 and 17 year olds voting in
Australian elections and referendums.



The background of the entire page is a repeating pattern of light blue ballot boxes. Each box is a simple line drawing with a rectangular body and a trapezoidal top that is slightly wider than the body, with a small rectangular slot cut out of the top. The boxes are arranged in a grid, with some boxes slightly offset from others to create a sense of depth and movement.

Why young

people want to

Make it 16.

When I was in primary school, I remember watching a video about climate change in class, but I wasn't afraid of it. The world used to seem so indestructible, so permanent, and at that time I was still young enough to believe that every problem would be magically solved by the adults around me. And then I got a little bit older, and I realised that my world wasn't actually indestructible, that those problems weren't going to be magically solved. Ever since then, I've felt the craving to make some sort of difference, the knowledge that we all have the responsibility to do what we can. But I don't feel like I have the power to do anything.

I'm 16. I'm no longer young enough to believe that these problems will magically disappear, that they won't affect me and everyone I love for the rest of my life. I'm no longer young enough to ignore the fact that everyone my age, whose futures are actually being shaped by the people voted into power, are so completely disregarded. Lowering the voting age would give us not only a vote and a voice, but the power, and with it the responsibility, to help create the world we're going to be living in.

Pranikka, Queensland



For so many people, elections are a happy day to celebrate our healthy democracy. However, I find it hard to enjoy election day, as I'm often thinking about all those who are excluded from our democracy, including myself. I think about how everyone in Australia's votes are being counted but because I'm 16, my voice doesn't matter, as if my peers and I don't deserve the democratic process.

At 16, I'm old enough to work, pay taxes, and even drive a car, but not old enough to vote. As I thought about it more, I realised that there were so many issues that affect young people like me, but we don't have a say in how they are addressed. Young people like me have a unique perspective and a stake in the future of our country. We should have the right to vote and have our voices heard on issues that will shape our lives for decades to come.

For me, lowering the voting age isn't just about getting to cast a ballot in the next election. It's about fighting for my right to have a say in the decisions that affect my life and the lives of my peers.

Archie, South Australia





Five reasons to

Make it 16.

1

Our democracy will benefit from young people's participation

Everyone deserves a fair and equal say in decisions that affect their lives. Unfortunately, many young people feel excluded and alienated from Australian politics because their voices are simply not valued or heard. So many of the decisions we have to make today will have a massive impact on the future, so it's only fair that young people are allowed to have their voice heard on those decisions.

In most cases, legal voting ages have been set totally arbitrarily or in response to specific events or contexts. These ages are not constitutionally fixed nor are they evidence based. Throughout history we've frequently changed who can and can't vote and after years of campaigning, it's time we extend the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds.

By letting 16 and 17 year-olds vote, we can create a better democracy that includes and enfranchises more people. This means a more just and fair society where everyone has a chance to have their voice heard and make a positive impact. By allowing young people to feel heard in politics, we can create a new generation of Australians who are more engaged and more optimistic about the future of our democracy.



2

Young people are entitled to a voice

From mass protests to online petitions to classroom debates, high school students are politically active and deserve a say in government decisions that affect their lives and future. But right now, 16 and 17 year olds are denied a fundamental right in our democracy - the right to vote.

Young people have the vision and energy to drive historic social change but are excluded from having their voices heard in electing political representatives or history-changing public votes, such as postal surveys and referendums. The Australian Government makes decisions about school funding and curriculum, Medicare support for youth mental health, income taxes and support, and setting climate targets. These decisions directly affect 16 and 17 year olds working and studying now, and will continue to impact young people for decades to come - long after our current political leaders have retired. Yet elected representatives can ignore young people's voices, because when it comes to election time - 16 and 17 year olds can't vote.

When the people we elect to government represent our community and reflect our values and concerns - that's when our democracy works best. By working together to include 16 and 17 year olds in the right to vote in our national elections, we can make sure young people's voices are heard. This will make our democracy fairer and ensure our elected representatives serve all of us, including future generations.

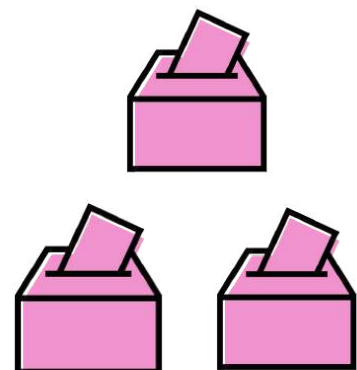
3

No Taxation without Representation

Young people in Australia start paying tax from as early as 15, when they begin their first jobs. They are given responsibility to start contributing to the economy but not the right to vote in the interests of their economic wellbeing.

Successive governments have failed to prioritise the financial security of young people and we are now seeing unprecedented transfers of wealth from young to old through our tax system. As a result, Millennial and Gen Z generations are predicted to be the first to be worse off than their parents since Federation.

Lowering the voting age will help to turn that forecast around. It will make sure more young people are heard and ensure that their interests and needs are taken into account by policymakers. We need to restore the balance of economic prosperity across generations. 16 and 17 year olds are deemed old enough to pay tax and should have a voice in how it is spent.



4

It will improve education outcomes

A strong democracy begins with a strong civic education. Lowering the voting age to include 16 to 17 year olds promotes and encourages the inclusion of civics education in state education curriculums.

Currently for 16 and 17 year olds to undertake civic education in their schooling, they have to enrol in a subject such as legal studies or Australian politics. Enfranchising young people aged 16 and 17 in the electoral process will incentivise education institutions to provide quality civic education - as young people would be directly experiencing our voting system. The provision of a structured and accessible civics education program would not only inform future voters, but empower them to vote wisely with their values and beliefs in mind.

When informed engagement is not accessible to young people, a disconnect begins to grow between the voting population and those who represent them. By lowering the voting age to 16, we will provide an opportunity to better educate and enfranchise future generations in our democracy.

5

It will improve the health of young Australians

Young people are directly affected by political decisions regarding education, climate change, and the economy, among others, which all have an impact on mental health and wellbeing.

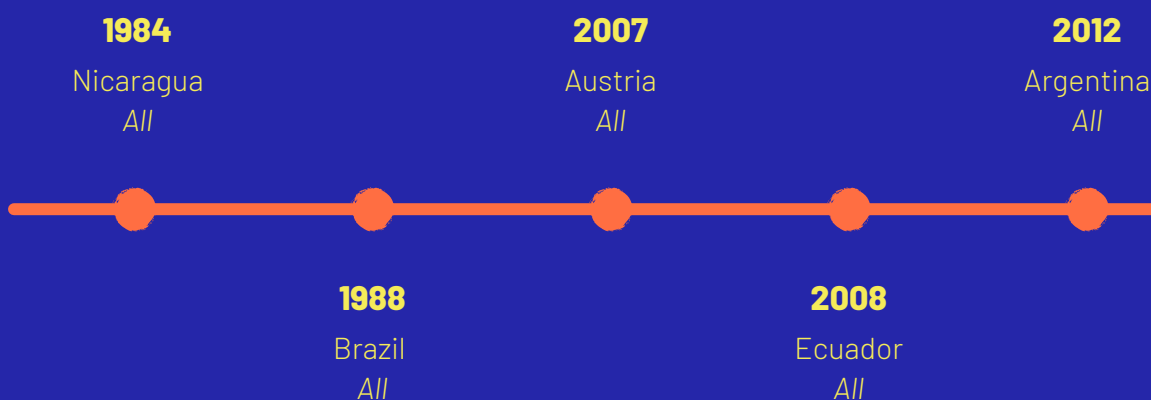
There is an increasing proportion of young people experiencing mental ill-health, and voicelessness could be a key contributor to this. Lowering the voting age has the potential to positively impact mental health by fostering a sense of agency, empowerment, and civic engagement among young people. It also recognises young people's rights as active members of society and provides them with a voice in shaping their future.

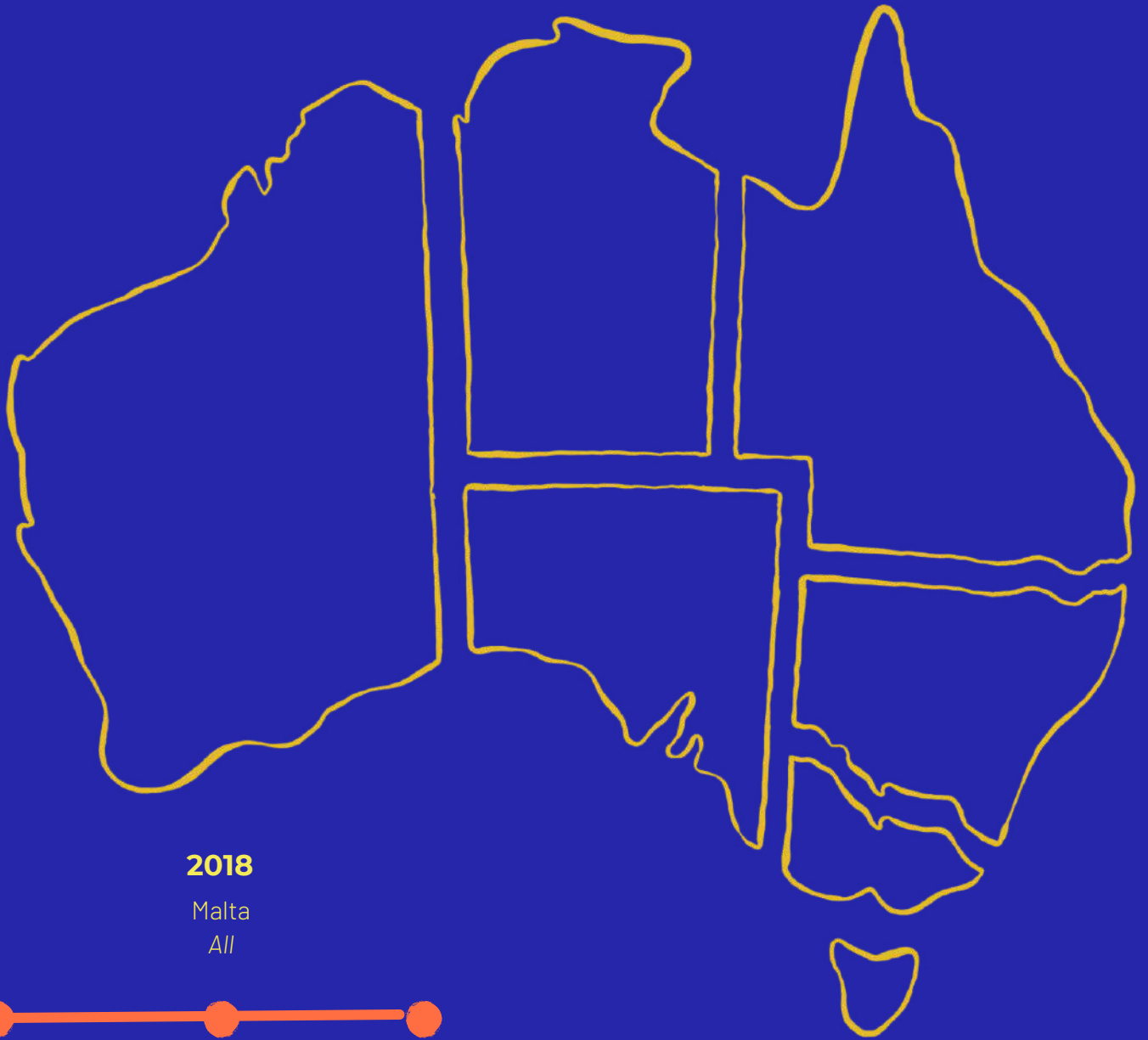
By empowering 16-year-olds with the right to vote, we promote intergenerational dialogue, amplify diverse perspectives, and ensure that the decisions made reflect the interests of all citizens, regardless of age. By expanding voting rights to 16-year-olds, we send a powerful message that their voices matter, thus promoting a supportive environment that nurtures their mental health and wellbeing.



Australia is falling behind

Many countries around the world have already lowered the voting age to 16. It's time for Australia to join them and empower young people to exercise their democratic rights and play an active role in shaping the future of our society.





2018

Malta
All

2015

Scotland

All Scottish elections
(not UK-wide elections)

2021

Wales

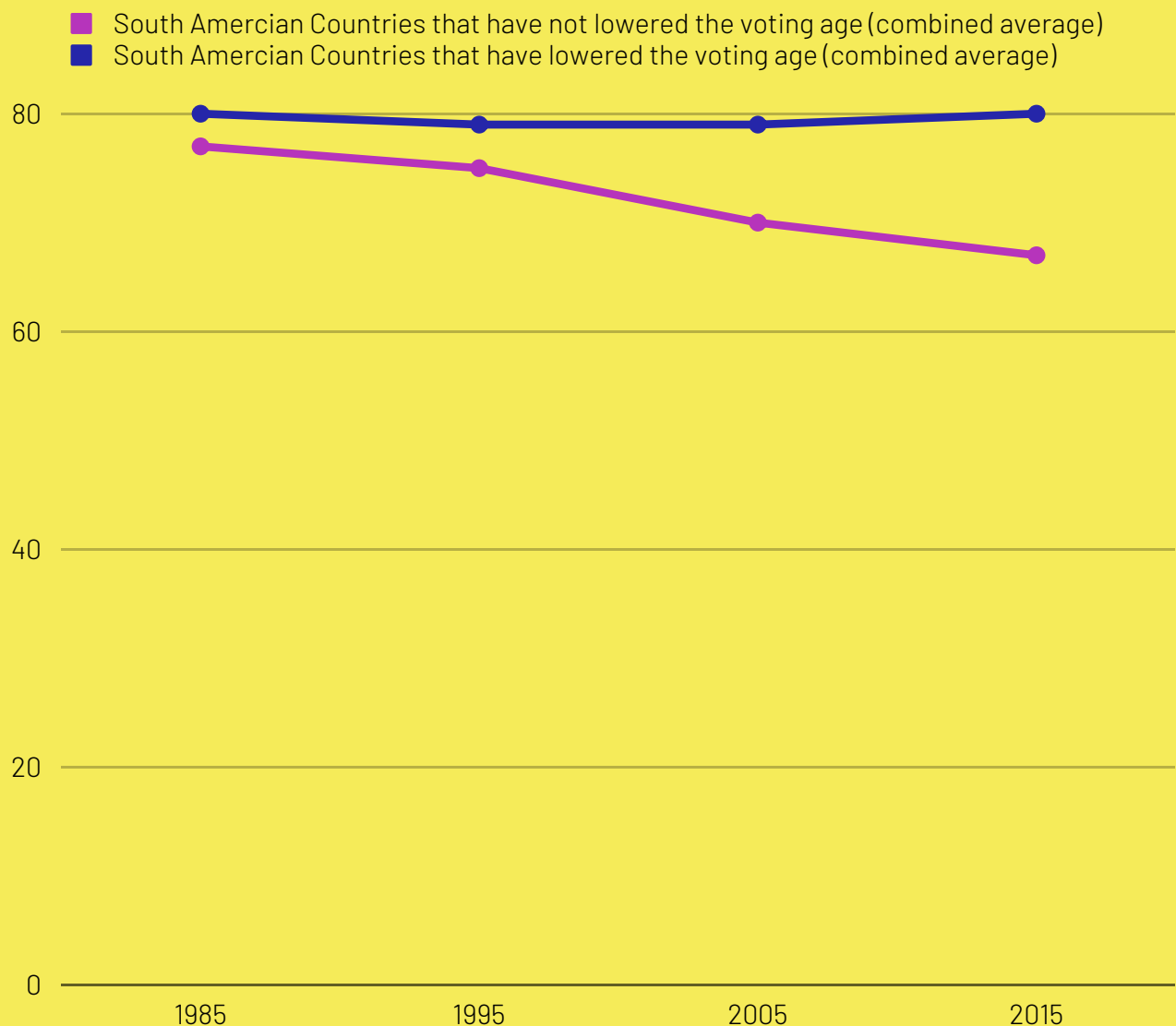
All Welsh elections (not
UK-wide elections)

* Sources: Bergh & Eichhorn (2020), Aichholzer & Kritzing (2020),
Leininger & Faas (2020), Toots & Idnurm (2020), and Douglas (2020)

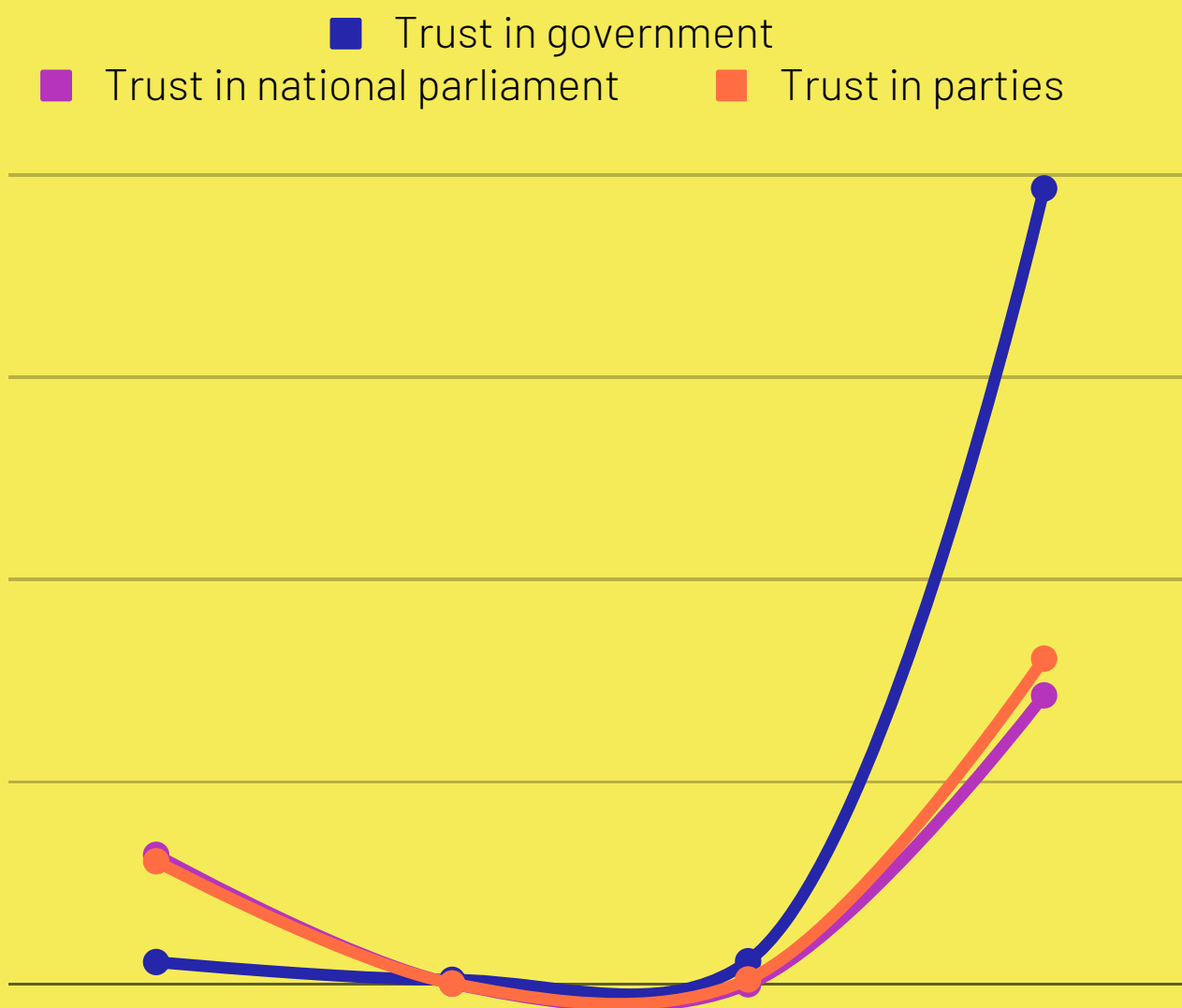
Case Studies

South America

Evidence from countries in South America has shown that electoral and political participation has improved in the long term when democracies enfranchise 16 and 17 year olds.



Across countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Ecuador, the evidence shows that voting at 16 is strongly positively associated with greater satisfaction with democracy. With all of these countries and more experiencing increased trust in national governments, parliaments and political parties when early political participation was incorporated into their electoral systems.



4. Belger, T., Jones, M., & Neame, K. (2023, May 11). Revealed: Full draft policy platform that could form 2024 Labour manifesto. LabourList. from <https://labourlist.org/2023/05/labour-manifesto-2024-election-what-policies-npf-party/>
5. Evans, D. (2017, November 2). It's time for votes at 16. The Labour Party. from <https://labour.org.uk/latest/stories/time-votes-16/>
6. MAKE IT 16 INC v ATTORNEY-GENERAL - https://www.makeit16.org.nz/_files/ugd/a1217e_6b0fae9aa8e24207a09339f4879a7d0c.pdf
7. Eva Zeglovits & Julian Aichholzer (2014) Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18? Evidence for the First-Time Voting Boost Among 16- to 25-Year-Olds in Austria, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 24:3, 351-361, DOI: [10.1080/17457289.2013.872652](https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2013.872652)



Scotland

People aged 16 and 17 were first given the right to vote at the 2014 referendum on national independence. Since 2015, 16 and 17 year olds have had the right to vote in national and local elections, and Scottish referendums. This change to voting rights has positively reshaped the political engagement of young people, with voters more likely to participate in the democratic process when included in the right to vote from the age of 16. Voting at 16 gave young people in Scotland a sense of empowerment and confidence in young people's voices and power to influence political decision-making.



United Kingdom



Following the decision to lower the voting age in Scotland, the UK Labour party has added a voting age of 16 to their draft Policy Manifesto for the next general election. In 2015 and 2017, the UK Labour party promised voting rights for 16 & 17 as their election policy, acknowledging that the democratic enfranchisement of as many people as possible is critical for a strong and united democracy.

New Zealand



In late 2022, the New Zealand Supreme Court ruled in favour of Make It 16 NZ when it found that denying 16 and 17 year olds the right to vote is unjustified age discrimination inconsistent with the country's Bill of Rights. Following this ruling, former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that New Zealand would lower the voting age, starting with local elections.

Austria



In 2007, Austria lowered the voting age to 16 in federal, presidential, and European elections. The government also launched campaigns to raise awareness and improve civic and democratic education in schools to prepare first-time voters. Since then, studies have found that political interest and participation among 16 and 17 year olds increased as a direct result of lowering the voting age.

Changes to the voting age over time

Since Federation in 1901, voting rights have changed to include people affected by government decisions of different ages throughout this country's history. Originally, the right to vote was extended to men aged 21 and over, excluding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men.

Voting rights for members of armed forces under 21 (1943)

As young men were sent to fight in World War II, the public and politicians increasingly recognised that they deserved the right to vote even though they were under the federal voting age of 21 years. In response to this sentiment, the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1943 lowered the voting age to allow members of the defence forces serving in a war zone outside Australia to vote in federal elections, including people under the age of 21.

Lowering the voting age to 18 (1973)

In the 1970s, a global movement advocating for lowering of the voting age to 18 emerged, driven by the belief that young people should have a say in political matters that affect them, especially young people being conscripted to fight in the Vietnam war. In 1973, under the Whitlam government, the federal voting age was lowered to 18 with bipartisan support.

State and Territory Governments lower the voting age (1981)

Following the success of the 1973 change, Australian states and territories began to align their voting ages with the federal standard. Over time, each state and territory amended their legislation to lower the voting age to 18 for state and territory elections. By 1981, young people could vote in all state and territory elections from the age of 18.

Marriage equality postal survey (2017)

As the Marriage Act allows 16 and 17 year olds to marry, young LGBTQIA+ advocates campaigned to have the right to participate in the marriage equality postal survey in 2017. While there were arguments made that the Special Minister of State's initial declaration would allow all people on the electoral roll to participate in the postal survey - including enrolled 16 and 17 year olds - it was later clarified that only people on the electoral roll 18 and over could participate in the postal survey.

Changes over the last 10 years (2013-2023)

Over the last 10 years, there has been growing public and political debate around lowering the voting age for federal elections. It has been included in political parties' platforms, including Federal Labor's 2016 pre-election commitment - citing that too many young Australians were not enrolling to vote and "falling through the cracks in our democracy" - bills moved in the Senate by the Australian Greens, and calls to make it 16 from independents and crossbenchers elected into Federal Parliament.

Despite multiple parliamentary and independent inquiries, and numerous pieces of academic research and recommendations over the past 50 years since the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18, the Australian Parliament has still not listened to the voices of young people and lowered the voting age to 16.

How would lowering the voting age work?



What actually needs to change?

Lowering the voting age in Australia doesn't need a referendum. In fact, there's only one law that needs to change - the Commonwealth Electoral Act, which is already regularly updated. The Australian Parliament could lower the voting age across Australia by making a simple amendment to the Electoral Act changing the age of eligibility for voting in federal elections from 18 to 16 years of age. That's it.

Would it be compulsory for 16 year olds to vote?

16 and 17 year old voters should be treated the same as everyone else. Compulsory voting is an important and valued part of Australia's democracy and there isn't any reason why it shouldn't apply to 16 and 17 year old voters.

What about enrolment?

In Australia, you can enrol to vote when you turn 16. But in the last federal election, around 400,000 eligible first-time voters didn't enrol. Research from around the world shows that 16 and 17 year olds are more likely to enrol if the voting age is lower, and more likely to vote than older first-time voters. Lowering the voting age will improve political participation due to young people enrolling and getting into the 'habit' of voting from 16.

If the voting age is lowered to 16, we would support people being eligible to enrol at 15.

How would the Australian electorate change?

Roughly 600,000 young Australians would be added to the electoral roll. On average, this would be an increase of 3.6% to the number of voters in each Australian electorate.

Will 16 year olds be fined if they forget to vote?

Compulsory voting is vital to our democracy, but we believe that the Australian Electoral Commission should be able to issue a warning instead of a fine for first time voters who don't vote. This will help educate first time voters about the right to vote, without requiring them to pay a fine they might not be able to afford.



Let's Make it 16.

We want to live in a world where everyone feels like they have a say in government decisions that shape their lives and futures. Democracy is a privilege and a right that so many Australians enjoy. Yet for no clear reason, 16 and 17 year olds like us are excluded.

There is overwhelming evidence and successful overseas examples that show how lowering the voting age will be a move in the right direction for Australian democracy. Lowering the voting age to 16 in Australia will not only make our democracy function better; it will also create a generation of Australians who feel more confident about participating in their system of government.

Allowing 16 year olds to vote means that we're allowing more already engaged voices to be heard where it matters most, strengthening our democracy and helping the Australian Government to make better policy decisions. This benefits everyone.

Our generation is politically interested and aware. We simply want a say in the decisions that affect our lives and futures. Many politicians and decision makers ignore us because we can't vote.

It's time for us to participate, to have our voices heard, to be represented. Let us vote, and we promise you - our democracy and society will only benefit.

It's time to make it 16.

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