

Foreword

This is the first report of a series of connected studies undertaken by *Article 12 in Scotland*. Each study consults with Scottish young people, aged 12 - 18 years, on issues related to Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - *The Child's right to express an opinion on matters that affect them*.

This study presents a national "snap-shot" view of young people's opinions on the current voting age in Scotland and how this impacts on their ability to actively participate in meaningful and major political processes.

Report findings successfully challenge the myth that young people have low levels of interest in politics and political issues; with young people consistently citing the lack of political information and education available as the main reason for "voting apathy".

" We are given lots of responsibilities or potential opportunities for responsibilities yet have absolutely no say on what goes on or who runs our country Young people should be more aware and involved in politics in preparation for the real world. We are only allowed in when someone else (who we don't choose) decides to let us in" **(Female, age 16, South Lanarkshire)**.

The Scottish Youth Parliament, Youth Fora, Pupil Councils, proposals for a Children's Commissioner for Scotland and the introduction of "Citizenship" to the curriculum will all work towards bringing political information and education nearer to young people, however this is just the first step.

Young people surveyed frequently questioned the inconsistency and ambiguity of the law; "You can marry at sixteen - so why not vote" (*Male, age 14, Aberdeen*), and they make the connection between societies failure to include them in decision making processes and the voting age with ease; "I don't think society listens to young people because we can't change anything in society; because we don't have a vote". (*Save the Children, 1999*).

Article 12 in Scotland is aware that the survey methods used in this research do not guarantee that the report is without bias in terms of social and economic background and ethnicity; however, we believe that the strength and depth of opinion outlined in the Report identifies issues and concerns worthy of further investigation.

Lynne Tammi
National Co-ordinator
Article 12 in Scotland

Introduction

This Report is the result of research undertaken by *Article 12 in Scotland*; a youth led Children's Rights Organisation supported by Save the Children.

It examines the views and interests of a sample selection, diverse in terms of age, gender and geographical area, of Scottish young people aged 12 - 18 years, regarding the current voting age in Scotland.

It uses party political statements and contemporary research to support and enhance the findings of the survey research.



Context and Motivation - why we undertook this Survey

Article 12 in Scotland is an independent youth led charity, supported by Save the Children, based on Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - *the child's right to express their views and opinions on matters which affect them.*

We are a national network of young people, aged 12 to 18, who believe in expressing our views at every opportunity, on anything we care about. But most importantly, we believe in **CREATING** the opportunities, as all too often adults just do not want to listen to what young people have to say.

At our national residential in August 2000 we identified **LOWERING THE VOTING AGE** as one of our campaign themes for three key reasons:

- Our belief that the current voting age of 18 years is inherently unjust; you can marry, work, and pay taxes at 16 yet you cannot have a say in who runs the country and the decisions that are made on your behalf

- To challenge the view held by many decision-makers that young people have low levels of interest in politics and politicians (Park, A. 1995) and to highlight the strength of opinion amongst young people around the issue of lowering the voting age in Scotland
- To identify current thought and opinion, about lowering the voting age, of main political parties active within the Scottish Parliament.

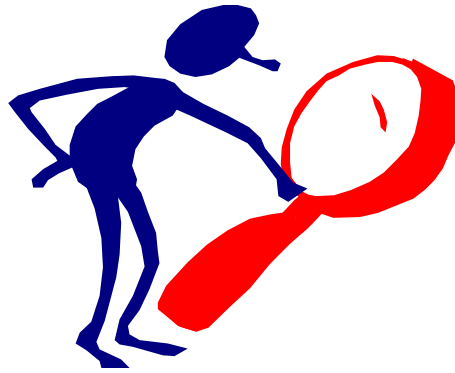
Methodology - What we did and how we did it

Aims and Scope of Research

Aware that our network is not currently representative of all young people in Scotland we embarked on a process of surveying young people, aged 12 - 18 years, throughout the country to enable us to elicit a wide range of thought and opinion on the current voting age in Scotland.

We asked young people to provide a limited amount of personal information (anecdotal evidence indicates that requests for in-depth personal data are often considered invasive and can result in low response rates). This information was considered necessary to ensure that our findings were a fair representation of Scottish young people in terms of age, gender, status (student, in work etc.) and geographical area.

For reasons mentioned above the survey does not consider social and economic background or ethnicity factors.



Research Design and Methods

A Self-completion survey (**appendix 1**) that sought both quantitative and qualitative data was devised. A total of 1700 surveys were disseminated as follows:

50 copies were distributed to all 32 Local Authorities in Scotland. Each Local Authority was asked to undertake the survey with one, pre-selected by Article 12 in Scotland, Secondary School Year Class and one Youth Group from their area.

50 Copies were distributed to local Article 12 Groups in Aberdeen, Dundee and Edinburgh. Article 12 members undertook the survey with their peers in a variety of settings: on the street, in youth centres, at school.

We contacted political parties active in the Scottish Parliament, requesting a statement of their stance on the issue of Lowering the Voting Age in Scotland.

We undertook a literature review, via the Internet, libraries and contact with organisations with an interest in Youth Rights, to find written evidence to support our campaign.

Findings

Self-completion Surveys

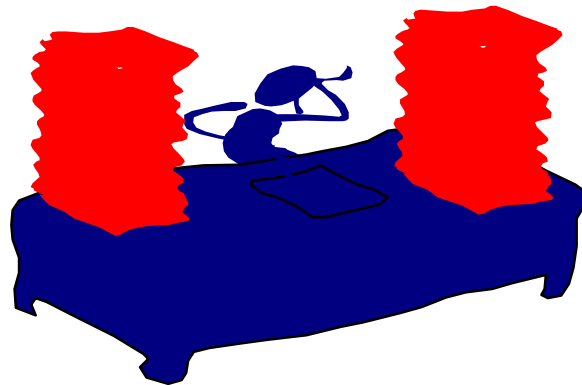
Response Rate

In total 898 (53%) completed responses were received, a good response rate for surveys of this type. (Babbie, E. 1992).

Of these responses 421 (47%) were male and 477 (53%) were female.

A good balance of urban/rural participants has been realised, with the four Scottish Local Authority City Councils (Aberdeen, Dundee, Glasgow and Edinburgh), and sixteen rural/urban Local Authorities ranging from Moray Council in the North East to Dumfries and Galloway Council in the South West responding to our request. A response rate, in geographical terms, of 63%.

Young people from throughout the target age range of 12 - 18 years are fairly represented, achieved by pre-selecting school year classes and targeting youth groups.



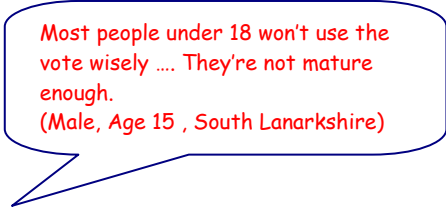
Responses - what young people said

Question One

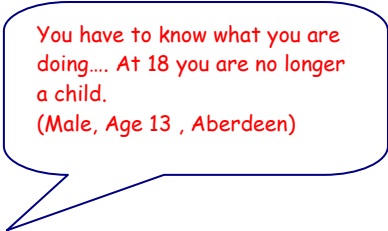
The survey asked the question: **Do you think the voting age should remain at 18?** 153 males and 181 females (37.2% of total respondents) said that they thought the voting age **SHOULD** remain at 18.

The following were the most common reasons given by those who answered "YES":

People under the age of 18 are not mature enough to vote: 157 (47%)

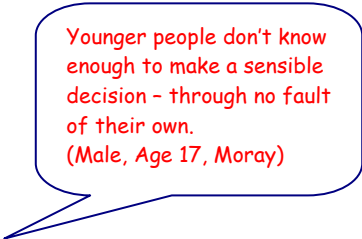


Most people under 18 won't use the vote wisely They're not mature enough.
(Male, Age 15 , South Lanarkshire)

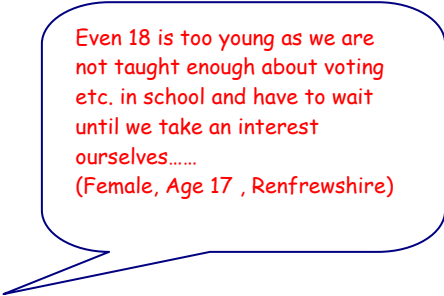


You have to know what you are doing.... At 18 you are no longer a child.
(Male, Age 13 , Aberdeen)

Young people don't know enough about politics: 86 (25.7%)



Younger people don't know enough to make a sensible decision - through no fault of their own.
(Male, Age 17, Moray)



Even 18 is too young as we are not taught enough about voting etc. in school and have to wait until we take an interest ourselves.....
(Female, Age 17 , Renfrewshire)

Young people are not interested in voting: 19 (5.7%)

Because most people under 18 don't really care about voting.
(Male, Age 15, Dumfries and Galloway)

I don't want to vote at my age.
(Female, Age 14, Angus)

Other reasons: 30 (9%)

The system is fine as it is.
(Male, Age 15, Inverclyde)

Governments would expose the vulnerability of younger people and appeal to their less mature side to try and gain votes.
(Male, Age 17, Renfrewshire)

42 respondents (12.6%) chose not to give their reasons for stating that the voting age should remain at 18.

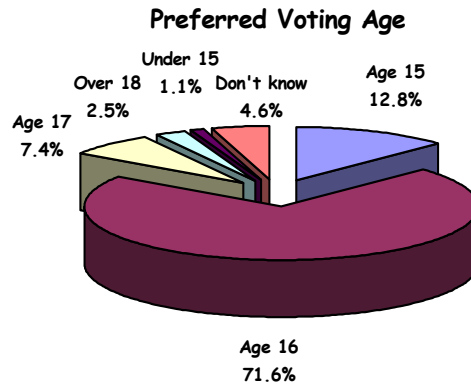
Question Two

For those who answered "NO" to question one the survey asked the question: **At what age do you think you should be able to vote? - 15 16 17 Other.**

268 males and 296 females (62.8% of total respondents) said that they thought the voting age should NOT remain at 18.

Preferred Voting Age

Total respondents: 564



Age 15: 72 (12.8%), Age 16: 404 (71.6%), Age 17: 42 (7.4%)

Higher than 18: 14(2.5%), Lower than 15: 6 (1.1%)

No preference 26 (4.6%)

The following were the most common reasons given by those who thought the voting age should **NOT** remain at 18:

The inconsistency of the law for young people: 256 (45.4%)

The age of consent and ability to work are at lower ages than the voting age - this doesn't make sense. Changes have to be made - Today, young people are more aware of their status within their country.

(Female, Age 14, Glasgow)

I pay 20% income tax to a government I have no say in choosing.

(Male, Age 16, South Lanarkshire)

Young people under 18 are mature enough to vote: 127 (22.5%)

At 16 you are expected to be old enough to make the decision to work or to marry so why not to vote?
(Male, Age 14, Stirling)

You are old enough to join the army at 16 so why do you have to wait until 18 to vote You might be dead by then.
(Male, Age 13, Glasgow)

Young people should have the right to vote: 102 (18.1%)

16 is when you are considered an adult for most things and so your opinion should count now instead of waiting for two years.
(Male, Age 16, East Ayrshire)

Children should be able to get say.
(Female, Age 14, Dumfries and Galloway)

Other reasons: 26 (4.6%)

People shouldn't vote until they are 21 - by this age they will be more knowledgeable about politics than they are now.
(Female, Age 17, Renfrewshire)

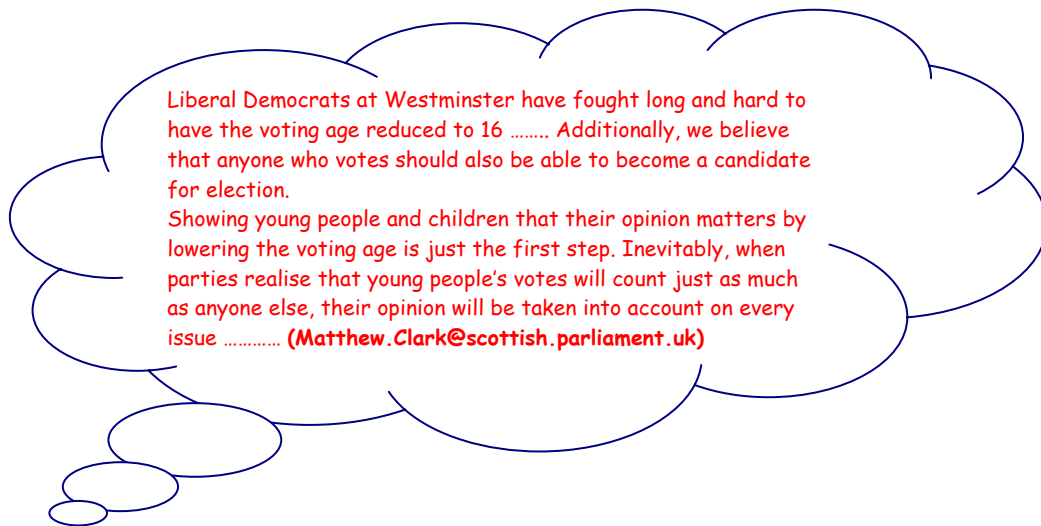
They are not listening to us - we should get to vote at 12 so they will do things for us.
(Male, Age 12, Dundee)

53 respondents (9.4%) chose not to offer an opinion on why they thought the voting age should NOT remain at age 18.

What the Political Parties said

We asked, via e-mail, all political parties active in the Scottish Parliament to provide us with a statement regarding their views on **Lowering the Voting Age**. Listed below is what they said:

Scottish Liberal Democrats



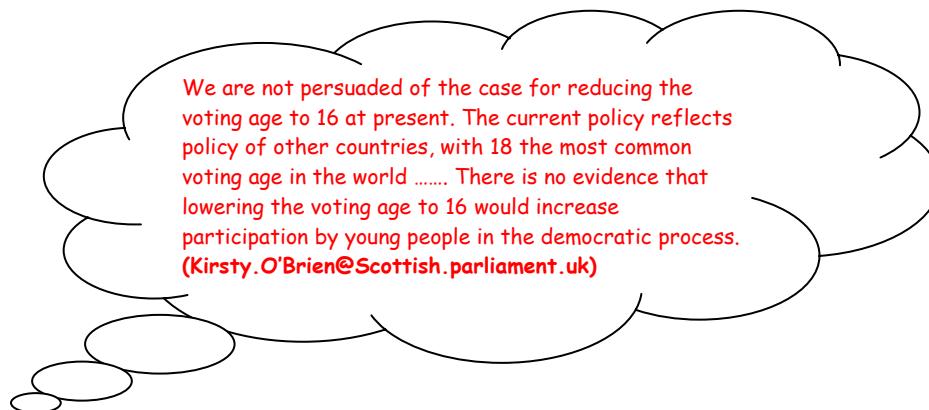
Scottish Green Party



The Scottish National Party



The Scottish Labour Party



Literature Review - evidence in support of lowering the voting age

A MORI poll carried out in 1977 before the general election, involving young people from Scotland, England and Wales, asking about voting intentions, found that just under one third (31%) of respondents would be certain not to vote at all. The main reasons given were a lack of interest in politics and not knowing enough about the political process.

(MORI, 1977: in Dorian et. al. 2000).

Following the Scottish Parliament elections, a survey was undertaken of the voting figures for the Scottish population aged 18 and over. Of those aged 18 - 21 years, 33% did not vote and 46% of those aged 22 - 25 years did not vote. As above, the main reasons given were a lack of interest in or understanding of the political process. (Dorian et. al., 2000).

Recent research supported by the *Joseph Rowntree Foundation* looks at the political behaviour and interests of young people aged 14 -24 years. Young people surveyed identified a number of issues that they felt prevented them from participating in the political process. These included the limited number of opportunities for young people to actively participate, leading to feelings of powerlessness and exclusion. In addition, young people saw themselves as lacking knowledge and understanding of politics and as a consequence did not feel confident enough to become involved. Young people were of the view that politics was a complex and alien subject that was hard to understand. (White, et.al., 2000).

The Children's Rights Alliance for England in The REAL Democratic Deficit states: " By the time they reach their sixteenth birthday most young people will have spent a total of over 1500 days - or about six solid years - in school, yet they are still not considered fit to vote. At sixteen, they are legally permitted to buy cigarettes and alcohol and can have sexual relationships with people of the opposite sex. They can leave home, get a job, pay taxes and get married with parental consent. But still no vote. (Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2000).

Research undertaken by *Save the Children Scotland* in 1998, with 326 young people from throughout Scotland, highlights that there is confusion about the rights of 16 and 17 year olds and their position in relation to the family, the state and working life. Additionally, young people feel that it is unfair that 16 and 17 year olds can be paid less than their 18+ colleagues, whilst they still have to pay national insurance and taxes. The fact that they cannot vote, and feelings that they are rarely consulted on matters which concern them makes young people see the law as inconsistent, ambiguous and unfair. (Ritchie, A. 1999).

Conclusion

The findings of the survey research successfully challenge the myth that young people have low levels of interest in politics and political issues.

Almost two thirds (62.8%) of young people surveyed thought that the current voting age was unjust and inconsistent, in terms of the law for young people, "At 16 you are expected to be old enough to make the decision to work or to marry, so why not vote?" **(Male, age 14, Stirling)**. 71.6% of respondents in this category thought the voting age should be lowered to 16.

Of the 37.2% who thought the voting age should remain at 18 almost three quarters (72.7%) cited a lack of confidence and maturity and understanding of politics and political processes as their main reasons for wishing to retain the current voting age; "..... Young people should be more aware and involved in politics in preparation for the real world" **(Female, age 16, South Lanarkshire)**.

Less than six percent of total respondents said that they were not interested in politics or voting.

All major political parties are committed to modern and democratic government, which is inclusive of young people. Three of the parties active in the Scottish Parliament have voiced their support for lowering the voting age to 16 and creating further opportunities for young people to actively participate in decision making processes.

The literature review consolidates the findings of the survey research. Young people from throughout Scotland and elsewhere in the UK consistently question the ambiguity of the law for young people. **(Ritchie, A. 1999)**.

Research looking at the political interests of young people aged 14 - 24 years across ten locations in Scotland, England and Wales confirms a lack of knowledge and understanding about politics and the lack of opportunities for young people to engage in the political process until the age of 18 as major contributors to low levels of political interest amongst young people. (White, et. al. 2000).

Despite a number of new initiatives to include young people in decision making processes, The Scottish Youth Parliament, Youth Fora, Pupil Councils, many young people still feel excluded from "adult" life; "We are only allowed in when someone else (who we don't choose) decides to let us in". (Female, age 16, South Lanarkshire).

What next?

The survey methods used in this research do not guarantee that the report is without bias in terms of social and economic background and ethnicity; however, we believe that the strength and depth of opinion outlined in this report identifies issues and concerns worthy of further investigation.

The following recommendations are suggested for consideration by those responsible for ensuring that young people have the right to express an opinion on matters that affect them:

- Realistic and meaningful opportunities for further research and debate around the current voting age should be created
- Politics should be introduced to the school curriculum, as early as secondary year one, as an integral part of an education for citizenship programme
- New initiatives which aim to encourage young people to participate in decision making processes should explore ways of ensuring representation from all backgrounds, in terms of age, race, gender and ability, and aim to be reflective of issues that are important to young people.

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