Voting age to be lowered to 16 by next general election

Sixteen and 17-year-olds would be able to vote at the next general election, under government plans to lower the voting age.

The pledge is [part of a raft of measures](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restoring-trust-in-our-democracy-our-strategy-for-modern-and-secure-elections/restoring-trust-in-our-democracy-our-strategy-for-modern-and-secure-elections) being introduced through a new Elections Bill.

Other changes include expanding forms of voter ID to include UK-issued bank cards, moving towards automatic voter registration and tightening rules on political donations to protect against foreign interference.

The minimum voting age is already 16 for local council elections in Scotland and Wales, and elections to the Senedd and Scottish Parliament.

However for other elections, including to the UK Parliament, local elections in England and all elections in Northern Ireland, it is 18.

Lowering the voting age to 16 across the UK would be the biggest change to the electorate since it was reduced from 21 to 18 in 1969.

A pledge to lower the voting age to 16 was included in Labour's election manifesto but it did not feature in last summer's King's Speech, which sets out the government's priorities for the months ahead.

The government has now confirmed it is planning to introduce the change in time for 16 and 17-year-olds to vote at the next general election, which is due to take place by 2029 but could be called earlier than this.

Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner told the BBC: "I was a mum at 16, you can go to work, you can pay your taxes and I think that people should have a vote at 16."

However, Conservative shadow minister Paul Holmes said the government's position was "hopelessly confused".

"Why does this government think a 16-year-old can vote but not be allowed to buy a lottery ticket, an alcoholic drink, marry, or go to war, or even stand in the elections they're voting in?" he asked in the Commons.

Critics of the idea argue it could benefit Labour as young people are more likely to vote for left-wing parties.

However, polls suggest Labour's youth vote is at risk of being chipped away at – by the Greens, Liberal Democrats and Reform UK.

In the UK 16 and 17-year-olds make up only around 3% of the population aged 16 and over so researchers say the impact on overall vote share is likely to be negligible, particularly as turnout tends to be lower for younger age groups.

The government has rejected claims it is introducing the change because it will benefit Labour.

"This isn't about trying to rig votes for a particular party. This is about democracy and giving young people an opportunity to have a say," Rayner said.

Voter ID

Among the other plans set out by the government are expanding the list of accepted ID to vote in Great Britain to UK-issued bank cards.

Labour opposed the introduction of voter ID under the Conservatives in 2023 but in its election manifesto the party only promised to "address inconsistencies" in the rules "that prevent legitimate voters from voting", rather than scrapping the policy entirely.

Some 4% of people who did not vote at last year's general election said this was because of voter ID rules, according to the Electoral Commission.

But the Conservatives suggested allowing bank cards as voter ID could "undermine the security of the ballot box".

The government said it would also work towards creating an automated voter registration scheme over the coming years, with safeguards so that people are aware of their registration status and can opt-out if they wish.

Currently people in the UK need to register in order to vote, which can be done online or using a paper form.

The Electoral Commission estimates that nearly eight million people are incorrectly registered or missing from the electoral register entirely, with the issue disproportionately affecting private renters and young people.

In a 2023 report it suggested an automated system could involve organisations like the Passport Office providing Electoral Registration Officers with the names and addresses of people eligible to vote so they can be registered.

The government said its plans would mean eligible voters could be directly added to the electoral register through better sharing of data between government agencies.

Exactly how this would work has not been confirmed yet, with the government saying it plans to test different methods.

The National Union of Students described lowering the voting age as "a major victory for young people".

It called on the government to make it as easy as possible for 16 and 17-year-olds to vote by scrapping voter ID laws, implementing automatic voter registration and promoting political literacy in schools and colleges.

Foreign donors

Meanwhile, the government said changes to the rules around political donations would help to tackle foreign interference.

Currently political parties can only accept donations from individuals registered on a UK electoral register or UK-registered companies which carry out business in the country.

However, there have been concerns that foreign nationals could get around the rules by donating through a foreign company that is registered in the UK.

The issue came to the forefront at the end of last year, [when it was reported that US billionaire Elon Musk could make a donation to Reform UK](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1kez8d2dygo) through the British arm of his social media company X.

Under the plans, political parties would have to assess companies they receive donations from.

Companies would have to make sufficient income in the UK or Ireland to donate.

The government said its proposals would close loopholes that mean a new company, registered only recently without even a single day of trade, owned by anyone, could still donate to a political party.

The Liberal Democrats welcomed votes at 16 as "a no-brainer" but said "ministers must go much further to close the door to foreign oligarchs interfering in British politics".