



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

VOTING AGE SURVEY

Key findings from the WA Commissioner for Children
and Young People's "Voting Age" Survey 2024



Acknowledgement of Country

The Commissioner for Children and Young People proudly acknowledges and pays respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands across Western Australia and acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation upon whose lands the Commissioner's office is located.

She recognises the continuing connection to culture, lands, skies and waters, families and communities for all the Aboriginal peoples. The Commissioner and her team also pay their respects to all Elders, past, present and emerging leaders. The Commissioner and her team recognise the knowledge, insights and capabilities of Aboriginal people, and pay respect to Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.

Who is the Commissioner for Children and Young People?

The Commissioner for Children and Young People (CCYP) has an important statutory role to monitor and review written laws, draft laws, policies, practices, and services affecting the wellbeing of children and young people under 18. She has a statutory duty to regularly consult with children and young people about issues that affect them and to promote the participation of children and young people in the making of decisions that affect their lives. The Commissioner also has the responsibility to encourage government and non-government agencies to seek the participation of children and young people in their work.

More information about the Commissioner and the work of her office is available from:
ccyp.wa.gov.au.

November 2024

A note about language

For the purposes of this report, the term ‘Aboriginal’ encompasses Western Australia’s diverse language groups and recognises Torres Strait Islanders who live in Western Australia. The use of the term ‘Aboriginal’ in this way is not intended to imply equivalence between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, although similarities do exist.

Disclaimer

This report has been prepared by the Commissioner for Children and Young People and is intended to provide the views of the children and young people who participated to the “Voting Age” survey. Any errors of omission or commission are the responsibility of the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

A selection of quotations is included in this report on the relevant topics. The quotations are generally unedited to ensure the voice of the child or young person is authentically represented. Editing has only been done where necessary for clarity, understanding or for confidentiality.

Alternative formats

On request, large print or alternative formats can be obtained from
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Message from the Commissioner



All children should have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and have their opinions taken into account. These rights are supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to this convention every child or young person should have an opportunity to voice their opinion on topics that affect them.

There has been growing discussion and movement by organisations within Australia to lower the voting age to 16 following the submission of a Bill put forward by the Greens in 2018 which supports this premise. Those opposing the change, question whether young people are politically aware or have the capacity to vote, yet young people aged 16 and 17 can leave school, work, pay taxes, and obtain their license. Significant issues such as climate change, healthcare, and taxes, are being decided upon without the input of the young people who will be directly affected by these decisions.

In 2020, three in five young Victorians aged 16-17 believed they should be allowed to vote in elections. Whilst there is numerous research supporting the voting age to be lowered in other countries such as Scotland, Brazil, and Austria, few other studies have managed to explore young people's views on this important topic. There is yet to be a similar survey conducted within Western Australia, and it is vital that children and young people be consulted on this issue.

There is a clear gap within this area of research, and my office sought to fill that gap by asking our young people their thoughts through our 'Voting Age' survey. This survey represents the views of a diverse range of Western Australian young people on lowering the age to vote.

This statewide, anonymous online survey was accessible to any young person aged up to 24, not only in Western Australia but across Australia, for a duration of 10 weeks, from July 17, 2024, to September 20, 2024.

Participants were invited to share their views on the topic and identify key issues that are important to them. I am delighted to present the key findings from this survey and hope these results serve as valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders as they work to address challenges and implement initiatives that align with the expressed needs and priorities of young Western Australians.



Jacqueline McGowan-Jones
Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

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Why the 'Voting Age' Survey?

It is evident that there are some young people who feel passionately about lowering the voting age, such as the youth movement, 'Make it 16', a non-partisan campaign advocating for the vote to be extended to 16 and 17-year-olds in Australia led by a group of people under the age of 18, who are currently running a petition to support lowering the voting age. However, this does not necessarily reflect the views of all young people and those who may not wish to vote may not be heard.

The 'Voting Age' survey was developed to provide an opportunity for Australian children and young people to share and explain their opinions on changing the voting age and identify which political areas are of interest to them.

The CCYP "Voting Age" survey was accessible to all Australian children and young people under the age of 24. The responses to the survey yielded invaluable insights into the experiences of children and young people from within WA and the rest of Australia. It is our hope that the information gathered from this survey will serve as a guiding resource for the development of legislation, and implementation of practices that support young people's right to vote in Australia.

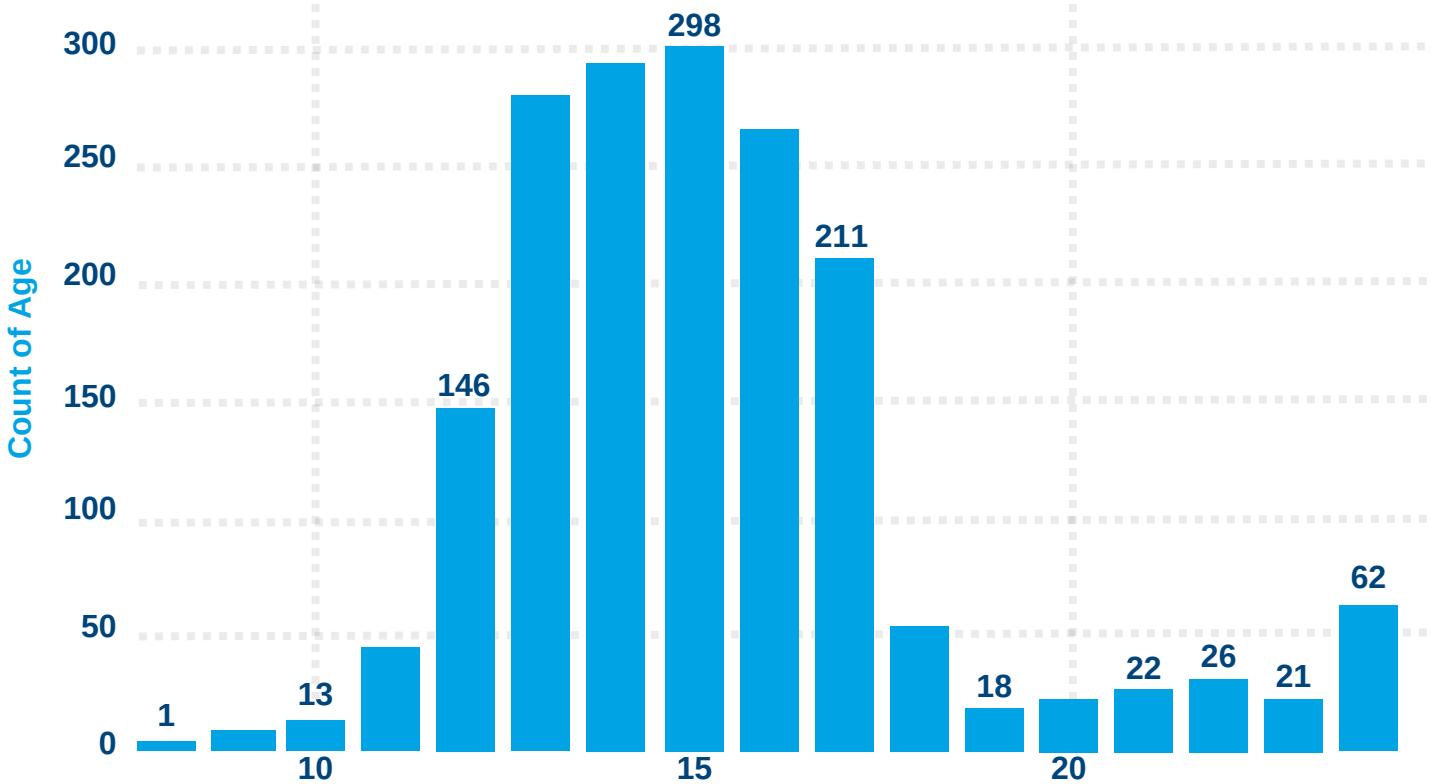
Profile of Participants

With the support of key stakeholders, the survey reached almost 2000 young people from across Australia, with 1780 complete responses. We have analysed the answers to demographic questions regarding age, gender, and geographic location.

Age

The survey was open to all young people aged 24 years and under, however, the vast majority of participants were aged 12-17. Of the 1780 participants, 61% were 15 years or younger, whilst 39% were 16 or older.

Age of Participants

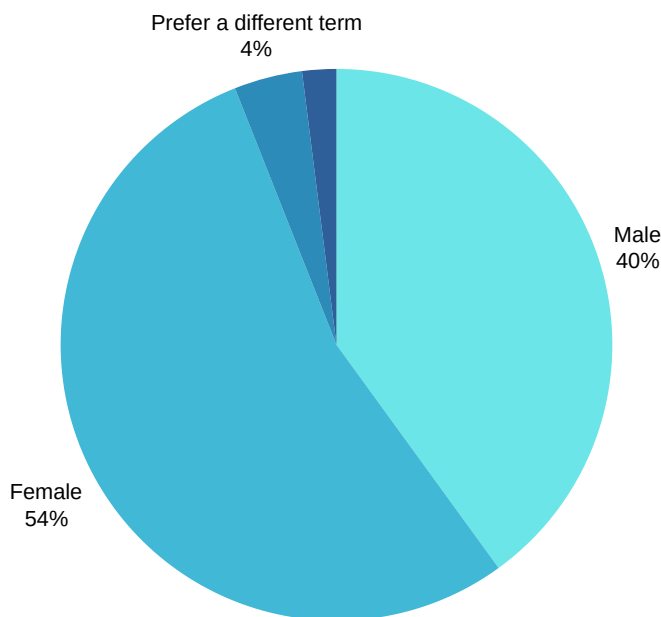


Age	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	Total
Count of Age	1	6	13	44	146	280	294	298	264	211	52	18	22	22	26	21	62	1780

Gender

Participants were asked “How do you describe yourself?” and could select either “Boy”, “Girl”, “I prefer a different term” with an open-text field to elaborate if they wished, or they could choose “Prefer not to say” if they did not wish to provide an answer.

Just over half of the participants identified as female (54%), whilst two-fifths identified as male (40%), and 4% preferred a different term. Those who identified ‘in another way’ described their gender identity in various ways, including non-binary, gender fluid, demi-girl, demi-boy, and queer.



Geographic location

All participants were asked for their postcode which has allowed us to group participants into geographic locations across Australia. Postcodes which were incorrect or incomplete were removed.

A majority of participants were located within the Metropolitan (52%), Pilbara (17%), and South-West (13%) regions of Western Australia. Participants also originated from the Great Southern, Midwest, Wheatbelt, Goldfields, Kimberley, and Peel regions of WA. There were 22 participants from other states within Australia, including Queensland, NSW, and Victoria.

Location	Participants
Christmas Island	1
Goldfields	37
Great Southern	118
Kimberley	19
Midwest	65
NSW	6
Peel	12
Perth Metro	927
Pilbara	299
Queensland	8
South Australia	2
South-West	223
Tasmania	1
Victoria	4
Wheatbelt	39
Total	1761

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected via a survey during July 17, 2024, to September 20, 2024, coinciding with term 3 in Western Australian schools. As part of the term 3 HASS curriculum is Civics, we were able to suggest to schools to integrate the survey into their Civics lessons. The survey was promoted through CCYP via our social media, the official CCYP website and sharing the link with teachers and schools. The survey was also shared through the social media of our external stakeholders, the Western Australian Electoral Commission, Make It 16, and the Federation for Young People.

All responses were provided anonymously as the information and data collected was de-identified. Participants were only asked demographic questions regarding their postcode, their gender, and age. Participants who identified as under 16 were asked 'Would you like to be able to vote when you are 16?', whilst participants who were 16 and over were asked 'Would you have liked to have been able to vote when you turned 16?'. All participants were then asked to share why they chose that answer.

Participants were given the option to complete additional questions which asked them to identify the political topics they cared about that they wish young people could have more of a say in. Lastly, participants were provided statements regarding their beliefs surrounding 16-year-olds involvement and understanding of politics. All survey questions can be found on page 44.

More than 2000 young people accessed the survey, however, responses which had failed to answer whether the question regarding voting at 16 were considered incomplete and were removed from the final analysis. Responses were manually screened to identify and exclude incomplete and inappropriate responses, including adults who had falsely presented themselves as children or young people in the survey. This left 1780 complete responses.

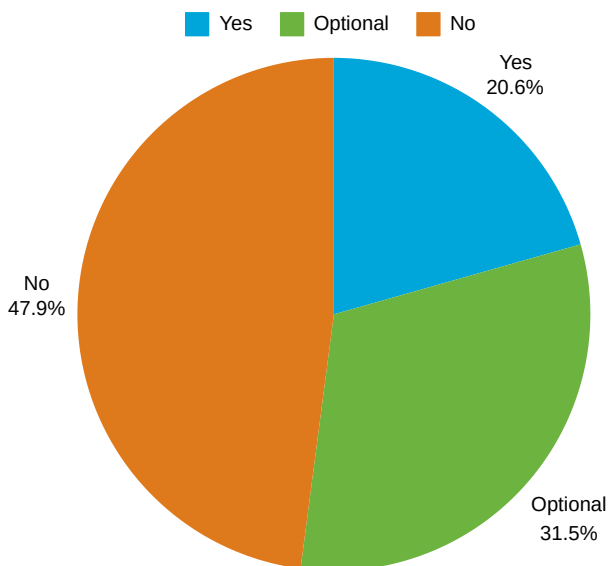
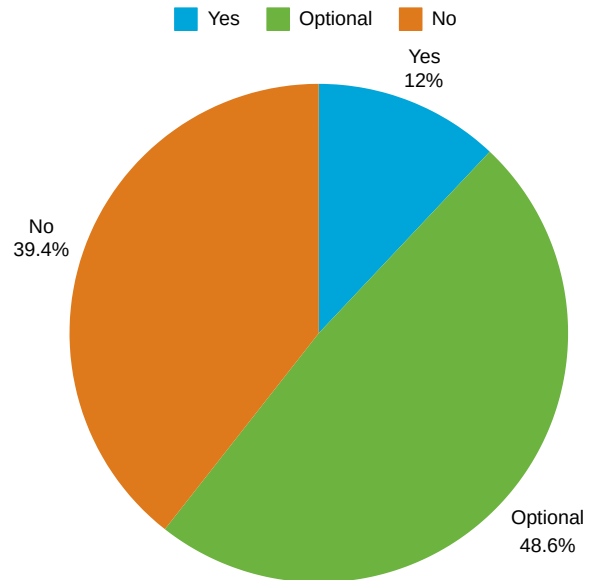
Microsoft Excel and Power BI were used to analyse the quantitative data. This report is the product of careful review and analyses of results from the open-text questions, which have undergone a thematic data analysis, using Excel, to identify the key themes that emerged from responses, including direct quotes from participants.

Should 16-Year-Olds Be Given the Right to Vote?

Insights from Young People

Voting at 16

More than half of participants who were 15 or younger identified they would like to vote, with 49% (525) identifying they think it should be optional and 12% (130) answering they should all have the right to vote. Whilst 39% (426) responded that they did not want to vote at 16.



Young people who were 16 and older were more evenly split with 52% identifying they thought they should have been able to vote at 16, and 48% (335) responding they should not have had been able to vote at 16. Of the slightly larger majority who thought they should have been able to vote, 31.5% (220) identified it should have been optional, and 20.6% (144) believing it should be required at 16.

Why 16-year-olds should be allowed to vote

More than 1000 participants responded that that the voting age should be lowered to 16 or should be given the option to vote at 16, with 930 providing a qualitative response when asked to share their reason as to why 16-year-olds should be allowed to vote. From these responses, several themes emerged surrounding young people contributing to society, being mature and capable, as well as the possible benefits lowering the voting age may have. These themes will be further discussed using quotes from the participants.

Old Enough to Drive, Work, and Pay Taxes? Old Enough to Vote!

Young people can be held criminally responsible for their actions at 10¹, and consent to significant personal decisions at 16² such as engaging in sexual relationships, yet are not supported with the right to vote. It appears as though the legal system acknowledges that they have the capacity for moral judgment and accountability in areas like criminal responsibility, assuming they understand the consequences of their actions. Similarly, by allowing them to consent to sexual relationships, society acknowledges their emotional and cognitive maturity. Young people who were supportive of lowering the voting age argued that young people are already expected to have maturity in these areas, and as such are mature enough to be able to have their say on key issues that affect their country.

If the criminal age of responsibility is 10 years old, if I can legally have sex with anybody I choose at 16, if I can live independently at 15 - I should have the right to vote about decisions that directly affect me.” (Girl, 17, Metro)



“16-year-olds pay taxes, get jobs and learn how to drive a car. Some people even start companies and make major changes in the world around them. It feels unfair that 16-year-olds are not being allowed to vote and have a say without anybody telling them, “Man, you did terrible!” even though they pay taxes and have concerns of the community around them.” (Girl, 12, Metro)

“If a 16-year-old works, they are taxed. They should have the right to decide how such money is spent. Also, it allows for parties/candidates to form relevant policies that concern young people, such as increased school funding and increased funding for sports groups.” (Boy, 17, Metro)





“16-year-olds are trusted with many big choices that affect their lives. They can choose to have jobs, drive, have sex, apply for their own homes, have access to banking facilities, and so much more. All of these things they can choose, are involved in, and are therefore active citizens of the country. Young people aren't represented enough and they should be able to choose to have a say in matters that affect their world and therefore vote.” (Girl, 14, Metro)

“Because we are old enough to be found guilty of a crime, we're old enough to drive, to work, to consent, to make our own medical decisions. It seems illogical that we don't have a say in our government when we are so affected by policy.”
(Non-binary, 16 years old, Metro)



As many 16-year-olds are employed and contributing to the economy, they believe they should be able to have a say in how their taxes are spent.



“At 16, you are more than capable of making coherent and rational decisions. At 16, you are trusted to work and contribute to our economy through taxes. At 16, you are deeply invested in the issues that shape your future. At 16, you possess the power to drive meaningful change before it’s too late. At 16, you deserve a voice. At 16, you deserve a vote.” (Girl, 15, Metro)

“If under 18yr olds can work and they pay tax, they should have a say in what that tax goes into.” (Girl, 15, Metro)

“If we are paying taxes we should be able to vote. It’s important to have the option to have a say when contributing to society and the economy.” (Girl, 17, Metro)

“If the consent age is 16, we are allowed to work, and legally drive on roads - I think we deserve the right to vote.” (Girl, 16, Metro)

“We are allowed to drive, work and contribute to the economy yet we still can’t vote in political elections when it all affects us.” (Boy, 15, Metro)

“If I am expected to pay tax, then I should be able to vote for the government and how they spend my money. I am already a member for the Labor party at 17, and I can vote in internal party votes, so it makes no sense that I cannot vote for them at the polls when I am able to stand outside the polling centre and hand out how to vote cards, or even act as a scrutineer on other peoples vote with the AEC.” (17, Girl, metro)

“We are able to work, consent to sex, drive, etc. and the government situation of our country affects us in a great deal but currently we have limited representation and choice in what happens.” (Boy, 17, South-West)



16-year-olds are mature, capable, and interested

Those who supported lowering the voting age felt as though perceptions of adolescents as immature was unfair, and that they believed they were mature enough to come to a thoughtful and informed decision. Despite stereotypical views describing teenagers as being immature, literature demonstrates there is significant variation regarding levels of maturity in adolescence. This is influenced by a number of factors including intelligence, experience of life events, family dynamics, and fit with their environment.³

“There are a few 16-year-olds out there who are already mature and feel confident in their status in society, who believe that they should be allowed to vote and voice their opinion on the laws that shape the world around them. Although most 16-year-olds are not yet capable or ready to have their say, a small portion rightly believe that the choice to vote should be provided.”

(Boy, 13, Pilbara)

“At 16, you are more than capable of making coherent and rational decisions. At 16, you are trusted to work and contribute to our economy through taxes. At 16, you are deeply invested in the issues that shape your future. At 16, you possess the power to drive meaningful change before it's too late. At 16, you deserve a voice. At 16, you deserve a vote.” (Girl, 15, Metro)

“Because we are mature and old enough to have our opinion in an election or referendum.”

(Boy, 16, Metro)



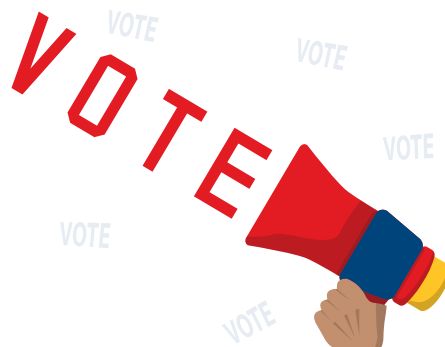
They also argued that many young people are not only interested in politics but are well-informed about societal and political issues. However, when discussing the possibility of giving 16-year-olds the right to vote, it was noted that not all young people are equally engaged or invested in political matters. This reflects results from 2021 National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship scores which demonstrate that whilst many young people are concerned about political issues such as pollution, climate change and water shortages, only 38 per cent of Year 10 students were at or above the proficient standard when assessed on Civics and Citizenship.⁴

“I think that at least a large collection of 16-year-olds should vote as a lot of them have many good ideas and opinions on how to make the community better for themselves and the people around them.” (Girl, 13, Pilbara)

“People that are aware and well researched in the politics of today would gain advantage from voting.” (Girl, 14, Pilbara)

“Because some take politics very seriously and want to vote but other don’t know anything about it and don’t want to think about it.” (Girl, 15, Pilbara)

“I believe people 16 and above should vote as a lot more of the younger generation these days are starting to take politics a lot more seriously. If young people are passionate and want to make a difference in their future, then why not allow them to vote.” (Girl, 24, Wheatbelt)



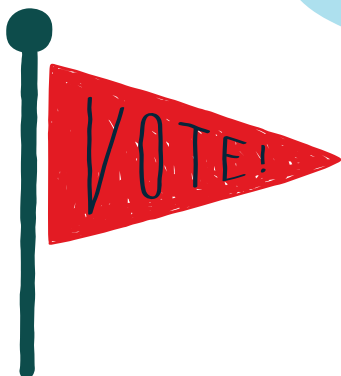
Participants questioned whether there was a significant difference between 16 and 18, with some suggesting that they were just as mature as 18-year-olds they had interacted with. Whilst there are significant individual differences, overall research suggests that cognitive capacity, determines the amount and level of information a person is able to process, is thought to reach adult levels at 16.⁵ When asked to present complex argument surrounding lowering the voting age, 16 and 17 year olds were found to provide more complex and integrative reasoning when compared to adults, demonstrating that they possessed the cognitive capacity and political knowledge to vote.⁶ Further, in Germany where the voting age was lowered, the voting quality of 16 and 17 year olds were just as reliable as adults, indicating that their voting aligned with their interests.⁷ However, psychosocial or emotional maturity, does not develop to adult levels until they are approximately early to mid-20s.⁸

Further, they believed that they were equally as impacted by societal issues, and due to the significant prevalence of social media, some young people also made the argument that they were more aware of societal issues than previous generations were at 16. Whilst they may be exposed to a large amount of information on social media sites, this can also lead to misinformation, as not all information posted on social media is reliable, and less than half of the adolescents surveyed would seek out additional evidence.⁹ Adolescents heavily rely on social media apps for their information, with recent research demonstrating that social media sites including Tiktok, Instagram, and Youtube, were used more frequently than news sites outlets to obtain news.¹⁰

"I think that the vast majority of those cognitive enough to vote at 18 were also cognitive and socially aware at 16 - at least to a standard at or above that of any prototypical Australian adult. Many issues in today's society affect young people and our livelihoods, and to have autonomy over that would generally benefit the wellbeing of many young people, since we often feel out of control and as though our lives are dictated by those who do not have the same experiences as we do."
(Boy, 16, Metro)

"In 18 months time I don't think my perspective should matter any more than it does right now." (Non-binary, 16 years old, Metro)

"I was constantly mixing with boys of 18 years and displaying roughly similarly levels of maturity, and oftentimes exceeding average performance in many area, such as academics, arts etc. - essentially, for all intents and purposes I could function very much like an 18 year old in every respect except legally, to the point people often forget I am 16 until the legal restrictions start becoming a problem. Since voting age and in general, age restrictions are ostensibly based on assumptions about the capacity of individuals to make decisions." (Boy, 16, Metro)



They should be given the choice

Young people acknowledged that their views and interests varied widely; some admitted that while they themselves might not be particularly interested in or knowledgeable about politics, others their age were and should have the opportunity to vote. Those enthusiastic about voting recognised that not all their peers shared this passion and argued that individuals who lack investment in such a significant responsibility should not be required to participate. This approach would also prevent disengaged voters from voting without a genuine purpose.

“I think making it optional for 16-year-olds to vote would provide a voice from the youth population, making the vote turnout higher and allowing these people who work and possibly pay tax a chance to participate in elections. However, the optional choice to vote ensures that 16-year-olds who are not interested in politics and voting do not cast a vote in which has no sincerity behind it.” (Girl, 14, Metro)



“Because some 16 year olds would like the opportunity to vote but not me :)”
Boy, 15, Pilbara)

“Young people should be able to have the option to vote as I believe we all deserve a say. I may only be thirteen but I constantly worry about what is happening politically. I already know who I want to vote for but I do understand I’m just mature for my age.” (Boy, 13, Pilbara)

“With some of us having the option, it depends how ones 16-year-old thinks about the political system, I think the ones who are interested in it and insist on having them contribute to it, they should have the chance.” (Boy, 16, Metro)

“I think it would be beneficial for younger people who are actually interested in politics and decisions being made for their country. I do not think it should be mandatory, because there would be many younger people who would not make mature decisions.” (Girl, 24, Midwest)

"It's easy to feel powerless as a 16-year-old as you're beginning to come into your own but the world around you doesn't reflect your thoughts. I think we should have the choice and be encouraged to vote at 16 and 17, but I also acknowledge that not everyone would be ready or care enough and forcing them to vote wouldn't be productive." (Boy, 21, Metro)

IT'S MY CHOICE

"They deserve the right; they're not little kids; they may not want to so should have the choice".
(Prefer not to say, 11, Metro)

Moreover, participants identified that providing the option to vote would lead to several substantial benefits, including increased voter turnout, greater representation, and empowering young people to engage in politics. These benefits have been demonstrated in other countries where the voting age has been lowered, such as Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Ecuador and Scotland. Specifically, pro-civic attitudes, increased voter turnout,¹¹ which would consequently lead to greater representation of young people.

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“Because having only adults vote is unfair because a lot of the time minors are quite affected by laws the government puts in place. Some adults have stupid beliefs too, so perhaps having more people vote could sometimes rule out their stupid choices.” (Girl, 12, Metro)

“It would be nice to give them the option to vote because. They have more of a fresh mind and can think more in depth.” (Boy, 14, Metro)

“Young people have diverse perspectives and experience unique challenges and needs to other members of the population. Currently, the needs and voices of young people are under-represented politically. Allowing young people the chance to vote could help address these unique challenges and needs.”
(Girl, 24, Metro)

“We have our opinions and we would like the choice to vote, even if it's just an option and not 100% mandatory, it could be good to hear the voices and opinions of younger generations.” (Genderfluid, 16, Metro)

“...it should be optional to vote when you're 16 because you might want to know how to vote before we do it and you might not feel that you're ready for it yet.” (Girl, 12, Pilbara)

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They should have a say in decisions affecting their future

This lack of representation within politics was discussed by many participants, as they identified that young people are being affected by decisions that they are unable to have a say in. The inability to have a voice in significant topics that will influence their present and future can significantly increase feelings of hopelessness, and consequently their mental health.¹²

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“I believe that 16 year olds should have the option to vote because most of the decisions made by state and federal governments will have an impact on them in some way. So it is only fair that they have the ability to have their voices heard in an election.”

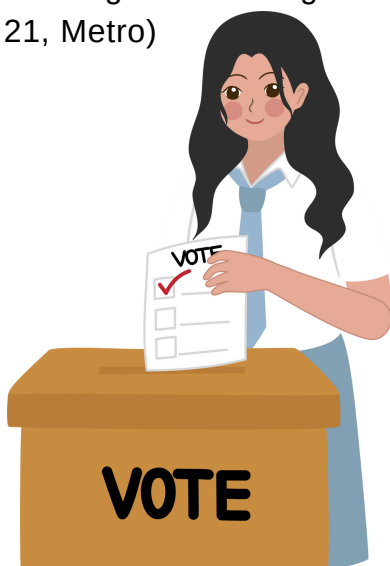
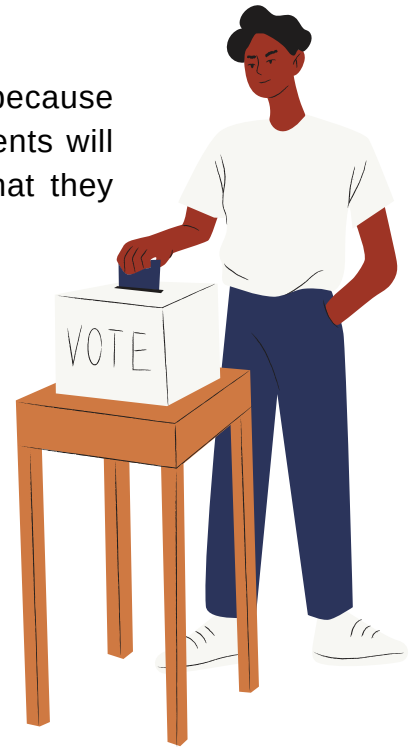
(Boy, 17, Metro)

“16 year olds have more knowledge about what they want the future to hold for them than most adults. If 50 year olds have the opportunity to influence their country and decide their own future, why shouldn't the ones who actually have to live in that future also have a say.” (Girl, 18, Metro)

“There is a growing collective awareness around major societal issues in young people. Voting allows you a sense of choice; like you actually matter and you have an chance to act. When young people cannot act on the wrongs they see around them, they grow distant. This has caused young peoples mental health to deteriorate. Young people should be given the option to vote on matters that will and are directly impacting them.” (Girl, 21, Metro)

“There's a lot of decisions made about young people without them. A lot of young people have novel perspectives and don't like the people who are making decisions for them. It's easy to feel powerless as a 16 year old as you're beginning to come into your own but the world around you doesn't reflect your thoughts. I think we should have the choice and be encouraged to vote at 16 and 17, but I also acknowledge that not everyone would be ready or care enough and forcing them to vote wouldn't be productive.”

(Boy, 21, Metro)



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Several participants shared personal experiences where decisions were made on topics that significantly affected them, but at the time were unable to have a say in the matter leading to feelings of disempowerment.

"I remember when I was around 16-17 and the SSM plebiscite was happening. I felt so disempowered and angry that a decision that actively affected my life was being made by a bunch of people not part of my community for me, when I was not able to have my own say. I think 16-17-year-olds are able to make informed voting choices. They are members of our community and are heavily impacted by the legislative decision made. They will be adults within the next election cycle too." (Queer, 24, Metro)

"I personally am a disabled teenager, and it's extremely scary to see federal response to the royal commission, and proposed NDIS cuts, and have absolutely zero power. Decisions are being made that will affect my ability to live, but I can't say anything because of an arbitrary date that doesn't say anything about me." (Non-binary, 16, Metro)

Being represented and having a voice

Young people expressed a sense of unfairness, as decisions that will profoundly impact their future are being made without their involvement, while older generations—who may have contributed to these issues and will not witness the long-term consequences—are allowed to voice their opinions. This concern was often framed in the context of climate change, a significant issue for the majority of young individuals across the world who fear the state of their future environment.¹³ The cost-of-living crisis is another looming concern, significantly impacting many children who are experiencing financial hardship.¹⁴ The crisis was also discussed in relation to the rental and housing market, as it will unfairly impact the future young people who are trying to enter the market. Both of these significant topics have been found to have significant impacts on young people's mental health and views of the future.

"I think 16-year-olds should be allowed to vote because it is our generation that will be affected by the vote adults make so it should be us who make the votes so that we know how our life would be." (Boy, 12, Pilbara)

"Unfortunately, the upper and lower houses of the Australian Parliament are run mostly but members outside my age bracket. The current issues affecting this generation, such as Climate Change, do not really effect the current representation in Parliament as most of the older generation will be in their graves by the time the actual problem takes its toll. Due to the lack of more accurate representation in both houses I feel it important to lower the age to more accurately reflect societies' will." (Girl, 16, Kimberley)

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“Even before 16, children can choose work and in some cases are expected or forced to. A capable democratic society is one that gives a voice to all who can be exploited, this means our workers. By forcing our politicians to cater not only to the adults and who will vote on election day leaving empty promises to be filled by the suffering of those who can be exploited for their labour without a word. We can push the system to a more fair and ideal Australia. Many assume the youth are not interested in politics or having a say. This is a dogma fed to us by those in power including our youth realising the stereotype. If we had the chance the youth can empower the government to fund education, mental health institutions and crack down on the deplorable working conditions within companies whose bottom line is young people. Many will say that we aren't ready to vote that it takes maturity and wisdom, especially the older generations, but I say as a person who is about to fall into the jaws of the housing crisis and increasingly impossible living cost that I am mature and wise enough to have my say and that it should be my right to do. It should be all my peers and fellow young people who get a say. Even now, I am relying on others to fight for what should be my rights because I am shackled by my inability to have a say in how the country I live in is run.” (Boy, 17, South-West)

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Young people felt as though they held a unique perspective on various key issues and challenges that were not represented in the current political system.

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“Because with an aging population, the voting is getting more and more skewed to conservative representatives. Further, I think 16 year olds are fully capable of making informed decisions regarding their parliamentary representatives.” (Girl, 17, Metro)

“It'll help cancel out the votes of really old people who contribute equally as little to society.” (Boy, 17, Metro)

“Young people have diverse perspectives and experience unique challenges and needs to other members of the population. Currently, the needs and voices of young people are under-represented politically. Allowing young people the chance to vote could help address these unique challenges and needs.” (Girl, 24, Metro)

“Having younger people voting would provide a broader perspective on issues of national interest and give young people a voice in change.” (Girl, 15, Metro)

“Lowering the voting age would guarantee that all young people have an ability to contribute to government - rather than just the lucky few who often come from high socioeconomic backgrounds that allow them to get opportunities like being on advisory panels.” (Girl, 16, Metro)

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Adolescence is a pivotal time for personal and physical development. At 16 many young people are expected to begin acting like adults but are often dismissed as being children. This duplicity can lead to a sense of frustration, and disillusionment in relation to our political systems.¹⁵ Young people stated that they want their opinions to be heard, and to be able to contribute to the discussion on important topics just like every other age group.

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“So they can voice their opinion as sometimes they might feel like their opinion doesn't matter.” (Girl, 15, Metro)

“It should not be enforced but it would be nice to be considered to vote when i was 16, just so that I have a voice like everyone else.” (Boy, 17, Metro)

“Representation of what younger generations need and expect of our elected officials.” (Non-Binary, 17, Metro)

“We can drive and do so many other things that are seen as adult but not being allowed it vote or even having the option to is just bad. If parties are concerned of losing a youth vote then that is their problem that they haven't done enough to support youth.” (Genderfluid, 16, Metro)

“I believe that 16 would be a suitable age as 16-year-olds are often put in positions to make big decisions yet don't have the same representation/ power when it comes to voting. Personally, when I was 16, I felt frustrated and powerless when it came to decisions being made about myself and my country as even though I had a full understanding of the situation and was able to form my own opinions on them, there was nothing I could do to vocalize them. My voice felt as though it meant nothing. I would have valued being able to take part in politics through means such as voting.” (Girl, 20, Wheatbelt)

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Good opportunity to learn

Young people suggested that being given the ability to vote while they are still in school, where they can ask questions and receive support throughout the process, could foster lifelong voting habits. This early exposure to the electoral process was suggested to help them develop a deeper understanding of civic engagement and encourage consistent participation in democracy.

This concept aligns with research highlighting the importance of education in cultivating informed voters. Engaging young people in voting while they have access to resources and guidance could instil positive voting behaviours that last throughout their lives.¹⁶

“Civic Engagement and Responsibility Engaging young people in the electoral process at an earlier age fosters a sense of civic responsibility and engagement. By the time they reach 18, many young people have already developed informed opinions on various issues affecting their lives and communities. Allowing them to vote at 16 provides an opportunity to channel their enthusiasm and perspectives into meaningful political participation, thereby strengthening our democracy. Education and Awareness At 16, many young people are still in school, where they are often taught about civics, government, and the importance of participation in democratic processes. Allowing them to vote while they are still in an educational setting can reinforce these lessons and encourage a lifelong habit of voting and civic involvement.”
(Boy, 23, Metro)

“Allowing 16-year-olds to vote can increase political engagement, represent the interests of younger generations, and help develop lifelong voting habits.” (Girl, 16, Great Southern)

Promote greater education and understanding

Some participants felt as though lowering the voting age would help promote young people to engage in further research and education about voting at an earlier age, suggesting that additional or more in-depth civics education during school could be one pathway to help inform young people about voting.

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“I think that young people’s voices are important and valuable for decision making, especially when these decisions will affect our futures the most. But a lower voting age needs to come with increased education on important issues and higher awareness of the value of voting, so that young people can make educated decisions.” (Girl, 17, Great Southern)

“I think it should be optional. The reality is that most 16/17 year olds will not do research on Australian politics to make an informed and educated decision. Though, I recognise that there are people who are passionate and would like to have a say. If I had the option at 16 I would have done the necessary research. Perhaps the key discussion is how to create a culture around the Australian youth where being educated is the standard and is desirable.” (Girl, 18, Metro)

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“because it gives you more time to learn about how to vote” (Prefer not to say, 14, Goldfields)



“because it will encourage the education department to teach politics and law in a stronger way, earlier.” (Girl, 16, Metro)

Contrastingly, other participants shared that they are already actively learning about politics, civics, and global issues within high school. This education was identified as providing a strong basis regarding political engagement and by lowering the voting age it would provide them the opportunity to practice what they are learning whilst it is still fresh and memorable.

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“I think 16-year-olds should be able to vote, because we already learn a lot about democracy at school and if we wait to vote until we are 18, we will have to learn how to vote for the years to come.” (Girl, 12, Pilbara)

“It makes young people more aware of the world. The people who will actually grow up with the politicians are able to make decisions regarding their future.” (Girl, 16, Great Southern)

“Young people deserve the opportunity to have a say in their future. Around 16 you are learning about how the government works and what better way to teach people than by actually letting them vote. It makes the lessons way more relevant and engaging. Instead once your 18, those discussion aren’t going on in the classroom and you are essentially on your own to figure it out. I seriously believe this would give young people hope for the future and harness that hope to make meaningful change.” (Girl, 23, Metro)

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Participants suggested that being given the option to vote while still in high school would enable them to receive support from their teachers and parents, facilitating an easier transition into the responsibilities of voting.¹⁷ This approach would alleviate the pressures associated with the significant life shift from high school to adulthood, as they would not have to simultaneously navigate the complexities of voting. Instead, this gradual introduction could foster greater confidence and understanding of politics.

“so they know what to do when they are adults, it gives you more responsibility while you are still at home.” (Girl, 13, Metro)

“I think 16-year-olds should be able to have an option to vote because it is a very good experience to vote when younger and learn the outside world.” (Girl, 11, Metro)

“I think it would be a good learning opportunity for younger people and would prepare them for later years where voting is mandatory. If the voting was optional, it would not put pressure on the idea and would enable parents to show their kids how to vote.” (Prefer not to say, 15, Pilbara)

“Because rather than everything being new when they have to vote at 18, they have the choice to have a say without the pressure of having to vote. They can get used to voting without the pressure of having to.” (Girl, 12, Midwest)

Why 16-year-olds should not be allowed to vote

“If 16-year-olds are subject to the same voting requirements as adults (ie. it is mandatory and failure to vote may result in a financial penalty) I think this will disproportionately affect low-income and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander young people and young people living in regional and remote communities. These particular minorities may not have access to voting centres, political and voting education, or news/media to inform their voting. As such, these people are more likely to abstain or refuse to vote thereby resulting in a penalty. This would be disproportionate to young people living in affluent areas, city localities, and non-indigenous youth. If the system was not mandatory and rather was optional, this may be a positive initiative as young people should have a say in how their country and society is being run. However, at 16/17 young people have lots going on in their lives including studying for WACE, ATAR, or TAFE, starting jobs and navigating the transition to adulthood. This may be overwhelming or add a level of stress to their lives. There would need to be a significant focus on political education and how to vote in schools to ensure children understand the voting system and how Australian government structures work. At 16/17 children may not understand the ideologies of each political party and may not have access to information outside of school. This may place a burden on them to vote without proper knowledge of the system. They also may not have time to fully inform themselves. Whilst those who are passionate will be able to inform themselves, the requirement to vote (mandatory or optional) may be overwhelming and leave children uncertain and stressed.” (Girl, 23, Metro)

Of the 761 responses who stated that the voting age should not be changed to 16, 704 participants provided qualitative responses. Themes that emerged when asked why they think 16-year-olds should not be able to vote include, “Immature and irresponsible”, “Need for further education”, “16-year-olds aren’t interested”, “Too easily influenced”, “Let them be kids”, “Brain is still developing”, and “Lack of world experience”. These themes will be further discussed using quotes from the participants.

Immature and irresponsible

Lack of maturity and responsibility was one of the most frequently mentioned reasons as to why 16-year-olds should not have the right to vote. Due to this lack of maturity, participants felt that the importance of the voting would not be taken seriously, and lead to irresponsible voting which could significantly influence the outcome. As previously mentioned, whilst cognitive capacity has developed at 16, psychosocial and emotional maturity are still significantly developing, and continue to develop on a trajectory until early to mid-20’s.⁵ This means that 16-year-olds can be more impulsive, engaging in sensation seeking, and more easily persuaded by their peers, which may have significant outcomes on voting behaviours.

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“Because they still haven't developed and matured enough to vote.” (Girl, 12, Pilbara)

“Because we are not mature enough. This question should be asked to ALL age groups. This is like asking a 5yo what he wants for dinner. They will always think of themselves, not for the whole family.” (Boy, 15, Great-Southern)

“Voting takes a lot of responsibility and thought and every single vote makes a difference in the end result of an election. Some 16 year olds may not take this seriously and will make a decision they may not fully support or understand in the end.” (Girl, 14, Metro)

“I don't think they should be allowed to vote as we're still young and biased. Most probably don't even understand the system.” (Girl, 16, Goldfields)

“We aren't ready at 16, it's too important.” (Girl, 17, Metro)

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Some slightly older participants reflected on their development over just a few years and noted that they felt they had significantly matured in that time, supporting that even two years made a significant difference in their understanding and appreciation of the significance of voting. This supports the understanding of the development of psychosocial maturity, which continues to develop throughout young adulthood.

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“Even just within this year, I have felt like I have matured a lot and my perspective and ability to fully comprehend the messages presented and what the different parties do/stand for has evolved a lot. I am still only 17 I don't believe to have a full comprehension of what the different parties do, honestly barely even know the difference between left and right wing. Although I believe having the perspective of the younger minds and generation as a whole would be beneficial, especially seeing as we are the ones who are going to be growing up in such a world, I honestly feel like I, and especially 16-year-old me are too immature and uninformed to make a proper call on what parties should be in charge for the foreseeable future of our lives.” (Boy, 17, Metro)

“Having been 16yo not long ago, I don't believe that age cohort is mature enough to vote on matters that impact Australia. Most cannot drive, hold full-time jobs, pay much tax, own houses, have children, etc. Not to mention, the ability to vote in referendums or on our political representatives mostly does not impact the areas 16yo care about, have any understanding about, nor directly impact them. A small politically passionate number of teenagers may be vocal about wanting to vote, but at the end of the day, the average 16yo is not equip with the necessary understanding and interest to make decisions that impact the adult-cohort of Australia.” (Girl, 22, Metro)

Lowering the voting age led few participants to question the implications of lowering age restrictions in relation to other age restricted activities, such as drinking or gambling. Suggesting that these age restrictions are in place for a reason, and that 16-year-olds are not equipped to handle these responsibilities.

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“By reducing the age of voting to 16, the government is essentially saying that they believe that a 16 year old person is mature enough be included in the decisioning making process of a country. It demonstrates that the people (following democratic ideology) collectively believe that a 16 year people can handle the social responsibility that is also given to a person that is 30, or 65, or 90. However, it is clear that society does not believe that is the case when there are still laws that prohibit 16 year from doing things. Examples include drinking, or sexual intercourse. The existence of these laws demonstrates that children are not [thought] upon in a mature spotlight by society and therefore, by giving them the right to vote, the government and the people would be contradicting their own thoughts and values.” (Boy, 15, Metro)

Need for further education and understanding

Young people identified that 16-year-olds needed more time to learn more about politics, their values, and ideals. This thinking is consistent with current psychological theories and research exploring psychosocial development which pose that adolescence is a key period for identity development.¹⁸

This included a need for further education and understanding surrounding civics as they did not feel they were equipped to make a knowledgeable and informed decision. This aligns with the previously discussed findings from the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship, where less than half of young people in year 10 scored proficient scores in Civics and Citizenship.⁴

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“There is no necessity of people under the age of 18 needing to vote, most people under the age of 18 may not have an understanding of what they're doing, furthermore there is no downside of waiting 2 years to create a greater and more deep personal understanding of their own ideals and values that they look for when voting.” (Boy, 15, Metro)

“We do not yet have the knowledge to make educated and informed decisions on behalf of our government, in order to influence the trajectory of Australia's future. Our underdeveloped minds are easy to exploit in order to keep the current government in power, meaning an advantage in regard to the coming elections.” (Boy, 16, Great-Southern)

“Aren't old enough to make educated decisions which can elect people into positions of power. Many of their beliefs or opinions could be reflecting those of the people they are influenced by instead of their own.” (Boy, 16, Metro)

“They are too uneducated with civic education. If civic education was expanded however, then I would support it.” (Boy, 17, Metro)

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Lack of knowledge and understanding of global and political issues was also identified as a key consideration when explaining why the voting age should not be lowered. Some participants alluded that this lack of knowledge was due to young people being sheltered from political and global issues.

As political and global issues are a key component of political agendas, influencing domestic policies and international relations, understanding these issues is crucial to having an informed vote. Further, politicians' positions on these issues should play a critical role in voting decisions, however, participants expressed doubt that 16-year-olds possess this knowledge or would take these factors into account when casting their vote.

These beliefs may not be entirely supported, as a recent survey of young adults across Australia identified that the environment, equity and discrimination, and the economy and financial matters were the issues causing the most concern, demonstrating awareness of current political issues.¹⁹

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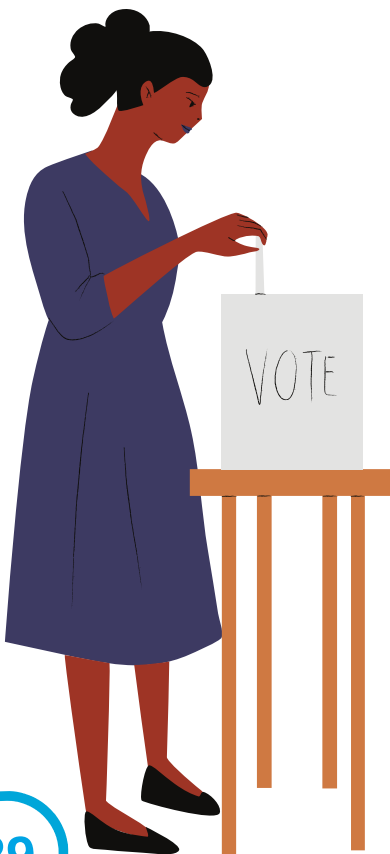
“Because normally by that age 16-year-olds are not properly informed and kept informed on political matters to give a qualified answer.” (Girl, 13, Pilbara)

“16 year olds are very much shielded from the world and intense political debates and issues. Not being entirely in the know of what is happening in the world or even in your country’s leadership will skew their vote (or they may even choose to make an invalid vote due to misunderstanding) and negatively affect our country.” (Girl, 20, Metro)

“At 16 I didn't understand the world, and no amount of education would convince me to prioritize the right things, as a teacher, I know exactly who would be voting, and it's safe to say, I can't wait for them to grow up, get a job and start prioritising right. Also, social media made me believe things unfounded and that I no longer support. Voting at 16 is a surefire way of ensuring you have the least educated voters having a say in the most poignant of decisions, or the most wrongly influenced voters as well.” (Girl, 24, Metro)

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Rather than participating in voting, it was suggested that young people who were interested in politics could participate in other ways. Suggesting that this would allow them to develop their knowledge and understanding of the political system without having the responsibility of voting.



“Civic engagement can be demonstrated in other ways, such as by political party membership. At the age of 16, one should focus on gaining knowledge and understanding of the political system and gaining grassroots experience in political activism. This knowledge will then allow young people to make informed decisions once they turn 18. At the age of 16, education and grassroots participation should be the civic priority; not direct political engagement at the polls.” (Boy, 18, Metro)

16-year-olds aren't interested

Participants across ages clearly stated that they did not have an interest in politics and did not want to vote.



Due to this lack of interest, there was concern that 16-year-olds would not engage in further research and would end up following the voting patterns of their friends or parents, or worse, engage in ‘donkey voting’. A ‘donkey vote’ is a term that is often used in Australia to define a vote that is technically valid but doesn’t reflect a genuine preference for a politician or party. ‘Donkey voting’ is thought to occur due to a lack of concern, understanding, or in protest of the system or candidates.^{20,21}



Too easily influenced

There were further concerns regarding how easily 16-year-olds are influenced, and what this may mean for developing their understanding and perspective on voting. Their concerns are supported by literature which has found that adolescents can be strongly influenced their fellow teenagers, and adults, particularly in relation to risky situations,²² but also in relation to prosocial behaviours.²³

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“Because they would influence their vote on their parents vote and they may be forced by parents to vote.” (Boy, 12, Midwest)

“I personally think at the age of 16, children aren't fully developed to understand what the Parliament in tells. Personally, if I was voting at the age of 16, I would vote what my friends are voting, which doesn't give a fair campaign to each of the front runners.” (Boy, 18, Metro)

“Looking back I can now see how my views were still very formative at 16. I am now at Uni and my critical thinking skills have been further developed and I feel confident to make my own decisions rather than relying on the voice of those around me.” (Girl, 21, Metro)

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Participants theorised that lowering the voting age would lead to political parties increasingly targeting young people in their campaigns to attract a new group of voters, who could significantly influence election outcomes. Specifically suggesting that political parties would invest in strategies that align with the ways young voters consume information, such as through social media and digital channels.

Some participants were concerned that political parties might adjust their messaging to appeal to issues that resonate more with younger generations. As mentioned by one participant, one far-right German party was able to garner votes from young adults through targeted campaigns on social media.²⁴

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“Alternatively, being given the right to vote, might lead to the altering of other laws, such as the driving age, drinking age, and other laws associated with adulthood. Although a weak point, the government has a lot more control over non-adults, easily manipulating what we think about the world. Still only a speculation, it still cannot be ignored that teenagers are more easily swayed, and, although the government might not intend to use teenagers to increase the likelihood of their re-election, it is a possibility that they might not be letting on. In conclusion, it's a risk I don't believe is worth taking. Then again, you might consider me to be another teenager, who knows nothing about politics or the 'adult world'. However, if anything, I am aware of my own naiveness, unlike most other teenagers, to the world in which I live, and that is something that cannot be ignored.” (Boy, 16, Great-Southern)

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“... Look at the trend of under-18 voting in the recent European parliamentary elections, where an overwhelming majority of under 18s in Germany voted for extreme far-right parties, in part due to a swath of disinformation on social-media platforms and their having campaigned on a populist platform which relies on emotions, rather than facts and base.” (Boy, 20, Metro)

“... But I also believe there's the issue of manipulation, particularly of younger, more susceptible people. Politicians, and their teams, are not dumb. They will know how to use social media to benefit them. They will exploit the algorithm, intentionally drum up controversy and hype to maximise engagement and reach and utilise low-cost advertising services that target young people on social media. It's a lot easier to influence young people into voting against their own interests.” (Boy, 21, Metro)

“Considering the current state of our education system being more interested in identity politics, climate change panic and other anti-Australian grievances, I won't support under 16s being able to vote. It would lead to parties like Labor & the Greens pandering to this new voter base with massive tax payer funded handouts and more radical policies.” (Boy, 24, Metro)

“16 year olds do not have the capacity to appreciate political conditions and generally aren't equipped for personal searches of fact - that is to say; it is easier for their opinions to be manipulated without check, and thus, makes it easier for politicians, family members, etc. to leverage emotion in order to captivate their audience and influence voting behaviour of otherwise uninformed individuals.” (Boy, 24, Metro)



“Let them be kids”

At 16, participants felt that they were dealing with enough concerns, including, social, personal and academic development, and did not need the additional responsibility of having to vote. Having the additional stress and responsibility of voting was thought to be burdensome to young people who were not interested in politics or voting. The sentiment of “let kids be kids” was prevalent, reflecting the view that 16-year-olds should be given time to mature before being expected to take on adult responsibilities like voting. Further, that young people should be protected from such responsibilities until they have gained more life experience and maturity.

“16 year olds have bigger things to be focusing on at that point in life and shouldn't have that burden to have to vote yet.” (Girl, 12, Metro)

“Because we have other things to worry about.” (Girl, 16, South-West)

“16 yr olds can't drink, drive, have sex or vote until they are adults. Also, children are under enough stress and struggling with mental health without roping them into political drama.” (Girl, 15, Great-Southern)

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“For another reason, I believe 18 is a great age as it allows students to finish high school, voting at 16/17 would just become another thing to worry or stress about nearing the end of our schooling years, especially if it was the same laws surrounding voting that currently enforces adults to do so... Speaking on behalf of myself and other 16 year olds, I also feel as though it is too much responsibility as we have so many others that we are already introduced to at this age. At the end of the day we are still children and while some may like to have to have the option to vote I do not believe it is a good decision.” (Boy, 17, Metro)

“I don't think that I would be ready to vote at 16. I think you should be an adult (18+) as you have more independence and can think for yourself more without others influencing you. 16yrs old in yr 10-11 which seems way too young to be worrying about voting, we should be focusing on school and hobbies, not what leader we should have. We can start to think about who we want to vote for, but not actually vote.” (Girl, 22, Metro)

“Let kids be kids, let them be, let them make mistakes and have adults to care for them and guide them through. Let them have a youth. I'm so glad I wasn't told I had to, or was pressured into voting, I could just be a kid!!” (Girl, 24, Metro)

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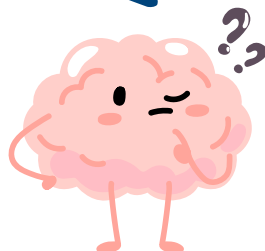
Brains are still developing

Many participants identified that as 16-year-olds brains are still developing, this suggested that they did not believe that 16-year-olds have the capacity, critical thinking skills, or maturity to provide a well-informed and thoughtful vote. Research demonstrates that adolescence is a pivotal time for brain development, including heightened brain plasticity, reduction in grey matter, and development in the pre-frontal cortex.²⁵As mentioned previously, this also does significantly influence psychosocial development. However, young people's cognitive functioning has found to be significantly developed, reflecting functioning of adults.⁵

“The brain isn't fully developed, even I was a totally different person just even a year ago. The gap from 16 to 18 is such a huge gap, I think you have to give it time to develop.” (Boy, 17, Metro)

“Because their brains haven't developed fully yet and they could be influenced easily.” (Girl, 13, Goldfields)

“Because, I believe that the human brain is not yet developed enough to make an informed on what is a good pick for how our country should be run. I personally feel the voting age should be moved to 21 or even higher.” (Boy, 16, Metro)



“What a ridiculous idea. Who came up with this? At 16 our brains aren't able to process the complex information required to make an informed decision.” (Girl, 21, Metro)

“Young brains aren't fully developed until mid to late 20s, also 16 year olds don't keep up with world events (they're uninformed/ don't have the capacity to make an informed decision).” (Girl, 17, South-West)



Due to continuing brain development, 16-year-olds are still developing their opinions, identity, and understanding of the world. Adolescence is a formative time for young people to develop their identity, including their sexuality, interests, and values, which are pivotal in helping to develop their own political values.

“I think under 16 years old, will not have enough opinions and actions are still uncertain. Human brain is fully developed after 22 years old and 16 is not the right age.” (Girl, 17, Metro)

“Because they don't know anything about anything. They have no exposure to any of the things they're voting on, don't have a concept of money, rights, responsibility, or even a fully developed brain. I think its good that people graduate into certain rights because otherwise we reinforce this horrendous idea that people emerge fully formed.” (Boy, 23, Metro)



Lack world experience

At 16, many young people are still in high school, almost 90% are living with their parents/carers,²⁶ and many are not working. As such it was argued that they do not have enough life experience to appreciate the importance of voting and the effects that voting.

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“I think 16 year olds have not experienced the world and how it works so they might make a mistake.” (Girl, 16, Midwest)

“Immaturity. No life experience. We are children - that's why.” (Boy, 16, Metro)

“A lot more ideals without real world experience, meaning much more extreme ideas, much more easily to influence, most of my peers at school have no idea about politics and would just vote for whoever.” (Boy, 17, Metro)

“Because there is still a lot of immaturity in the group, that can only be learned outside of school and in the real world as 18+ year olds.” (Boy, 17, Wheatbelt)

“In my opinion 16 year olds aren't developed enough to be able to vote. As an 18 year old you should have completed high school where you have been prepared to face harsh environments in the real world without the protection of a supervisor, e.g. Parents or teachers. I don't believe that the political scene is an environment that we should be exposed to, as we are still children.” (Boy, 16, Metro)

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Participants expressed concerns that 16-year-olds may lack the necessary life experience and financial awareness to fully grasp the impact of voting on household issues, particularly regarding the cost of living. With limited exposure to managing expenses such as rent, utilities, and taxes, they argued younger voters might not fully appreciate how political decisions directly affect economic realities.

Further, participants pointed out that young people are often driven by idealistic values—such as environmental protection or social justice. This may lead them to overlook the importance of policy decisions that influence day-to-day financial stability. Relating to the concern that due to their lack of experience within the world and living independently, 16-year-olds could prioritise issues that, while important, might not reflect the immediate challenges faced by households trying to balance rising costs of living with long-term financial planning. Although these concerns may be unfounded as recent surveys have identified that financial matters are of significant concern to young people.²¹



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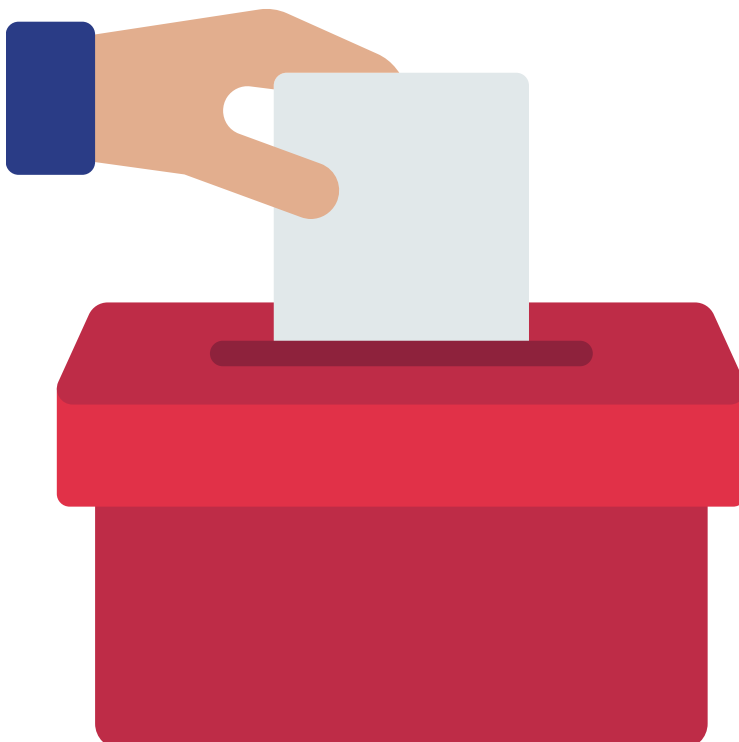
“This disproportionately benefits smaller minority parties, 16 year olds don’t have the same stakes in fiscal management such as interest rates, water management etc. human rights of other countries should never come at the expense of domestic management.” (Girl, 16, Metro)

“Most likely do not have a wide experience of the world and may not fully understand the political landscape, only a small portion of ideas that are presented to us.” (Boy, 16, Metro)

“At 16, I would've liked to have been able to vote, as I saw myself as informed and politically engaged. In retrospect, it was good I wasn't able to vote - the two extra years, development, understanding of the world around me and the life experience I gained in that crucial period enabled me to now make informed decisions in my vote.” (Boy, 20, Metro)

“My reasons include: The majority of 16 and 17 year olds don't pay taxes. They haven't yet had time to see how different ideas play out in the real world - social media and those around them have a greater influence than their own experience. They aren't deemed old enough to serve in many different roles, including the ADF [Australian Defence Force] and emergency services.” (Boy, 22, Metro)

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What topics do young people care about?

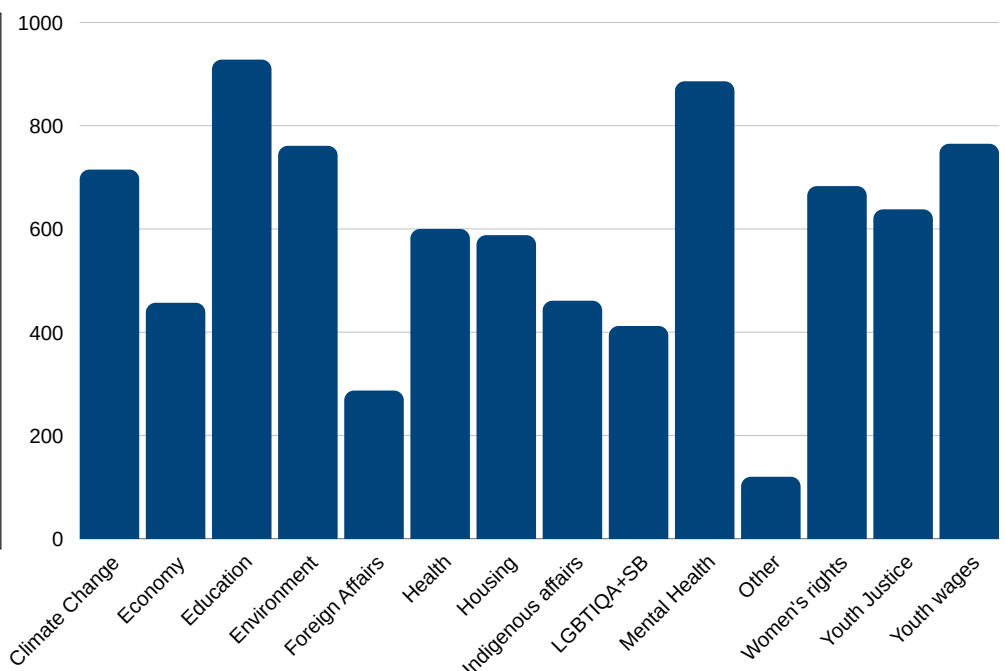
1263 participants agreed to complete additional questions on their opinions and views on political topics. When asked specifically about topics that they cared about, they were able to choose multiple options.

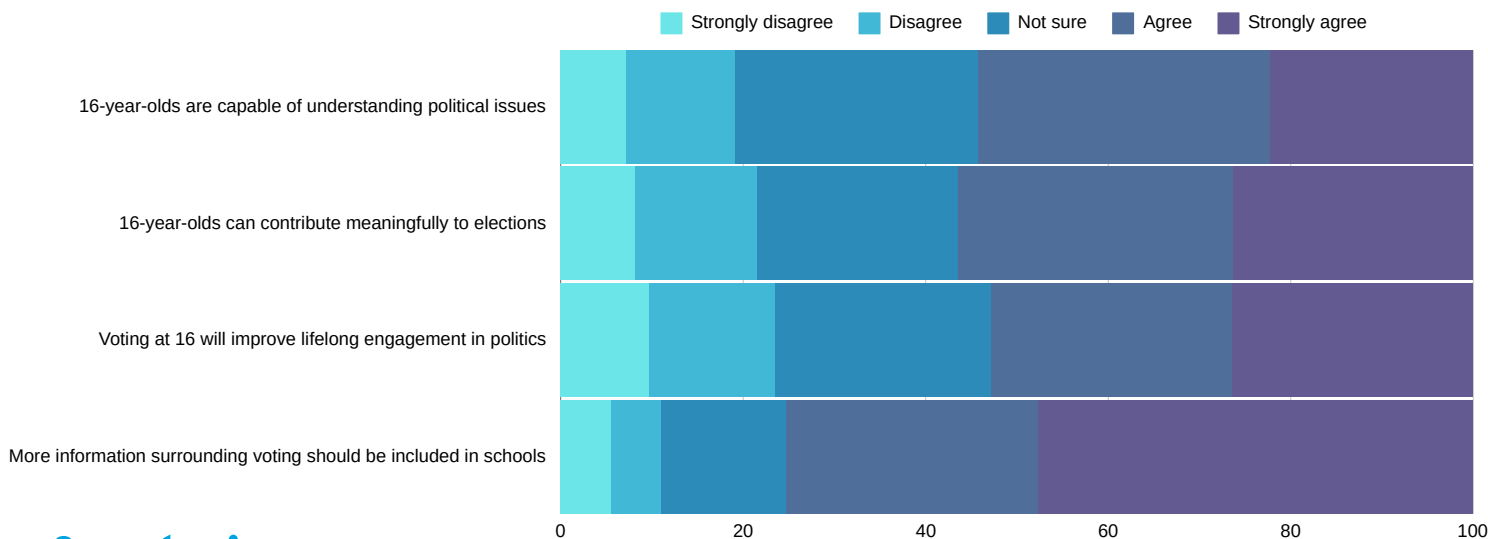
Education was identified as one of the topics most highly chosen for the young people in our survey (74%, 928). This is unsurprising, as many young people who took part in the survey would have been still been in school or would have just completed their education. Therefore, education would be a key focus and priority for many of our participants who would be looking to further their knowledge and look towards their future careers.

Corresponding with other recent research examining topics of concern in young people, mental health was identified as a key topic of concern identified by 70% of participants (886). When young people were asked what topics were important to them in Mission's 2023 Annual Youth Survey, 30% of young people identified mental health as a significant issue, whilst 32% of these participants were extremely or very concerned about mental health.¹⁹ Many young people are currently facing mental health issues, with young Australians aged 13-18 being 3.4 times more likely than adults to be hospitalised for intentional self-harm, with girls accounting for four in five of these hospitalisations.²⁷ Of the young people with mental health issues, First Nations, queer young people and those living with disabilities are significantly over-represented within these statistics. Findings from our 2021 Speaking Out Survey indicated that many young people may be struggling with their mental health, with 58% of students in years 9 to 12 reporting that that they had felt sad, blue or depressed for two weeks or more.²⁸

Echoing sentiments from our previous survey 'Your Environment: Your Say'29 and Mission's Annual Youth Survey,¹⁹ the environment (60%, 761) and climate change (57%, 715) were identified as significant areas of concern. Many young people are significantly concerned about what their future will look like in light of significant environmental and climate changes.²⁹ This has been a consistent concern for many young people in recent years, with growing warnings from scientists regarding the urgent need for action on issues like global warming, biodiversity loss, and limited resources for future generations.

Climate Change	715
Economy	457
Education	928
Environment	761
Foreign Affairs	287
Health	600
Housing	588
Indigenous affairs	461
LGBTIQA+SB	412
Mental Health	886
Other	120
Women's rights	683
Youth Justice	638
Youth wages	765





Conclusion

It is evident that there are many young people who are passionate and informed on key political topics and decisions who want the ability to vote. Some young people also identified that whilst they themselves were not interested in voting, that other young people their age should be provided with the opportunity. However, there is a substantial number of young people who do not want or believe that 16-year-olds should have the right to vote. The literature is also quite divided on this topic, with findings supporting both perspectives on the topic.

Young people who supported lowering the voting age discussed that many 16-year-olds are mature, passionate, and capable of voting, and deserve a right to have a say in decisions that will affect their future. Participants also identified that many 16-year-olds are already contributing to society in various ways, and as such have earned the right to vote. Lowering the voting age was also thought to lead to other benefits, such as helping young people gain more experience and understanding of politics and voting whilst still at school where they are supported by both their teachers and parents.

Those who opposed lowering the voting age identified that 16-year-olds may lack the maturity or life experience needed to make informed voting decisions. They also believed that many teenagers are still developing critical thinking skills and are more susceptible to outside influences, whether from parents, peers, or social media. Furthermore, some believe that 16-year-olds might not fully understand the long-term consequences of political policies, given that they are still transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. As a result, they argued that allowing them to vote may not lead to thoughtful or responsible participation in the democratic process.

It is evident based on young people's responses surrounding areas of concern, as well as their qualitative responses, that they are worried about their mental health, as well as the effects that climate change will have on the environment and their future. It is imperative that policymakers and governments, give due consideration to the views shared with me on this important issue. It is vital that the voices of more than 1700 children and young people in WA are considered as part of the broader approach to investing in our current and future generations.

Recommendations

Comprehensive civics education - Ensure 16 and 17-year-olds have the knowledge to make informed decisions.

- Implement a robust civic education curriculum in schools, covering government structures, political ideologies, the electoral process, and critical thinking around political issues. This should start in early high school and be reinforced regularly.

Pilot voting in local and regional elections - Allow younger voters to engage with issues directly affecting their communities.

- Introduce a pilot program where 16 and 17-year-olds can vote in local or regional elections. This phased approach will provide data on their engagement and impact, helping refine the policy before extending it to state and national elections.

Youth engagement and participation programs - Foster political participation and civic responsibility from a young age.

- Establish programs in schools, youth clubs, and online platforms to encourage political engagement among young people. These programs could include mock elections, debate clubs, and youth councils where they can voice concerns and ideas.

Encourage pre-registration within schools at age 16 - Make the voting process easier and more seamless for young people as they become eligible.

Outreach and voter education campaigns for youth - Engage and educate potential young voters.

- Government bodies, NGOs, and youth organisations should collaborate on outreach campaigns designed to engage 16 and 17-year-olds, ensuring they understand the importance of their vote, how the political system works, and where they can access information on political issues.

Implement voter support systems - Provide young voters with the resources they need to make informed decisions.

- Develop online voter education tools specifically for first-time young voters, providing non-partisan information about candidates, policies, and how to navigate the voting process.

If the voting age is lowered, it is recommended that voting be made optional for 16-18 year olds.

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Survey Questions

1. How do you describe your gender?
2. What is your postcode?
3. How old are you?
4. Would you like to be able to vote when you are 16?
OR
5. Would you have liked to have been able to vote when you turned 16?
6. Why do you think 16-year-olds should be able to vote?
OR
7. Why do you think 16-year-olds should not be able to vote?
8. Is there anything else you would like to say about lowering the voting age?
9. Would you be happy to answer a few more questions asking about your opinions?
10. What topics do you care about that you wish young people could have more of a say in?
11. Please identify how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:
 - a. 16-year-olds are capable of understanding political issues
 - b. 16-year-olds can contribute meaningfully to elections
 - c. Voting at 16 will improve lifelong engagement in politics
 - d. More information surrounding voting should be included in schools





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