



[Votes at 16: an aspiration?](#)

Opinion piece by [Ian Betts](#) January 2012

In my Salon article [New Year, New Optimism](#) , I suggested reducing the voting age to 16 to help end the stagnation of progressive politics and the endemic disaffection of young people in our society. Here, I lay out my reasons why I believe this to be the case.

Whatever your political leanings, this year will see [significant developments in the mechanisms of our democracy](#) . How we register to vote will change with plans to introduce Individual Electoral Registration, and how we are grouped in constituencies will be reworked by the Boundary Review. With a week of campaigning planned in February by ***Votes at 16*** supporters to add names to their [e-petition](#) , it seems timely and relevant to discuss this proposal now.

The goals of the Votes at 16 campaign are to [engage, empower and inspire](#) older teenagers with the idea that they can contribute to society as part of a wider social community. To me, this is a noble endeavour, and one which seeks to address and resolve many of the issues raised by the rioting last year. We cannot blame criminal acts on political concerns such as these, but what we can do is investigate those events to recognise fault lines in our society and legislate in a way that addresses the problems we discover.

The idea of giving mature teenagers the chance to vote in political elections is one such measure. If the riots sent one clear message, it was that some young people don't care about the communities that they inhabit or the people who are living around them. It's a harrowing thought and one that needs addressing. We should all recognise the danger of further marginalising and disassociating our youth. Even [David Cameron has admitted](#) that "there is a major problem in our society with children growing up not knowing the difference between right and wrong."



Yet repeatedly the current government has pursued a rigorously Conservative agenda which marginalises vulnerable groups of citizens, [rounding on immigrants and benefit-claimants](#) in a

way that implicitly blames them for our current financial difficulties which are, in fact, largely the fault of the bankers who are funding the politicians. “Be young and shut up” is the inferred message, one continually contested and satirised by

[student bloggers](#)

who see Cameron’s actions as inflammatory and irresponsible. It seems that one way or another, teenagers are being disregarded. So by whatever route our young people arrive at being immoral, indifferent or disenfranchised non-citizens, we must at least acknowledge that something should be done to deal with the problem.

Is lowering the voting age to 16 the answer to this social rift? In my mind, there is no clearer signal to young people that what they say and do affects the community around them. This link has to be made in order to extinguish the “[divide and conquer rhetoric](#)” and the isolationism it has subsequently created. Moreover, we need to establish that a person’s contribution to society is what defines them and thus re-engage young people with their communities accordingly.

Now, more than ever before, teenagers are engaged by immersive social and commercial worlds often accessed through digital media. Social networking sites like **Facebook** encourage them to create virtual identities which are defined by the messages they release, groups they belong to and items they like. These actions empower them as individuals and promote a relativist worldview that implies their opinions can never be wrong. Coupled with that, online marketing targets teenagers specifically as consumers and encourages them to define who they are through isolated trends in language, music and clothing. Therefore young people cannot help but see themselves as isolated preferentially as an independent consumer group, subject to their own whims and interests, and set aside from the communities around them.

Thus, technology has empowered teenagers in every way except as citizens. How has such an important consideration been overlooked? Compare the above ideas to the complex world of

politics which relies on the more traditional application of Reason and educated understanding of economics, and also history to some extent. The formalised procedures and antiquated language of Parliament are exclusive barriers between those in power and those subject to it. It is not hard to recognise how easily a relativistic teen would dismiss such a social sphere, no matter how influential, when it remains completely remote and closed off to individuals who feel so empowered in the other areas of their lives. Most teenagers are not encouraged to access the world of politics, and will therefore ignore it feeling that they have equally been ignored, perhaps even disrespected. They grow up distanced and disassociated, only encountering this echelon of society when it criticises their actions through the press or challenges their actions through the Police. Deliberate or not, it amounts to social kettling.

For both adults and teenagers, there is a pervading sense that politically, [nothing can be done](#) , and the rise of groups like

Occupy London

express this frustration. With the additional political deadlock engendered by a Coalition government which is poorly held to account by its co-opted liberal allies and

[an ineffective Labour movement](#)

which is yet to publish its key policies for opposing the government's agenda, a general sense of stagnation in terms of ideas has taken over, despite a number of strikes and protests campaigning for change.

In my opinion, reducing the voting age to 16 will break this deadlock and encourage young people to take an active role in society. Suddenly, teenagers will have to decide about the policies and political parties that will shape their future. Isn't it right that decisions about Higher Education are made with consideration of the students it will affect? If we are to make critical changes to taxation and pensions, shouldn't those people who are legally entitled to work be involved in that debate? What about marriage, parenting and welfare? If it affects you, then you will have an opinion about it and those views should be heard.

