

SHOULD POLITICIANS PAY MORE ATTENTION TO CHILDREN'S VOICES?

With a **general election** fast approaching, politicians are keen to win over voters of all ages. As young people under the age of 18 are unable to vote, in what ways are their views taken into consideration? Technology has helped to give young people more ways than ever to make their voices heard, but are the people in charge really listening? Should politicians be paying more attention to the voters of the future, or do children need more life experience and time to form their opinions before their views are taken seriously by the people in power?



VOTING AGE

In 1969, the UK's voting age was lowered from 21 to 18, which is now the age that a person is seen as an adult in the eyes of the law. However, in Scotland, the law was changed in 2015 to allow anyone over the age of 16 the right to vote in Scottish-only elections. In 2020, Wales also lowered the voting age to 16 for Welsh-only elections. In many **European Union** countries, including France, Spain and Portugal, the voting age is 18. However, in Germany, Austria, Belgium and Malta the voting age is 16 and in Greece it is 17.

There has been a lot of debate about whether the voting age should be lowered to 16 for the whole of the UK, so that 16 and 17-year-olds can vote



in general elections. It's possible that by the time of the next general election, in around five years' time, the voting age could be 16. So, anyone over the age of 11 today may have the right to vote in the next general election.

David Runciman, a professor of politics at Cambridge University caused a stir when he suggested that anyone over the age of six should have the right to vote in elections, arguing that there are more older people than ever before and that it's vital for young people to feel represented and have a voice in deciding who runs the country from as early an age as possible.

Since young people won't be voting in the upcoming general election, in what ways are children able to get their voices heard?

HOW CAN CHILDREN GET THEIR VOICES HEARD?

The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) states: "Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously".

Here are some of the ways that young people can get their voices heard:

Writing in to a local or national newspaper has long been a way for members of the public to share their views on various issues. Eighteen years ago, *First News* was set up to report on current events for young people and help children to raise their voices on the issues that matter to them. In that time, *First News* has taken petitions to Downing Street and held debates in Parliament on issues ranging from climate change to road safety.

Most social media platforms allow users over the age of 13, which is [controversial](#), but there's no doubt that social media can be a way for young people to get their voices heard. For example, environmental activist [Greta Thunberg](#) used the power of social media to spread the word about



Greta Thunberg at a school climate strike

her school climate strikes. As news spread that Greta was sitting outside Swedish parliament with a sign that read 'School strike for climate', millions of young people joined climate strikes around the world, grabbing headlines and making their voices heard. Greta Thunberg has since been invited to speak directly to world leaders at summits and in parliaments around the world.

Many schools have student councils, where students are elected to represent the views of the pupils at meetings with the adults in charge. There are also local youth councils, which young people can join to get their voices heard on issues that affect their local community. People of any age can also contact their local MP to raise any local issues or wider concerns.



The UK's Houses of Parliament in Westminster, London

Most political parties have a '[youth wing](#)' that young people can join from the age of 14 or 15, so that young members can be involved in political discussions and put their views forward. The UK also has a Youth Parliament, which is made up of more than 300 young people aged 11-18, who are elected to represent children's views and bring young people into the political process.

First News recently created the *First News Children's Party* to raise the voice of all young people and make sure they are heard in the run-up to the general election. Everyone under the age of 18 is automatically a member of the party, which has a [manifesto](#) that's been written using data collected by the [Office of the Children's Commissioner](#) for England (and including learnings from the offices of the Children's Commissioner of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). The manifesto includes issues ranging from family life, health and education to social care and young asylum seekers.

So, there are several ways for young people to raise their voices, but should politicians be paying more attention?



ISSUES TO CONSIDER

One of the biggest arguments for politicians to pay more attention to children's voices is that it's young people's future that will be affected by political decisions taken now. *First News'* editor-in-chief, Nicky Cox says: "Children are 30% of the world's people, but 100% of the future." Many young people care passionately about big issues like climate change and inequality and want to make sure that things are changing for the better. However, some people argue that children haven't had enough life experience to fully understand these complicated topics. They say that young people are often **idealistic** about solutions to issues that aren't easy to tackle.

In fact, some people say that young people aren't mature enough to have a say in politics at all. However, others point out that just being over the age of 18 isn't a guarantee that someone understands political issues. Everyone is different and a 15-year-old may well be more engaged with

politics than a 45-year-old. Psychology lecturer, Dr Caroline Henry, says: "There isn't any magic age at which young people become an adult. Some young people will be more engaged with political issues, just like we see in older adults."



Labour leader Keir Starmer chats to children in Blackpool



There is an argument to say that, in order for politicians to make effective decisions, it is vital that they listen to people of all ages, whether they have a vote or not. However, others might argue that adults have had longer to form their opinions and as they are the ones who vote, it's their voices that should be the heard the loudest.

It could be argued that in order to encourage a society where people are actively engaged in changing things for the better, it's important for young people to feel involved in politics from as early an age as possible. If young people don't feel like their views are listened to, they might switch off from politics entirely. The counter argument is that young people haven't had enough time to work out how they feel about big issues, so they may be easily influenced by their parents, friends or social media. Some people worry that this could lead to young people being **exploited** by adults who want to encourage them to form a particular view (or vote in a certain way).



Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on a visit to a primary school



OPINIONS

Children's Commissioner Rachel de Souza argues that it's vital for politicians to pay more attention to children's voices, saying: "If we don't include their voices when it comes to elections, manifestos and promises from their local MPs, children feel invisible. Their contributions to this debate matter. I have challenged politicians to listen and act on what children have told me; what they want from their schools and teachers; what they need to thrive into adulthood; what they wish for in their family lives."

In a debate on whether the voting age should be lowered, Noel Howard, the founder of **Social Care Ireland**, argued that under-18s don't have the life experience to be involved in political decisions: "The fact of the matter is a child is a child until they turn 18. They are the least politically informed, the least politically experienced and the least mature in terms of making long-term decisions. Things are very **black and white** for them... Political parties know that they will be open to being exploited."

general election – the process where the voters of a country vote for the candidates who will represent them in Parliament. In the UK, the leader of the party with the most members of parliament (MPs) becomes prime minister

European Union – a union of 27 European countries. The UK was a member of the European Union from 1973 until 2020

United Nations – an international organisation that was formed in 1945 with the aim of promoting worldwide peace and security

Convention on the Rights of the Child – an international agreement that sets out the rights of every child

controversial – causing a lot of disagreement or discussion

Greta Thunberg – a Swedish environmental activist known for inspiring young people to protest against climate change through a series of school climate strikes

youth wing – the part of an organisation that's made up of young members

UK Youth Parliament – an organisation made up of 300 members aged between 11 and 18, who have been elected to represent the views of young people

manifesto – a list of aims and objectives outlining what a person or political party intends to do if they win an election

Office of the Children's Commissioner – the organisation that promotes the rights, views and interests of children in policies and decisions that affect their lives

idealistic – a strong belief in perfect standards, which might not be realistic

exploit – use someone unfairly to gain an advantage

Children's Commissioner – the person appointed to promote and protect the rights of children, especially the most vulnerable. The current Children's Commissioner for England is Dame Rachel de Souza

Social Care Ireland – the organisation that represents people working in social care in the Republic of Ireland

black and white – easy to define as right or wrong



YES, POLITICIANS SHOULD PAY MORE ATTENTION TO CHILDREN'S VOICES...



1. Political decisions about big issues like climate change and inequality will have a big impact on children's future, so it's vital that their views are properly taken into account.
2. Paying attention to children's views and involving them in political decisions makes it more likely that they will grow up to become active citizens who work to change things for the better.
3. To make the best possible decisions, it's important that politicians listen to everyone, from all backgrounds and of all ages. Many young people are more engaged with politics than adults and they have valuable insights to offer.



NO, POLITICIANS SHOULDN'T PAY MORE ATTENTION TO CHILDREN'S VOICES...



1. Young people may feel strongly about topics like climate change and inequality, but they don't have enough life experience to fully understand everything that's involved in tackling these issues.
2. Young people are still forming their opinions and working out how they feel about various issues, which means they can be easily influenced by their friends, parents or social media. This could lead to young people being exploited by people who want them to form a particular view.
3. It's more important that politicians listen to the voices of adults. It's only people over the age of 18 who vote in general elections, so it's their voices that politicians need to hear.

QUESTIONS

Are you interested in politics?

What do you think the voting age should be?

Does your school have a school council? If so, what issues are discussed at school council meetings?

Do you think that young people can be easily influenced by others?

Would you be interested in becoming a politician in the future?

Do you wish you had the chance to vote in this general election?

Which big issues do you feel the most strongly about?

What do you think is the best way to get your views heard by the people in power?

Do you think the *First News* Children's Party is a good idea?

Do you think politicians need to pay more attention to the voices of children?

