

Extending the Franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds in Aotearoa, New Zealand

A submission by members of the New Zealand Political Studies Association Working Party on Civics, Citizenship and Political Literacy. 14 November 2022.

The 2022 Independent Electoral Review/ He Arotake Pōtitanga Motuhake notes a “key question for all voter eligibility restrictions is whether they are a reasonable limit on the right to vote.

This report addresses question 2.1 What do you think the voting age should be?

- **We recommend the age of eligibility for voting should be lowered to 16 years in conjunction with the formal adoption of civics and citizenship teaching for all year 9 and 10 students in New Zealand in English and Māori medium and adequately resourced professional training and development for teaching in civics, citizenship and political literacy.**
- **If the term of parliament is extended to 4 years we recommend that the age of eligibility is revised in tandem, otherwise 17-year-olds for example will not be able to vote until 21, despite policies impacting their life choices and opportunities.**

Age of Majority

In New Zealand, there is no fixed age of majority. For example, a 17-year-old is not able to vote and yet from age 14 years as a ‘young person’, they can be held criminally responsible for breaking any law; and at 16 you can apply for a firearms licence, leave school, and agree to or refuse medical treatment, pay tax, and work full time.

The decision to enfranchise 16 to 17-year-old citizens and permanent residents in New Zealand is not a decision about when one becomes an adult, but a decision about who is able to have a voice in the process of determining the nation’s future direction (Lamb 2019). A compelling reason to allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote is that they inherit today’s decisions for much longer than older adults.

Equity and Justice in a changing demography

Our electoral age restriction is exacerbating inequity and injustice by excluding younger citizens who will be disproportionately impacted by policy decisions made today. In particular, this impacts young citizens in communities where the median age is significantly lower including, for example, Māori and Pacific populations who have ‘proportionally more individuals aged under 18 than other populations, such as Pākehā and Asian’. (NZ Royal Society Te Tapeke Fair Futures Panel, 2021).

Civics and Citizenship/Raraunga education

In line with the existing New Zealand curriculum resources: *The School Leavers Tool Kit*, we distinguish between civics education and citizenship education.

Civics education involves students developing their knowledge and understanding of their rights and duties as citizens and of civic processes, for example, how laws are made, the roles of formal institutions, and common civics activities such as voting in elections.

Citizenship/Raraunga education involves students developing the dispositions, knowledge, and skills they need to be active citizens. This includes having opportunities and experiences of being, belonging, and participating in a community, in ways that teach students how to listen respectfully to the views of others and how to effect change in the communities and societies they belong to. To become active, engaged, and informed citizens, students need both strong civics knowledge and experiences of real-life decision-making on issues that matter to them and to their communities.”

Citizenship/Raraunga education should be grounded in historical context (Godfrey 2016) and sensitive to both the constitutional settings including **Te Tiriti o Waitangi**, the diversity of life experience and a Māori values approach to citizenship (Matthews 2016). What these values mean and how they are enacted in everyday life vary, and as Nathan Matthews (2016) argues, a values-approach would reflect local community, hapū and kura priorities, and commonly shared norms including for example: Manaakitanga—showing respect, generosity and care for others; Whanaungatanga—reciprocal relationships; Kaitiakitanga—guardianship, stewardship, trusteeship; Rangatiratanga—leadership; and Wairuatanga—spirituality.

Citizenship/Raraunga education has been shown to have a long-term impact on engagement when:

- Classrooms have an open, inclusive climate where skills of critical reflection, media literacy, and respect for diversity informs opportunities to actively follow current events, discuss community issues and expose students to civic role models and supportive tuakana/teina relationships (Anae, 2020; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Schulz et al., 2010; Macfarlane et al 2007; Donbavand & Hoskins 2021; Sherwood O’Regan 2021).
- Students are presented with issues which have direct relevance to their lives, and gain effective knowledge and have opportunities to actively respond (Wood et al., 2018; Nairn, Kidman, Matthews et.al. 2021). When young people participate in more active forms of citizenship learning during school (such as community engagement, volunteering, participating in hui/talanoa, or lobbying MPs on issues of local concern or interest), this results in stronger patterns of future civic participation (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Stephens 2022; Tualamali’i 2021).

The Effects of Enfranchisement: learning from elsewhere

Other nations have already enfranchised 16 and 17-year-olds, including Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Malta, Nicaragua, Scotland and Wales, and three self-governing British Crown Dependencies: the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey. In 2021, the new Coalition Federal Government in Germany has agreed to lowering the voting age to 16 in Federal and European parliamentary elections. At present, voting age varies by state and municipality across Germany with youth aged 16 years and older having the right to vote in Hamburg, Bremen, Brandeburg and Schleswig-Holstein. This has allowed most-similar case comparisons, which clearly show that lowering the vote has ongoing beneficial participation effects with a positive association between lowering the voting age at state elections and increased turnout for young people in the mid to late 20s (Eichhorn and Huebner 2022). This finding is supported in emerging studies in other nations, which indicate generally positive associations between voting age and engagement particularly where other conditions supporting engagement (for example, education and ease of voting registration) strengthen that relationship (Eichhorn and Bergh 2021). Long term positive effects on voting turnout have also been noted in recent studies in Austria (Aichholzer and Kristzinger, 2019) and Latin America (Franklin 2019).

Summary: Fairness for Future Generations

Overall the size of the population of 16 and 17-year-olds usually resident in New Zealand in 2022 is comparatively small, 125,840 citizens. This is a ratio of just 3.71% of the New Zealand voting population of 3,967,750. Enfranchising these citizens would make a significance difference to ensuring a fairer future for New Zealand's democracy

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