

# What young people think about lowering the local government voting age

Members of the South Australian Student Representative Council (SA SRC) want young people to have a say in the decisions that impact their lives and futures. It is important that young people's voices are being heard, and that input from young people is included in decision making.

Young people across the country are advocating for Australia to join many countries around the world who have already lowered the voting age to 16 years. In South Australia, the focus of the SA SRC Our Future Our Vote campaign is to lower the voting age to 16 for local government elections.

Lowering the voting age is an opportunity to make democracy fairer, improve civics education, recognise young people's rights and strengthen young people's participation in issues affecting them.

The voting age has changed throughout history, and should continue to evolve to reflect the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of young people today. Arguments against lowering the age tend to imply that voting requires a certain level of knowledge, maturity, and judgment, however such a standard is rarely applied to adult voters.

## About the SA SRC

The SA SRC is an initiative of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, supported by the Foundation for Young Australians. The 2024 SA SRC cohort comprises 150 students from 80 schools representing 44 South Australian electorates.

The Year 10, 11, and 12 students, drawn from across the state, work together to create genuine, student-led change within their communities. The SA SRC brings together passionate young people who want to create a better future for themselves and for future generations of South Australians.

## About the Commissioner for Children and Young People

Established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016*, the Commissioner for Children and Young People promotes and advocates at a systemic level for the rights, interests, and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia. The work of the Commissioner is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and informed by the experiences and issues of South Australian children and young people themselves.

## What we did

To ensure the Our Future Our Vote campaign is representative of young people across the state, SA SRC members distributed a poll at schools throughout South Australia between March and April 2024.

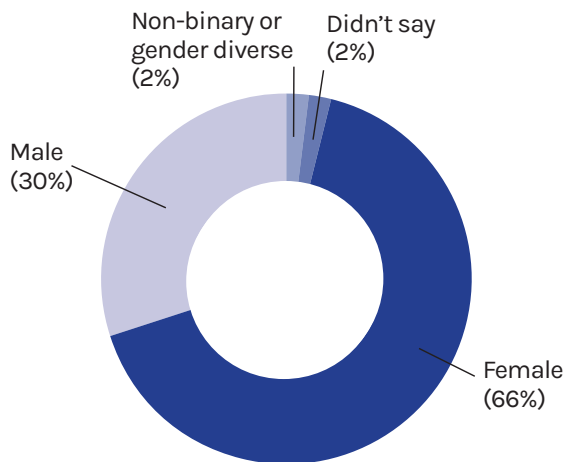
Students in Years 7-13 were asked about their thoughts on the voting age, how prepared they feel to vote, and what they would need to feel more prepared to vote.

## Who responded?

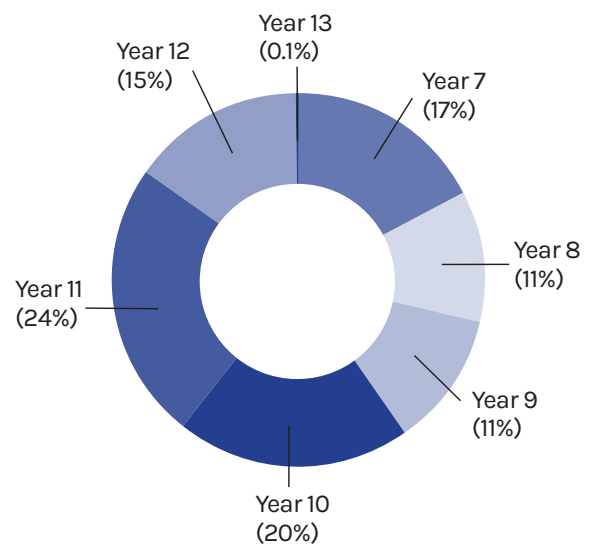
A total of 769 students from 36 secondary schools across South Australia responded to the poll, representing all three school sectors (Government, Catholic and Independent). Schools were located in 17 local government areas, and responses came from students in various year levels and with different genders.



### Gender



### Year level

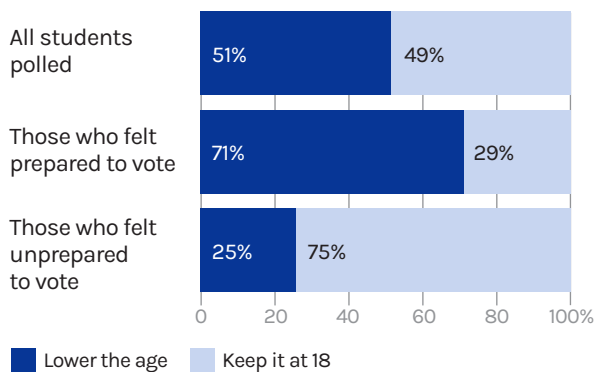


# At what age should people be able to vote?

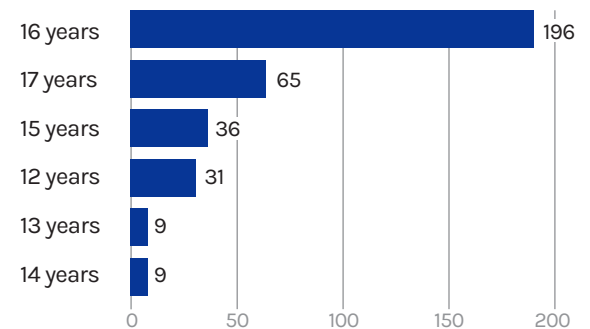
Just over half of all students who participated in the poll thought that the voting age should be lower than 18. Those who felt more prepared to vote were more likely to think the voting age should be lower, while those who felt less prepared were more likely to say it should remain at 18.

The most common suggestion for a lower voting age was 16 years, followed by 17, 15, and 12 years of age.

## Should the voting age be lower?



## Preferred lower voting age

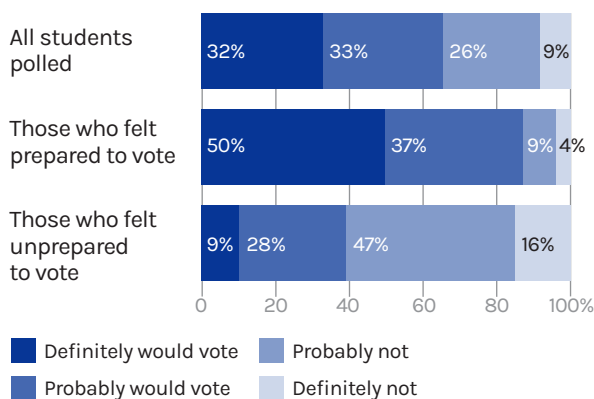


## If the age was lowered...

Most students reported that they would vote if they were 16 or older and the voting age was lowered for local government elections. Almost two thirds (65%) of all respondents said they would 'definitely' or 'probably' vote, while just over one quarter (26%) said 'probably not', with only 9% saying 'definitely not'.

Those who felt prepared to vote were more likely to say they would vote than those who did not feel prepared.

## If the voting age was lowered, would you vote?



## Students who said they would vote if the age was lowered explained that this was because:

We care about the future and our communities, so we want to have a say on our rights and the future of our country, and participate in electing the people that represent us.

- “ I would love to have a voice on what goes on in my local government.” - Year 10
- “ I like to have a say in my rights and the world I live in.” - Year 11
- “ It is important that young people’s voices are heard at the ballot box to ensure that the future concerns of young people can be heard and understood.” - Year 10
- “ Young people already have a concept of their values and what matters to them. Not only do we want to be acknowledged in this community, but we also want to play our part in fostering it.” - Year 11

Decisions made by politicians affect us now and into the future; we are the generation who will live with a world shaped by these decisions.

“ Having young people’s voices heard means holding politicians accountable for making change in areas that are most important to young people. It gives young people the opportunity to have a say on the matters that will affect their future.” – Year 12

“ I believe older people are stuck in the past and don’t make the right decisions for our future and giving young people a voice will help improve OUR future.” – Year 10

Our perspectives and experiences are different to those of older generations, so we are the ones who know what’s best for us.

“ If more younger kids who were more aware about what they need (especially since rates of having a mental disability or being queer are higher), being able to speak about it and those words being taken seriously legally, it would help.” – Year 11

“ Young people should be able to have a say in decisions that will ultimately affect them and the next generation. Youth have the best idea of current issues that are important to them as they the ones currently experiencing them.” – Year 10

We feel prepared to vote, or we know how to do the research needed to be prepared.

“ Because I know enough about my country and politics to be able to have a say and have my voice heard.” – Year 10

“ Young people are just as capable of understanding and forming their own logical opinions.” – Year 12

“ With all the information available these days, we’re more informed than ever before. We can actively participate in discussions and contribute fresh perspectives.” – Year 10

We are part of the community, and we are expected to act as adults in many ways, so we should be able to vote too.

“ We are able to drive, pay taxes, arrange doctors appointments, and have children (in certain circumstances) – there is not a large enough difference between sixteen and eighteen year olds for us to be held back.” – Year 11

“ I think 16 is good because the government handles roads and stuff so I think whoever drives can have a say in it.” – Year 9

“ Having young people’s voices heard means that the people who have to live in the future will get to have a say in the future. If we can get jobs, pay taxes, and drive, then why can’t we vote.” – Year 10

“ We as a society have arbitrarily made 18 the age of political maturity and old enough to be in charge of oneself – why that number specifically? You don’t gain anything special at 18 years old, your brain is still developing, most still have schooling of some form. There is nothing special about 18, so why is it so held onto in matters of political decision-making? People mature at different stages, and choosing an age seemingly at random won’t change that.” – Year 12

### Students who said they wouldn’t vote explained that this was because:

We need more information and education to feel confident and comfortable voting.

“ I am not fully educated on how the voting/governments system works.” – Year 10

“ I would need to educate myself more about politics, but would like to have my voice heard.” – Year 11

“ I wouldn’t know how to decide on who is better.” – Year 8

We need support to make informed decisions for ourselves as it can be easy to be influenced by others.

“ I would feel to much pressure from peers and family to vote for what they believe instead of casting my own vote, as I am not an adult I feel very influenced by the elders in my life such as my parents.” – Year 10

Voting is a big responsibility, and it can be difficult to find the information we need to be fully informed.

“ Too much responsibility for younger people. Not enough information about available governments/independent parties.” – Year 12

It can be difficult to take interest in politics when school and other commitments are a priority.

“ Yes it impacts my future, but I must focus on studies.” – Year 10

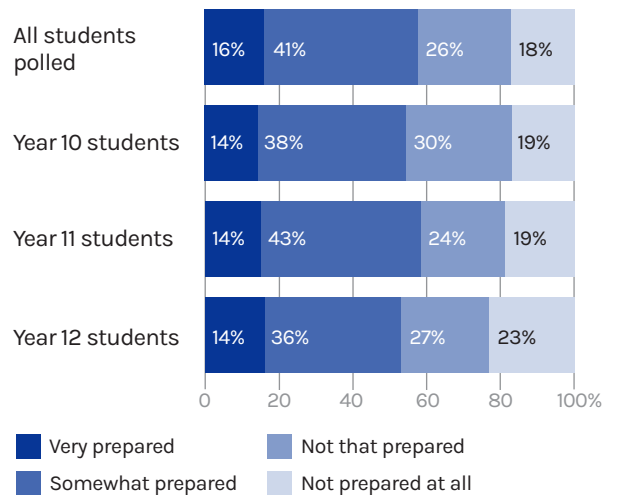
“ I have too many stressors in my life like getting good grades so that I can get into uni so I can get the job I want so I can live how I want. I don’t need the stress of voting on top of that.” – Year 11

## How prepared do students feel to vote?

Students most commonly reported feeling 'somewhat prepared' to vote (41% of all respondents). Only 16% felt 'very prepared' to vote. Just over one quarter (26%) said they were 'not that prepared', and 18% said they felt 'not prepared at all'.

Students reported feeling less prepared to vote as they get closer to the voting age, with almost one quarter of Year 12 students reporting that they did not feel prepared at all.

### How prepared do you feel to vote?



## What would help young people feel more prepared to vote?

Regardless of their views on the voting age or how prepared they felt, most of our peers identified at least one thing that would help them feel more prepared to vote. More information and education was by far the most common response.

Students want more opportunities to learn and talk about voting at school from a younger age, including:

- greater access to civics education for all students rather than this 'only being an option in senior years' for those who do certain subjects
- presentations and expos that explain the enrolment and voting processes and enable students to ask questions
- opportunities to talk with teachers about voting and issues affecting the community.

Students want to learn more about:

- how voting works and what it means, including the process of enrolling, why it's important, how it is relevant to young people's lives and communities, and what options there are

- the candidates and parties or 'who we are voting for', including their values and their plan for the community, their background and motives, how well they understand or represent young people, and whether they can be trusted
- how democracy works and 'what goes on in politics', including the role of parliament, local government and other levels of government, and how decisions are made
- issues affecting people and communities locally and globally, 'today's political landscape' and 'what society needs'.

Students want more comprehensive school-based education to be supported by campaigns, guides and online resources outside of school aimed at and designed by and for young people.

Students want information that is:

- designed for young people
- clear and accessible, including on a centralised platform or website
- from a neutral and unbiased perspective
- helpful, transparent, trustworthy and practical rather than overwhelming, secret or focused on hate or political rivalries.

Students also want more opportunities to enrol and to practice voting, including through ‘open votes’ with people we trust, ‘mock voting’ and practice ballots at school, as well as video tutorials and in-depth instructional guides. Students want guidance that supports young people to ‘actually know what we’re doing’, while having ‘access to the information we need to make informed decisions about who to vote for’.

“ Having more education on what goes on in politics, but from every perspective so there is less bias. Knowing that I have someone inside the parliament that understands what young people want. Maybe having more coverage in schools of programs like youth parliament so more kids understand they have a chance to get your voice and ideas heard.” – Year 10

“ I believe that civics education could be presented as a workshop for year ten, eleven, and twelve students that would educate them on how to vote, how to behave at the ballot box, and how to decide who to vote for based on the election campaigns.” – Year 10

“ I believe civics education should look like learning how and where to vote. It should be about teaching young people how to access unbiased information around political parties so they can make informed voting decisions.” – Year 12

“ Civic education needs to be equitable and equal for all young people across the state. The differences in civic opportunity and leadership need to be acknowledged and addressed if a state civic education program rolls out. Civic education in the state should be updated, relevant, in-depth and create a generation of young people who are informed and aware. Should include info on voting, responsibilities, referendums, etc.” – Year 11

“ In order to allow Australians to understand civics in their own elections and lives, education must be offered surrounding political systems, decision making, policy making, and decision responsibility, allowing voters to make the most honest and informed decisions.” – Year 11

“ Civics education should start young rather than being an option in senior years. Making young people understand why voting and politics are important to their lives is crucial in changing things. Education around how to vote and how it’s processed is important.” – Year 10

## For more information

For more information about Our Future Our Vote and other SA SRC campaigns please contact Niav Andrews, Engagement and Participation Officer, at [Niav.Andrews@sa.gov.au](mailto:Niav.Andrews@sa.gov.au)