

April 2004

Main headings

The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the UK by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties.

On 1 April 2002, The Boundary Committee for England (formerly the Local Government Commission for England) became a statutory committee of The Electoral Commission. Its duties include reviewing local electoral boundaries.

Age of electoral majority
Report and recommendations

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8.16 The Electoral Commission therefore recommends that the minimum age for all levels of voting in public elections in the UK should remain at 18 years for the time being.

8.17 However, the question of the minimum voting age should be formally reviewed on a periodic basis, as it is entirely possible that future circumstances may change sufficiently to make a change to the voting age an appropriate step.

8.18 There are two factors in particular that may change the social context to a sufficient degree to make a lower voting age appropriate in the future. The first is the longer-term development of citizenship teaching across the UK, mainly in respect of improving social awareness and responsibility among the young. The second (quite possibly influenced by the first) is any change in society's attitude to the general age of majority, preferably expressed through the medium of an independent review encompassing wide public debate.

8.19 The Commission proposes to undertake further detailed research on the social and political awareness of those at – and a few years either side of – the current minimum voting age, which should provide more evidence on this crucial area of the debate.

8.20 The Electoral Commission would expect to undertake a further formal review of the minimum voting age within five to seven years of this report. We would encourage the Government to consider in the meanwhile initiating a wider review of the age of majority given the length of time that has passed since the last one.

Candidacy age

8.21 Although the picture is mixed in the responses to our consultation paper, general public opinion as revealed in the results of our survey work appears to be opposed to lowering the minimum candidacy age to any significant degree (if at all). However, it seems public opinion is less firmly held on the issue of the candidacy age than the voting age, and much more likely to change if a reasoned argument is made. There appear to be sufficiently strong arguments to justify such a change.

8.22 We have seen that the most common approach worldwide is to have a single age that is the minimum for both voting and candidacy rights. As we stated in our chapter on international comparators, in our view this supports the proposition that there should be no differential in the UK between the two minimum ages.

8.23 The argument for retaining a differential rests on the belief that a person needs to have more experience of life to be a candidate than to be a voter. However, it is certainly not inconceivable, in our view, that there may be some people younger than 21 who would be both interested in being, and able to act effectively as, an elected representative.

8.24 The Commission notes that – especially when contrasted with the blanket age bar in legislation – the election process itself already provides a far more subtle and flexible mechanism by which the public can decide who is and is not suitable to hold elected office. Most candidates will also need to pass through

the preliminary stage of a political party selection process before getting onto the ballot paper at all.

8.25 We recognise that particular circumstances at ages lower than 18 may need to be taken into account. However, in the context of a minimum voting age of 18, we can see no reasonable argument why the candidacy age should not be brought into line with the current voting age.

8.26 The Electoral Commission therefore recommend that the minimum age of candidacy be reduced from 21 to 18, the minimum voting age currently in force.

8.27 We note that the Scottish Executive have a Bill currently before the Scottish Parliament, provisions in which would lower the candidacy age to 18 for local elections in Scotland (a devolved matter and therefore outside the remit of this review). It is likely that any implementation of these provisions would take place before any of our own recommendations would be implemented in respect of other elections in the UK (if accepted by the Government), so we will watch developments in Scotland with interest.

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