

Response to the Scottish Government's Consultation Paper on Electoral Reform

Submission from the Scottish Youth Parliament March 2018



Introduction

The Scottish Youth Parliament represents Scotland's young people. Our vision for Scotland is of a nation that actively listens to and values the meaningful participation of its children and young people. Our goal is to make this vision a reality, in order to ensure Scotland is the best place in the world to grow up.

We are a fundamentally rights-based organisation, and our mission, vision and values are grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In particular, our purpose embodies Article 12: that young people have the right to express their views freely and have their opinions listened to in all matters affecting them. As a completely youth-led organisation, the words and sentiment of Article 12 have a profound importance for our work.

Our democratically elected members listen to and recognise the issues that are most important to young people, ensuring that their voices are heard by decision-makers. We exist to provide a national platform for young people to discuss the issues that are important to them, and campaign to effect the change they wish to see.

SYP's Values are:

- **Democracy** - We are youth-led and accountable to young people aged 12 to 25. Our democratic structure, and the scale of our engagement across Scotland, gives us a mandate that sets us apart from other organisations.
- **Rights** - We are a fundamentally rights-based organisation. We are passionate about making young people aware of their rights, and ensuring that local and national government deliver policies that allow those rights to be upheld.
- **Inclusion** - We are committed to being truly inclusive and work tirelessly to ensure the voices of every young person from every community and background in Scotland are heard.
- **Political Impartiality** - We are independent from all political parties. By working with all stakeholders, groups, and individuals who share our values, we can deliver the policies that are most important to young people.

Our approach

SYP welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's consultation on Electoral Reform (hereinafter referred to as 'the consultation'). This response is based on existing SYP Policy on elections, as well as the online responses to an online survey ('Pre-

SYP65 Consultation Survey’) where Electoral Reform questions were co-designed by Suki Wan MSYP for Glasgow Shettleston and Vice Chair of SYP, the Elections Team at the Scottish Government and the Electoral Management Board for Scotland. The Survey was completed in advance of a Consultation Workshop called ‘Elections of the Future,’ due to be held at our rescheduled 65th National Sitting in Saltcoats, North Ayrshire on 14th April 2018.

SYP’s Conveners Group, a group of ten democratically elected young people who lead on policy at SYP and their respective ten Subject Committees, decided to respond to this public consultation through a youth-led process at their last meeting in January 2018. They have approved this response.

We hope the findings of that workshop can supplement this official response to the consultation. Therefore, this response is not structured around the official consultation questions, but on SYP Policy and then the responses to the co-designed questions on Electoral Reform in the Pre-SYP65 Consultation Survey.

SYP Policy

- **The voting age should be lowered to 16 for all elections and referendums in Scotland, the UK, and Europe.**
([Lead the Way Manifesto](#) Commitment passed on 12th March 2016 with 70% agreement).
- **The government and political parties should actively encourage young people, women, and minority groups to participate in politics and stand as candidates.**
(*Lead the Way Manifesto* Commitment passed on 12th March 2016 with 71% agreement).
- **The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that in the interest of democracy and making every vote count, the UK and Scottish Governments should replace the First Past the Post System (FPTP) with the Single-Transferrable Vote (STV) as the way of electing constituency members to their respective parliaments.**
(Policy statement passed 16th October 2016 with 68% agreement, Members’ Motion by Keiran O’Neill MSYP).
- **The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that the minimum age to stand in all elections should be lowered to 16.**
(Policy Statement passed on 20th March 2015 with 55% agreement, Members’ Motion by Nicola Bruley former MSYP).

- **The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that every young person should learn about politics in secondary schools across Scotland, including teaching about political systems and voting, to ensure that they have the best start for engaging in politics.**

(Policy Statement passed on 27th October 2017 with 89% agreement, Members' Motion by Louisa McCearney MSYP and Luca Delpippo MSYP).

'Elections of the Future' - Ongoing Consultation

The Elections Team at the Scottish Government and the Electoral Management Board for Scotland will co-facilitate the aforementioned Consultation Workshop on Electoral Reform, 'Elections of the Future', with Madeleine Brown MSYP for GirlGuiding Scotland, Convener of the Culture and Media Subject Committee, on 14th April 2018. It will take place with the members of this Committee - around 17 MSYPs from across Scotland. For more information on the demographic of SYP's current membership, please see [here](#).

The Pre-SYP65 Consultation Survey is aimed at young people aged 12-25 on issues including 'Elections of the Future'. This survey received 121 responses, from 25 of all 32 Local Authorities across Scotland. **At least one third of respondents cannot vote in Scottish elections at present (30% of respondents overall were aged 12-14).** The gender balance of responses was as follows: 51.26% female, 40.34% male, and 3.36% with a non-binary identity and 1.68% who prefer to use their own term. Responses came from young people currently in school, college, university, full-time or part-time work, and apprenticeships or training. 69.75% of responses came from young people in school.

MSYPs consulted widely with the young people they represent in their constituencies and national voluntary organisations before the workshop, using their unique democratic mandate to ensure they represented the views of as wide a cross-section of young people in Scotland as possible. Therefore, our comments are fundamentally shaped by the genuine views of young people. However, as our membership represents young people aged 12-25, SYP's response is not representative of children below the age of 12, or of adults over 26.

What changes would you like to see for Scottish elections?

With the new powers the Scottish Parliament has gained over the conduct of Scottish Parliamentary elections and electoral registration, and existing devolved responsibility for local government elections, young people want to see change in many areas.

Age

'If it is something affecting the young people of Scotland, let them have the right to vote.'

(Anonymous quote from the Pre-SYP65 Consultation Survey - all following quotes from same survey).

Many respondents focussed on the voting age, and in line with the SYP Policy outlined on the previous page, reiterated the call for Votes at 16 in all elections taking place in Scotland. Some respondents called for the voting age to be decreased further than this to 14, and one respondent said:

'They should let kids vote as we are smarter than people think and we often get underestimated when it comes to extremely important things that affect us directly and not just shove us to the side and look at us like a statistic because they are voting for our lives.'

One respondent also called for 'more ability to stand', and another with 'improved gender representation' - which aligns with SYP's policy call on page two to encourage young people, women, and minority groups to participate in politics, enhancing diversity.

Electoral system

Many respondents wanted a more proportional voting system which is more representative of and connected to constituents. Some called for the Additional Member System to be replaced by the Single Transferrable Vote (STV) system (which SYP Policy advocates for on page two). However, others communicated that the STV system in local government elections is 'confusing' and needs to be better explained to young people. A couple of respondents supported a boundary review to ensure a better representation of constituents in parliamentary decision-making.

Education, information, accessibility (electronic voting)

Chiming with SYP Policy on political education on page two, and to resolve the aforementioned confusion around the different voting systems in use in Scotland, many respondents called for better education in schools, colleges, universities and general awareness-raising about how to engage in the electoral process from a young age:

'A better education on why voting is important. Have information about why and how we vote accessible for everyone. Also limit the jargon and buzzwords used in manifestos and interviews so that the information is available to everyone no matter if their first

language isn't English or if they have a disability or have a lower standard of formal education.'

Respondents want information around elections to be non-biased and easily accessible ('more understandable' and 'less daunting'). They wanted more information aimed at young people with more notice before elections, and for parties to be encouraged to campaign with and to young people to enhance engagement. One suggestion was to have a database with access to information on all the candidates. Another idea was to ensure there is:

'A clear distinction between UK and Scottish issues, as issues from both elections are being crossed over into campaigns of the other when they aren't affected.'

A couple of respondents considered compulsory or mandatory voting as a way forward, and automatic voter registration was mentioned twice. To improve voter turnout, one respondent suggested holding local government elections alongside Scottish Parliament elections again.

Electronic voting and options to vote from home were largely supported by respondents, and one respondent wanted an improved method of voting by proxy. A young person in support of electronic voting said:

'Disabled people and the elderly and currently isolated from taking part in elections, in particular if they do not have a relative caring for them that can vote by proxy, and I would like to see alternative methods introduced to ensure that all of Scotland's citizens have a say.'

Transparency and influence

To combat political apathy and increase engagement in elections in Scotland, respondents called for greater transparency of elected representatives, including a better maintenance of public trust through doing more 'to keep the promises of those being elected'. This aligns with SYP's approach to meaningful participation grounded in Article 12 of the UNCRC- young people's voices have to ultimately influence the decision-making, and for this outcome to be fed back to them, for this right to truly be realised.

One suggestion was for there to be more of an obligation on candidates to answer questions from the public rather than to 'divert and avoid the question'. Another respondent wanted to influence policy through more frequent referenda like in Switzerland. Another called for an optional issue-based and non-party political element to elections in Scotland.

Do you agree that the right to vote should be extended to include everyone legally resident in Scotland?

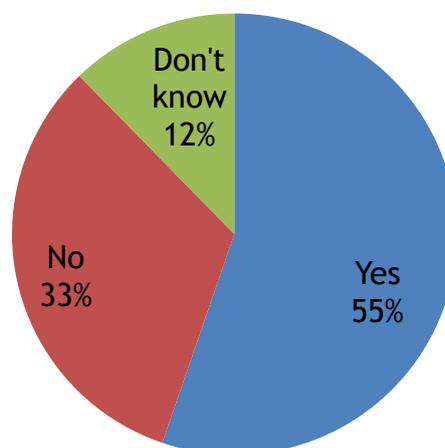
The responses indicate that some thought this question was asking about the voting age rather than residency specifically, as there was an introduction to this question which referenced Scotland leading the way by lowering the voting age to 16. Nevertheless, a majority of respondents agreed with the question above. Some respondents said:

'Yes as a resident of the country ... you deserve a say [sic] in how the country is governed' and *'Yes - if you live here, you contribute and should have a say'*.

Others who responded positively to the question added a caveat that you should be legally resident for a certain period of time, with suggestions ranging from one to five years. Some objected to prisoner voting as another caveat to their support.

Do you think that the Scottish Government should introduce a form of electronic voting?

Electronic voting - respondents answered:



As evident in the table above, respondents voted in favour of electronic voting.

Some comments included:

- Many concerns around the risks of the system being hacked, manipulated and corrupted, to the extent it would make some young people less likely to vote (one respondent recommended the Estonian model as a secure one).
- Some concerns about a lack of access to the internet or electronic devices.

- That the electronic system would make it easier to vote and encourage young people to vote.
- That changing the system will not make young people more likely to vote, but more confidence in elected representatives would.
- *‘Electronic voting would make people think less and may lead to more instinctive decisions instead of more thought through ones’.*
- *‘I would definitely choose this method of voting as it is a more flexible way of voting around my work and disability. I’d be far more likely to vote in future elections if I didn’t have to find the nearest polling station.’*
- *‘I’d definitely be less intimidated by voting and therefore would more likely vote than if it remains the way it is currently.’*
- *‘I might choose it if I didn’t have time to go [sic] to a polling station but I like the idea of getting out the house and taking a wander [sic] with my parents to the polling station.’*
- *‘I would be more likely to vote if it could either be done electronically or from home.’*
- *‘I would choose this method of voting but however the older generation might not feel as comfortable with voting this way’.*

Conclusion

SYP’s response to this consultation shows that young people are still calling for Votes at 16 in all elections taking place in Scotland, and wish to see **more accessibility in terms of who can stand** for elections in Scotland including **better representation of young people, women and minority groups**.

SYP calls for a **more proportional voting system such as STV** to be used in Scottish Parliament elections, however, any changes would need to be accompanied by the implementation of young people’s calls for **enhanced political education** on voting systems, registration and engaging in politics from a young age. The young people we asked also called for more **non-biased, accessible information** around elections and voting, with **greater engagement with young people** during elections.

Despite some confusion around the question about **extending voting rights to all legal residents in Scotland**, the majority of respondents **supported this change**, with a few respondents qualifying their agreement with concerns around prisoner voting rights and a minimum period of residency to access these rights.

Electronic voting methods and enhanced proxy voting were largely supported by respondents in order to improve accessibility and voter turnout. The electronic method was strongly supported by some physically disabled respondents, who would find it easier not to have to attend the polling station to vote. However, many respondents expressed security concerns around implementing such a change, especially around **hacking and corruption**.

SYP believes that by implementing SYP Policy on page two and listening to the views from this initial consultation with young people, the Scottish Government can ensure Scotland really is the best place in the world in which to grow up and take an active part in local and national political decision-making.

Contact us:

Laura Pasternak

Public Affairs Officer

Laura.p@syp.org.uk

0131 557 0452

Visit us:

On our website: www.syp.org.uk

On Twitter: @OfficialSYP