***Ellie Levenson: The voting age should be raised, not lowered***

The majority of 16-year-olds are just not mature or responsible enough to have the vote

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Top of Form

Bottom of Form

To be against lowering the voting age is seen by most progressives as symptomatic of losing one's youth and gaining some grumpiness. So for a relatively young progressive such as myself to be against lowering the voting age - well, I might as well have said let's abolish the vote altogether going by the looks I have received from many of my colleagues on the left.

The Electoral Commission releases its report on lowering the voting age today, and if the Labour Party's growing sympathy towards this idea is anything to go by, it is likely that it will come out in favour of it.

This is a mistake, for two reasons. The first is that it is a simple case of ostrich head meets sand. Yes, it is a sad fact that over 40 per cent of those eligible to vote in this country did not exercise their right to do so in the last general election. It's generally agreed that this constitutes some kind of crisis of political engagement. However, by increasing the number of people eligible to vote you merely have the same percentage of a larger number of people not voting, or perhaps an even larger percentage of people not voting, as the youngest group of eligible voters usually has the lowest turnout.

But the second reason, and most important one, is that the majority of 16 year olds are just not responsible enough or mature enough to have the vote.

Those who argue against this use the bundling of rights argument: the age of consent is 16, people can get married at 16, people can join the armed forces at 16, and that there should be no taxation without representation. Therefore, they think, it follows that 16-year-olds should also have the vote.

Well, we know that just because a person has sex does not mean that they are responsible. Look at Britain's teen pregnancy rate. There seems little logical connection between having the right to participate in sex and having the right to vote. Animals, after all, have sex, yet we do not propose giving our pets the vote.

To get married in England and Wales people under 18 require parental consent. Do we want people to ask for parental consent to vote for a party of their choice? And how many of us really think a 16-year-old is capable of making a life-changing and legally binding decision such as marriage? Financial institutions certainly do not think so. You must be 18 to sign binding contracts or to own land in your own name. Therefore 16-year-olds, married with parental permission or not, cannot apply for a mortgage or own the house in which they live.

Similarly, under 18s need parental consent to join the armed forces, and in normal circumstances are not deployed on operations until they are 18. In fact, the UN supports raising the age of joining the forces to 18.

As for no taxation without representation, all young people pay tax if they spend money - VAT. A 10- year-old spending their pocket money on a burger in McDonald's or on a CD pays tax. Does this mean they should be given the vote? Or does this argument just refer to income tax, in which case, if tax is so inextricably tied up with voting rights. do they think the vote should be taken away from those whose incomes do not reach the threshold for paying income tax?

But whether or not a taxpayer, spouse, parent or soldier, 16-year-olds should not have the vote.

It is during a person's teenage years that they are most likely to be exposed to new ideas and points of view, be it through school, the new people they meet or from the media. This is the age at which people should be able to think through their political ideas and change them at will, debate and try out policies without having to act on them and without having to take responsibility for their ideas.

And it is at this age that teenagers are at their most rebellious and negative stage, a time when they are more keen on making a statement than acting responsibly. Rebellion against your parents' taste in music and their rules is one thing; let's not make that part of the democratic process by which our government is elected.

As we all know, maturity rates in teenagers differ tremendously, both in terms of the ability to think through an argument logically and in terms of the ability to understand cause and effect and to take responsibility for their own actions. Some 16-years-olds look and act as if they are in their twenties. Others are still childlike and unable to take on responsibility or act independently.

Voting is a serious matter. It is what makes a democracy, and must be taken seriously by all voters. I don't think most 16-year-olds are mature enough to vote. Some will be capable of voting (and having sex, getting married and joining the armed forces) at 16 - others will not be ready at 18. As the law must be arbitrary, we need the highest common denominator, and 18 is a better line than 16.

So perhaps "should we lower the voting age?" is the wrong question. Instead it should be should we raise it, and if so, to what age? I am 25. I think this would be a good age.