

Let science decide the voting age

Research on the adolescent brain can help us decide whether 16-year-olds should have the vote

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Societies have long had a raft of legal boundaries between adolescence and adulthood, decreeing at what age we can or cannot do things such as drive, drink alcohol or vote. In most countries, 18 is the age of majority for most purposes, but there are all sorts of exceptions.

The US has probably the most diverse and logically inconsistent array of limits. You can drive at 16 but not drink alcohol until 21. In between those two extremes fall the ages at which you can see a movie intended for adults, enter into a legally binding contract, or buy cigarettes. Moreover, in most US states 12-year-olds who commit a serious violent crime can be tried as adults, because they are viewed as “old enough to know better”, whereas a 25-year-old with a clean driving record might not be able to rent a car without paying an “immaturity premium”.

Sentiment, be it political or public, tends to dictate these limits, with little regard for what we know about the psychological maturity of young people.

Which begs the question: can the age of majority be better determined by paying heed to science? Advances in the study of brain development have greatly furthered our understanding of how, why, and in what ways intellectual capabilities change during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Let us apply this to the issue at hand.

Over about 40 years – not long in the grand scheme of things – the voting age in Scotland has dropped from 21 to 16, although 16 applied only in the case of the independence referendum. From the perspective of brain science, is one of these ages a wiser choice than the other, or should the UK continue to split the difference at 18? And if the voting age were lowered to 16 across the UK, should other boundaries be eased as well? In the 1970s, for example, the US lowered the age of alcohol consumption when the [voting age fell to 18](#) (although most states later reverted the drinking age to 21 amid drink-driving concerns).

Research on [adolescent brain development](#) does not point to an obvious age at which a sharp legal distinction between adolescents and adults should be drawn for all purposes, but it is very informative. People reach various kinds of maturity between the ages of roughly 15 and 22. Adolescents’ judgement in situations that permit unhurried decision-making and consultation with others – what psychologists call “cold cognition” – is likely to be as mature as that of adults by 16. In contrast, adolescents’ judgement in situations characterised by heightened emotions, time pressure or the potential for social coercion – “hot cognition” – is unlikely to be as mature as that of adults until they are older, certainly no younger than 18 and perhaps not until they are 21. This distinction is partly related to our understanding of

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Cold cognition is relevant to matters such as voting, granting informed consent for medical procedures or taking part in a scientific study, and competence to stand trial in court. In these, adolescents can gather evidence, consult advisers (such as parents, physicians or lawyers), and take time before making a decision. Time pressure and peer pressure aren't usually factors.

I see no reason why a pregnant 16-year-old, given adequate time and the opportunity to discuss the decision with an adult, shouldn't be able to get an abortion or contraception without her parents' involvement, or why we shouldn't let 16-year-olds vote. Indeed, they can vote in Austria, Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and Nicaragua.

I certainly wouldn't recommend changing the age limit to 16 for all purposes, though. A later threshold is more sensible for matters that involve hot cognition, such as driving, drinking and criminal responsibility. Here the circumstances are usually those that bring out the worst in adolescents' judgement. They frequently pit the temptation of immediate rewards against the prudent consideration of long-term costs, occur against a backdrop of high emotion, and are influenced by other adolescents.

These are the very conditions under which adolescent decision-making is more impulsive, more risky and more myopic than that of adults. Given this, we ought to set the minimum driving age and the minimum age of adult criminal responsibility at 18, and continue to restrict minors' access to alcohol, tobacco and, where it is legal, marijuana.

Science cannot be the only consideration in drawing legal boundaries, to be sure, but it ought to play a role in these discussions. I don't harbour any delusions about the use of scientific evidence to inform policy-making, though. If the political will is absent, no amount of science, no matter how persuasive, will change the law.

“Science cannot be the only consideration in drawing legal boundaries, but it ought to play a role”

Politicians and advocacy groups use science in the way that drunks use lampposts – for support, not illumination. That quip, ironically, originated from the pen of one Andrew Lang, a poet, scholar and son of Scotland.

This article appeared in print under the headline “Thinking outside the box coming of age, little by little”

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