



16 October 2023

S23.14

## **Submission to the Justice Committee on the Electoral (Lowering Voting Age for Local Elections and Polls) Legislation Bill**

### **Introduction**

1. The National Council of Women of New Zealand, Te Kaunihera Wāhine o Aotearoa (NCWNZ) is an umbrella group representing around 60 affiliated organisations and 300 individual members. Collectively our reach is over 200,000 with many of our membership organisations representing all genders. NCWNZ has 13 branches across the country.
2. NCWNZ's vision is a gender equal New Zealand and research shows we will be better off socially and economically if we are gender equal. Through research, discussion and action, NCWNZ in partnership with others, seeks to realise its vision of gender equality because it is a basic human right.
3. This submission has been prepared by the NCWNZ Decision Making and Influence Action Hub and the Parliamentary Watch Committee after consultation with the membership of NCWNZ.

### **Executive summary**

4. The NCWNZ membership was split in its support of the policy objective of this Bill to reduce the voting age in local elections and polls from 18 to 16 years of age. Those in favour of the Bill's objective feel that empowering young people with the ability to vote will benefit them and their communities. Those against lowering the voting age are concerned that young people do not possess the requisite knowledge and maturity to vote in a well-informed, unbiased manner. Members are strongly supportive of improved civics education, regardless of whether the voting age is lowered.

## Advantages to lowering the voting age in local elections and polls

5. Members who support lowering the voting age to 16 years old believe that as the school curriculum changes and students are exposed to more of the history of Aotearoa New Zealand, students are better informed to develop positions on social and political issues. These young adults could offer a fresh perspective on key issues for the country (especially relating to climate change, environmental sustainability, inequality and social diversity) that would positively affect the direction taken by local councils around Aotearoa New Zealand. Civics education can mean young people are better informed than some adults.
6. At 16 years old, people may leave home, make enquiries about their parentage, legally have sex and care for a baby, work and pay taxes, drive a car, and, in some circumstances, leave school and enter full-time employment. Currently the NZ population has an imbalance in the proportions of the population who are young adults and senior citizens<sup>1</sup>. Reducing the voting age in local elections could correct the imbalance in political decision making between future generations and those who are older at the local level. This is important when planning changes for the next 30–50 years. It is also right that young people are able to engage in decisions that will affect their futures.
7. It is thought that many 16 year olds would give careful thought to how they exercised their vote. Current young voters are less likely to vote, but feeling that their views are valued and being enfranchised could encourage young people to see themselves as yielding a degree of political power. If the practice of voting started when they were still studying or living at home, it is possible that it might become a lifelong practice. Sixteen and seventeen year olds may also be more inclined to engage in and have respect for their local community if they are recognised as voters who can have a political voice and can influence what their community looks like.
8. One member who has had experience working as a researcher with young people considered that students have many and varied ideas that they are keen to share and that many are desperate to be heard. As one young woman told the member for a research project:

*“All our lives, we've grown up to the previous couple of generations' set of rules. Now, we're coming into our own and we're going, actually we have all of these opinions and we have all these ideas. We often just don't get given the time of day by adults a lot 'cos they think that we're immature or something”*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ehinz.ac.nz/indicators/population-vulnerability/age-profile/>

## Disadvantages to lowering the voting age in local elections and polls

9. Members who do not support lowering the voting age to 16 years old believe that people this young are not mature enough to make informed voting decisions. They are concerned about the influence of social media on young people, especially given the rise in dis- and mis-information online<sup>2</sup>. It is also felt that young people are at risk of being unduly influenced by their parents and teachers.
10. At age 16, a teenager's brain is still developing and many will not yet have a full understanding of the economic and social context their local government operates within. Members are worried that young people will fail to take into account the wide-ranging and long-term implications of their voting decisions.
11. It is acknowledged that good-quality civics education would play a significant role in enabling young people (as well as adults) to vote in a well-informed and unbiased manner. NCWNZ members are strongly supportive of improvements being made to civics education, regardless of whether the voting age is lowered.

## Conclusions

12. Thank you for the opportunity to submit on this Bill. NCWNZ members are split in their support of the Bill's policy objective. Members are strongly supportive of improved civics education, regardless of whether the voting age is lowered.



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<sup>2</sup> Disinformation and the 2023 New Zealand General Election (2023) The Disinformation project  
<https://thedisinfoproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Disinformation-and-the-2023-General-Election.pdf>