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"I THINK THE FLAGS ARE SAYING ONLY BRITISH PEOPLE FROM BRITISH CULTURE SHOULD STAY HERE."

Britain's first 16-year-old voters: how today's Year 8s see politics

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Introduction

In 2025, the Government announced that the voting age would be lowered to 16 for the next general election, expected in 2029. This change creates a brand-new electorate: today's Year 8 pupils – children aged just 12 and 13 – will form the first cohort of voters to enter the democratic system two years earlier than any generation before them. By 2029, around 1.7 million 16- and 17-year-olds will be eligible to vote for the first time, creating one of the largest new voting blocs in modern electoral history.[1]

Public First set out to begin to understand who these young people are, what shapes their emerging political identities, and how prepared they feel to take part in democratic life. We conducted four in-depth focus groups with Year 8 pupils in two very different parts of England:

- County Durham, a rural, low-diversity community where immigration and economic change are salient, and where Labour won the seat in 2024 with Reform in second place; and
- Bristol, a diverse, politically plural city where Labour won in 2024 and the Green Party took second place.

Together, these groups provide an early, vivid snapshot of the political worldviews forming inside Britain's newest electorate. Their responses offer one of the first insights into how Britain's future 16-year-old voters are beginning to see politics – long before they step into a polling booth.

It is important to note that these pupils are still several years away from entering the electorate, and there is a great deal of social, emotional and cognitive development that will take place between now

[1] *ONS population projections (Nomisweb, 2025 estimates). Approx. 840,000 16-year-olds and 866,000 17-year-olds projected for 2029.*

and when they are first eligible to vote. The views captured here should therefore be understood not as fixed political positions, but as early signals of how political identities and instincts begin to form. This research does not seek to predict how these young people will vote, but to understand the influences shaping their thinking at this early stage.

The picture that emerges is striking. Even before GCSE options are chosen, young people's politics are already diverging sharply by place. Bristol pupils spoke confidently about climate change, crime, and funding for the NHS. In County Durham, immigration dominated every conversation – often in emotive terms and often echoing views heard at home.

Across both settings, political knowledge was low. Few pupils could name the Prime Minister, no one knew that the voting age was changing, and yet almost all recognised Nigel Farage instantly. They were sharply alert to fake news and misinformation, and they trusted their parents and the BBC far more than any other source.

These insights suggest that when 16-year-olds enter the electorate for the first time, they will bring with them political identities that are shaped not by formal political institutions but by place, family, local issues, and the cues available in their immediate world. Understanding these early differences – and the uneven access to political education across England – will matter for any party hoping to engage Britain's newest voters over the next few years.

Who we spoke to

To understand the political instincts of Britain's first 16- and 17-year-old voters, Public First spent time with 40 Year 8 pupils – children aged 12 and 13 who, in just a few years' time, will enter the electorate earlier than any generation before them. We conducted four in-depth focus groups, designed to explore how young people talk, think and feel about political issues in their own words. We chose to run these focus groups in two places that could not feel more different.

County Durham: a rural community shaped by the politics of migration and economic change

Here we spoke to pupils in a tight-knit, low-diversity community where conversations at home often revolve around immigration, fairness and what has changed – or not changed – locally. In 2024, Labour held the seat but Reform finished a strong second, and that political tension is clearly part of the local atmosphere. These pupils offered a window into how political narratives travel through families and communities long before young people engage directly with politics themselves.

Bristol: a diverse, outward-looking city with a confident youth culture

In Bristol, we met pupils growing up in one of the most politically plural and socially diverse parts of the country. Here, Labour won in 2024 with the Green Party in second place – and pupils were quick to talk about issues like crime, climate change, and public services. These groups gave us a sense of what political socialisation looks like when young people are surrounded by variety, debate and a strong sense of agency.

How the groups were formed

Each group brought together 8-12 pupils with a mix of genders, ethnicities, prior attainment levels and family backgrounds. The groups reflected the diversity of their school communities, including similar proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals. The discussions were facilitated by trained moderators with enhanced DBS certificates, using a semi-structured discussion guide that allowed pupils to respond freely and in their own terms. Informed consent was collected from all pupils and their parents.

This research does not claim to represent every young person in England. But by listening closely in two very different places, we were able to see how sharply political identities start to diverge before teenagers have even chosen their GCSEs.

Findings

01 Awareness of the change to voting age appears to be very low.

02 Political knowledge is low – but young people do know Nigel Farage instantly.

03 Politics tracks place: 12-year-olds already live in different political worlds.

04 Flags have become political signals – and young people read them fluently.

05 Reactions to votes at 16 split sharply by place.

06 Trust runs through family and the BBC – not teachers or the internet.

07 Civic confidence is uneven from a very early age.

08 There is no single 'youth vote' taking shape.

Finding 01

Awareness of the change to voting age appear to be very low

Across all four groups, not a single pupil had heard that the voting age was being lowered to 16. The first cohort who will benefit from the reform were encountering it for the first time in these discussions. Their reaction ranged from surprise to confusion, underscoring how little political change is communicated to – or reaches – young teenagers.

This lack of awareness was universal - cutting across location, confidence, knowledge and political interest. Even pupils who spoke confidently about national issues had no idea they would soon be eligible to vote. For many, the discovery also raised immediate questions about consistency and fairness – why some responsibilities begin at 16 while others remain at 18.

> **I think it's a bit weird because you're classed as an adult when it's voting, but then for other things, like drinking alcohol, you can't do that. So put a line in: it's either 18 or 16.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, County Durham*

Others responded with surprise at how rapidly the rules seemed to be shifting, connecting this change to the wider history they had learned about voting rights.

> **I am pretty shocked… I remember before it was only men, then it changed to men and women, and then it changed from 21 to 18, and now it's 16. So it's changing a lot.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, Bristol*

These reactions suggest that while pupils had no prior awareness of the reform, they were quick to interpret it through the lenses of fairness, adulthood and social change.

Finding 02

Political knowledge is low – but young people do know Nigel Farage instantly

Pupils' knowledge of mainstream politics was extremely limited. Most could describe what a Prime Minister is, but many – especially in County Durham – thought the King also held some kind of executive power.

> **I feel like the government runs the country and Parliament, but the King's got the most power. He's just stripped the prince's titles off hasn't he. But the government couldn't have done that, so I feel like the King has got more power than Parliament, but he doesn't really use the power.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, County Durham*

And very few could name Keir Starmer, even when presented with a photograph of him.

> **I don't know anything about [Keir Starmer].**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, County Durham*

Those that did know who the Prime Minister was were not positive about his impact.

> **All I know is that Keir Starmer hasn't really made any changes.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, County Durham*

Several confidently asserted that Rishi Sunak was still Prime Minister, and only a handful could name any current party leaders. This low level of recall was consistent across both locations.

Yet certain political personalities cut through immediately. Nigel Farage was recognised in every group and provoked the strongest reactions – mostly admiration in County Durham and hostility in Bristol.

> **I think if [Farage] was to step in, he might make some changes – in a good way.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, County Durham*

> **[Reform] are racist.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, Bristol*

Recognition extended beyond current British politics. Pupils also identified Donald Trump and Boris Johnson with ease, often via social media rather than news.

> **[Donald Trump's] all over Tiktok, with his orange face.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, County Durham*

Interestingly, in one County Durham group Charlie Kirk, the right-wing influencer was assassinated earlier this year, came up unprompted, and awareness of his profile and views was much higher than any Westminster figure.

> **[Charlie Kirk] spoke true facts, and then sometimes he was really funny.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, County Durham*

These responses suggest an emerging political understanding shaped far more by personalities in the media environment than by knowledge of political structures or institutional leaders.

Finding 03

Politics tracks place – 12-year-olds already live in different political worlds

The pupils in Bristol and County Durham offered strikingly different pictures of what they believed the country's biggest issues were. Geography, community context and family conversations shaped their political instincts long before formal political education plays a role.

In County Durham, immigration dominated both discussions. Pupils spoke about "people on boats", housing allocation, taxes and fairness – often seeming to echo the views heard at home or from older relatives. Their comments showed not only strong feelings but a surprisingly nuanced ability to distinguish between refugees, legal migrants and people arriving illegally.

> **Immigration is the biggest thing I've heard about in a while in our country.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, County Durham*

> **Some migrants are paying taxes and actually doing jobs and they can stay, but if they're not, they're just staying here and getting a free home.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, County Durham*

> **Some people are assuming that every single immigrant is coming for bad reasons, that they all have bad intentions, instead of thinking some of them are legal, and some of the illegal ones have good intentions and just want to get away from a bad place that they're in.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, County Durham*

> **Refugees are coming from countries like Ukraine, but people are shunning them because they're from a different ethnic background. I don't think it's fair that people think the worst before they actually know what's actually going on...I feel like people, especially mothers, try and take their kids to the safest place.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, County Durham*

In Bristol, immigration featured a great deal less. Pupils instead focused on crime – particularly knife crime – NHS funding, housing pressures and the cost of living. They described these issues as immediate, local and personal, reflecting the concerns of a diverse and densely populated urban area.

> **I think maybe there could be more police, just patrolling the pavements and the roads and stuff, just because of how much crime there is. It's not good.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, Bristol*

> **I think doctors and nurses don't get paid as much as they should. Because actually they should be getting paid more because they save lives, and sometimes their life could be at risk if people come in that are maybe drunk or drugged.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, Bristol*

> **Schools and the NHS aren't getting enough funding.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, Bristol*

The contrast was immediate and consistent. Even at 12 and 13, pupils are already internalising different political priorities shaped by the communities they live in.

Finding 04

Flags have become political signals – and young people read them fluently

When pupils were shown images of the Union Jack and St George's Cross, their interpretations were immediate, confident and strikingly political. Their reactions went far beyond simple descriptions of what they saw. None described the flags as neutral or purely patriotic symbols, or as linked with international sporting events. Instead, across both Bristol and County Durham, pupils associated them with immigration debates, belonging, exclusion, and local tensions.

> **Recently I've seen loads of flags hung up everywhere. And I think my parents and some people in my family are saying they are anti-immigrant. And when people like refugees walk past, they feel kind of intimidated by them. They say they're putting them up because 'oh we love Britain', but I think they're actually just targeting immigrants.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, Bristol*

Several pupils talked about flags being used to "send a message", mark territory, or signal who "belongs" in a community. Some linked them to hostility towards refugees or migrants; others described discomfort or intimidation when they saw them displayed in certain contexts.

> **The flags that have been put up around here haven't really been put up for any good reason, they have been put up to make people feel like they aren't wanted or shouldn't be here and make them feel like they don't belong here because they didn't originate from England.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, County Durham*

> **I think the flags are saying only British people from British culture should stay here.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, Bristol*

Pupils also linked the flags directly to their own sense of fairness and belonging.

> **It makes me a bit upset. Because to me, it seems a little bit racist, like they love their country, but also they want immigrants to be kicked out and not be here, just because they can't tell which ones are here illegally and legally.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, County Durham*

Even at 12 and 13, pupils are already decoding symbolic politics – interpreting everyday images as part of wider social and cultural debates.

Finding 05

Reactions to votes at 16 split sharply by place

Once pupils learned that the voting age would be lowered to 16 – something none had known beforehand – their reactions diverged strongly between Bristol and County Durham.

In Bristol, pupils were overwhelmingly positive. They framed voting at 16 as a matter of fairness, future, impact, and having a voice in decisions that would shape their lives.

> **I think it's good because for the people voting at 16, it's your future as well. So what you vote for will have an effect on what will happen in your later life.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, Bristol*

Some felt confident that they already understood enough about the world to participate meaningfully, citing school and wider information sources.

> **We learn about stuff going on in the world in school and out of school, so we know what to do, if that makes sense. We know what we can do to make it better.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, Bristol*

Others also felt able to vote independently of their parents.

> **I think my parents would probably let me vote for who I'd want to vote for. Not what they would vote for.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, Bristol*

In County Durham, pupils were far more sceptical. They repeatedly emphasised that 16-year-olds would not be ready to vote without far more political education. Many believed young people would simply "copy their parents" and felt unprepared to understand manifestos or evaluate political choices.

> **I think no, it shouldn't be brought in because 16-year-olds don't have the education of politics and they won't be reading manifestos or anything like that, or they'd follow their dad or mum.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, County Durham*

A desire for political and legal education before voting was a strong, recurring theme across both locations.

> **I think if we learned law and politics in school, I think it would be a good idea [for us to vote]. But since we haven't… I don't think we're ready to make that choice.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, County Durham*

These contrasting instincts reveal early differences in political confidence and perceived readiness – differences that emerge long before pupils reach the age of enfranchisement.

Finding 06

Trust runs through family and the BBC – not teachers or the internet

Across all groups, pupils placed the most trust in their parents and in mainstream broadcast news, especially the BBC. They described parents as having "no reason to lie" and saw established broadcasters as factual and reliable.

> **I don't think [my parents] would have a reason to lie.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, Bristol*

> **[My parents] have only lied about things they feel is necessary to lie about. They wouldn't lie about something they don't need to.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, Bristol*

The BBC was consistently contrasted with other outlets pupils perceived as sensationalist or exaggerated.

> **[The BBC] doesn't exaggerate like the Daily Mail. With the Daily Mail, something will happen and then they just exaggerate it. Like it's way worse.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, Bristol*

By contrast, pupils showed deep scepticism toward online articles, social media, influencers, and – more unexpectedly – their teachers. Many felt that online information was too easily manipulated, and that teachers' perspectives could be incomplete or influenced by their own opinions.

> **You don't really know everything about [teachers], so I don't trust them.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, County Durham*

They also demonstrated a perhaps surprisingly mature awareness of misinformation and fake news, often articulating the need to verify information before believing it. This was clearly something both groups had been taught about at school.

> **They were going on about it in English. There's a lot of fake news out there, and the only reason I would trust it is if there was like valid evidence…most online articles are mostly fake because they need people to support them for what they're doing.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, Bristol*

> **You can’t trust anything you see on the internet.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, County Durham*

Taken together, these comments reveal a generation that is wary of digital information, cautious about adult authority beyond the family, and most trusting of sources seen as stable and accountable.

Finding 07

Civic confidence is uneven from a very early age

Pupils in Bristol and County Durham differed sharply in how confident they felt about influencing government or participating in civic life. These differences emerged naturally in discussion and were not dependent on prior political knowledge.

In Bristol, pupils could readily identify a range of ways people – including young people – might make their voices heard: joining protests, signing petitions, writing letters, acting collectively. They described these actions with confidence and saw them as plausible routes to change. But even in Bristol, pupils were sceptical about the effectiveness of protests, often seeing them as disruptive rather than impactful.

> **Protests in general, they're not good…say someone's trying to get to work and then they get stuck in a protest, they just can't get to work and do their job.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, Bristol*

In County Durham, very few pupils could initially identify any avenue for influencing government. The idea of civic participation felt distant, and pupils struggled to name examples until prompted. Protests, in particular, were seen as chaotic, stressful, or likely to escalate.

> **Even when people are saying it's going to be a peaceful protest, it ends up being more of an argument than a protest.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, County Durham*

Across both locations, pupils saw influencing government as something thar requires power, numbers and, often, adulthood – suggesting that young teenagers already view civic participation as difficult or inaccessible without collective backing.

> **I think [influencing the government] could be possible, but I think it's really hard to because if you want to speak to the government, you might need like, I wouldn't say power, but you would need a lot of people to agree with you for that to at least happen.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, Bristol*

These early differences in civic confidence mirror the broader patterns seen elsewhere: pupils are paying attention, but the degree to which they feel able to shape political life varies sharply by place.

Finding 08

There is no single ‘youth vote’ taking shape

Although these pupils are years away from entering the electorate, their political instincts are already diverging sharply – shaped by where they live, what issues dominate their community, and the conversations they hear at home.

The contrasts between County Durham and Bristol ran through almost every topic:

- The issues they prioritised
- Their confidence discussing politics
- Their sense of whether young people should vote
- Their ability to identify ways to influence government
- The emotional tone of how they interpreted symbols like flags
- Their level of political knowledge

These differences emerged despite pupils being the same age, in the same school year, in schools with similar levels of deprivation, and asked the same questions. What united them was not a shared ‘youth perspective’, but the extent to which place and family shaped the way they approached political questions.

Pupils in County Durham often framed voting choices in national terms, sometimes with strong views but limited knowledge of parties.

> **I would just choose the best for our country.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, County Durham*

> **[I would vote for] anyone who’s not Keir Starmer.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Male, County Durham*

In Bristol, pupils were more likely to link their choices to values, fairness and social issues – though knowledge still varied.

> **I’d probably vote for like the Green Party because it’s to do with immigration and like less racism and stuff.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, Bristol*

For some pupils, the lack of knowledge in itself was a barrier to imagining how they might vote.

> **I don't know, because I don't know any of the parties, I know Labour, but I don't know what they campaign for.**
> *Year 8 Pupil, Female, County Durham*

These perspectives show there is no singular 'youth vote' or 'youth issue' emerging. Instead, pupils are developing place-shaped political outlooks long before they are old enough to cast a ballot.

Conclusion

These conversations with Year 8 pupils offer an early window into the political instincts of the first cohort who will vote at 16 – and highlight what political parties will need to understand if they want to communicate effectively with them over the coming years.

What emerged was not a unified 'youth vote', but distinct political identities shaped by place, family culture and the issues young people encounter most directly. Views on immigration, crime and fairness often reflected local realities; confidence in discussing politics varied sharply; and pupils' trust was rooted firmly in parents and established broadcasters rather than online voices or political institutions.

For political parties, this creates both opportunities and challenges. These pupils responded most strongly to what feels immediate, concrete and grounded in their lived experience. Generic appeals to 'young people' are unlikely to resonate; instead, parties will need to engage with the specific concerns that matter in different parts of the country – whether that is crime, public services or migration pressures.

Clarity will also matter. Many pupils expressed uncertainty about how politics works and a desire for more straightforward information. They responded to authenticity and simplicity, and were quick to detect exaggeration or bias. Here, credibility – rather than slogans – is likely to carry weight.

Lowering the voting age will bring into the electorate a group whose political formation is still underway, influenced as much by home and local environment as by formal education. How effectively parties listen to them, reflect their experiences and earn their trust will shape not only how these young people vote, but how they understand politics itself.

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