

MCGUINNESS INSTITUTE PRESS RELEASE

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McGuinness Institute proposes lowering the voter pre-registration age from 17 to 15 years

The McGuinness Institute is exploring whether New Zealand should allow 15- and 16-year-olds to apply for registration with the Electoral Commission in preparation for future elections, enabling them to be automatically enrolled once they reach 18 years of age. Under the Electoral Act 1993, New Zealanders must be 17 years of age to apply to the Electoral Commission to pre-register. The Institute is interested in whether extending this opportunity to 15- and 16-year-olds could strengthen civic engagement and improve electoral participation among young people.

According to Electoral Commission Board Chair Simon Moore, approximately 440,000 eligible people are currently unenrolled, around 200,000 of whom are under 25.

‘Too many young people are failing to enrol to vote,’ says Wendy McGuinness, Chief Executive of the McGuinness Institute. ‘It’s time we examined practical ways to improve future enrolment and electoral participation among young New Zealanders.’

The proposal does **not** involve changing the voting age. Rather, it focuses on enabling younger New Zealanders to begin their electoral journey earlier by joining what the Institute calls a ‘pre-registration roll’ before becoming eligible to vote.

‘From women’s suffrage to lowering the voting age, New Zealand’s electoral history reflects an ongoing commitment to strengthening democratic participation and preparing citizens for civic responsibility. Exploring earlier registration is consistent with this tradition,’ says McGuinness.

‘Allowing 15- and 16-year-olds to apply for registration with the Electoral Commission could be a practical, cost-effective way to improve future voter participation while helping young people better understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens.’

Young adults often encounter circumstances that can make electoral participation challenging, including residential mobility, study or employment commitments, time overseas and transport constraints. By comparison, many 15- and 16-year-olds have stable living arrangements and remain engaged in formal education, creating valuable opportunities to build civic knowledge and support pre-enrolment before they become eligible to vote.

The Institute believes there are several potential benefits from lowering the pre-registration age:

- Increasing voter readiness ahead of the 2029 general election.
- Supporting civics and citizenship education within secondary schools through practical participation in the democratic process (e.g. bringing Electoral Commission pre-registration centres to schools).
- Encouraging discussion about elections, public policy and civic responsibilities within families, iwi and other communities.
- Helping young people become more informed about public policy, political leadership and democratic decision-making before they are eligible to vote.
- Strengthening future civic participation and community engagement.

- Aligning New Zealand with international trends aimed at increasing youth engagement in democracy.
- Improving the Electoral Commission's ability to maintain contact with young people as they transition from school into further education, employment and/or independent living.

The Institute has written to the Electoral Commission seeking advice on the practical implications, benefits, costs and legislative requirements associated with lowering the age of applying for registration from 17 to 15 years.

The Institute has asked the Commission to provide guidance on:

1. What legislative or administrative changes would be required to enable 15- and 16-year-olds to apply for pre-registration.
2. Which organisations, agencies or decision-makers would need to be engaged if such a proposal were to be progressed.
3. Whether a referendum would be helpful.
4. Any legal, operational or policy barriers that currently prevent such a change.
5. The likely costs associated with extending pre-registration to 15- and 16-year-olds.
6. Whether an amendment to section 82 of the Electoral Act 1993 would be sufficient to implement the proposal.
7. Whether the proposal could be implemented without an amendment to the Electoral Act. We consider this proposal could be implemented as part of the legal objective and responsibilities set out in the Act, to facilitate 'participation in parliamentary democracy'.

See also [‘Electoral Commission campaign looks to educate voters after enrolment changes’](#), RNZ, 10 August 2026.

For more detail on the proposal, please also see [the OIA to the Electoral Commission on the Institute's website](#).

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About the McGuinness Institute

The McGuinness Institute is an independent non-partisan think tank applying hindsight, insight and foresight to explore major challenges and opportunities facing New Zealand over the long term.

McGuinness Institute Te Hononga Waka

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