

History of the suffrage age

The suffrage age was last changed at the referendum of 19 September 1978, when 18 year olds got suffrage. The current suffrage age is the result of a long process, whereby a greater and greater part of the population gradually has been receiving suffrage.

Background

The expansion of suffrage falls mainly in two key periods. The first spans from the mid 1800s and up to the Constitution of 1915; the dominant issue regarding suffrage was to which extent suffrage should depend on economic qualifications, gender or ownership of property.

The second period spans from the 1920s and goes up to the Constitution of 1953. In this period the suffrage age comes into focus.

Since 1953 the development of suffrage has been based on the connection between suffrage and the development in young people's maturity and democratic obligations.

1834

The suffrage age is set along with the age of majority (from Danish law, 1683) of 25 years.

1849

With the 1849 Constitution, the suffrage age to Parliament was increased to 30 years, while the rule on suffrage following property ownership was abandoned and replaced by a requirement that servants should be exempt from voting, unless they had their own housing.

The suffrage age for the Landsting was also set at 30 years, but the age of eligibility to be elected was set at 40 years. Women did not have suffrage, the age of majority was still 25 years and servants and peasants continued to be excluded from voting.

1901

Towards the introduction of parliamentarism in 1901, the suffrage

age was again lowered to 25 years. At the same time, economic requirements were still tightened, and the major tax payers' and landowners' position in the Landsting was strengthened. On the whole this meant limited suffrage.

1915

The major step towards normal suffrage was taken in the years leading up to the 1915 Constitution. Women, servants and peasants were given suffrage. The suffrage age to the Landsting was however increased to 35. The suffrage age to Parliament therefore had to be gradually reduced down from 30 to the age of majority of 25. The suffrage age was to be lowered by 1 year every 4 years – so 16 years would have to pass before a reduction to 25 would be achieved.

1918

At the 1918 Parliamentary elections, 29 year olds therefore had a right to vote, but the overall ruling about the gradual reduction of the suffrage age was immediately abolished hereafter, so that the suffrage age could be lowered to 25 for the Parliamentary elections.

1920

In 1920, the Parliament twice passed a bill to lower the suffrage age to Parliament to 21 years. Both times it was rejected in the Landsting.

With the Constitution of 1915 and 1920, the normal suffrage was introduced – in Parliament at least – that all Danish citizens

(men and women) with fixed abode in the country had suffrage when they reached 25. Only receipt of social benefits could lead to loss of suffrage.

1939

In the mid 1930s the suffrage age debate reignited, fuelled by the desire for a constitutional reform. During the debate several bills about age limits were presented: a general reduction to 21 years, a reduction at the parliamentary elections to 21 years combined with a reduction to Landsting elections to 25 years and, finally, a general reduction to 23 years, which also adopted the principle of "one electorate, one vote." The Constitution bill was passed twice by both Parliament and the Landsting, so that it in 1939 it could be decided by referendum. Here the bill was rejected, as only 44.6 pct of those entitled to vote, voted for the bill while the requirements from the Constitution at that time was a minimum of 45 pct.

1940-1945

Many young people's active involvement in the resistance movement led to a political desire to lower the suffrage age in recognition of their efforts.

1946

In 1946 a constitution commission was set up to look at lowering the suffrage age.

1949

The suffrage age at the municipal elections was lowered to 23 years. The following years hence had different suffrage ages at the municipal and the parliamentary elections.

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CHANGES TO THE SUFFRAGE AGE 1834 - 2008

Year	Suffrage age – Parliament etc. (years)	Suffrage age – The Landsting (years)	Age of majority	Other
1834	25	25	25 years	Women have no suffrage. Strict requirements regarding economic status.
1849	30	30 (eligibility for election: 40)	25 years	Women, servants and peasants without suffrage.
1855	25	25 (eligibility for election: 40)	25 years	Women have no suffrage. Strict requirements for regarding economic status.
1915	30	35	25 years	Suffrage age to Parliament gradually reduced to 25 years.
1918	25	35	25 years	
1922	25	35	21 years	23 years at municipal elections.
1949	25	35	21 years	One chamber system. Normal suffrage for all public elections.
1953	23		21 years	
1961	21		21 years	
1969	21		20 years	
1971	20		20 years	
1976	20		18 years	
1978	18		18 years	

1953

It was widely agreed in the constitution commission that the suffrage age should be lowered, but agreements could not be made on whether it should be 21 years (like the age of majority) or 23 years. It was therefore decided that it should be determined by referendum in connection with the constitution bill of 1953. At the referendum all people who had reached 21 years could vote.

In addition to the decision about a new suffrage age, the constitution bill also included these following three suffrage-related points:

- 1) The suffrage age should be the same for elections to Parliament, municipal elections and parochial church council elections
- 2) The suffrage age should no longer be stated directly in the Constitution, but should be amended by normal law – although with the limitation that changes of the suffrage age should always be decided by referendum.
- 3) Abolition of the Landsting and introduction of a one-chamber system.

The constitution bill was passed twice by both Parliament and the Landsting, so a referendum about the Constitution and the suffrage age could be sent to referendum in May 1953. The Constitution was passed and the suffrage age for all public elections was therefore fixed at 23 years in 1953, and a change to the age limit could only be executed following an obligatory referendum. The age of majority was still lower than the suffrage age.

1961

A large majority in Parliament decided to reduce the suffrage age

to 21, after which the bill would be decided by referendum in accordance with the Constitution. At the referendum of 30 May 1961 a majority voted to lower the suffrage age to 21.

1964

A bill about a suffrage age of 18 was presented to the Parliament without result.

1969

In 1967-1969 the subject of lowering the suffrage age to 20 or maybe 18 was debated several times. A bill for lowering the suffrage age to 18 years was passed on 6 June, 1969. On 24 June, less than three weeks later, there was a referendum. The bill was rejected, as there were majorities amongst the voters and more than 30 percent of registered voters voted against.

1971

In December 1969, Parliament passed a bill to lower the age of majority to 20, based on the reason, amongst others, that the legal and suffrage ages should be the same. In 1971 the Parliament decided to lower the suffrage age to 20. The referendum was held at the same time as the Parliamentary elections in September 1971, and the result was a reduction of the suffrage age to 20.

1976

In 1976, the Parliament again tried to lower the legal age, this time to 18, but without changing the suffrage age.

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REFERENDUMS ABOUT SUFFRAGE AGE

Referendum	Bill for change of suffrage age	Percentage of total registered voters	Percentage of votes	Result
28. May 1953	25 years to 23 or 21 years	23 years: 29.9 % 21 years: 24.9 %	57,1 %	23 years
30. May 1961	23 to 21 years	For 20,3 % Against 16.6 %	37,3 %	21 years
24. June 1969	21 to 18 years	For 13,5 % Against 49.8 %	63,6 %	Rejected
21. September 1971	21 to 20 years	For 47.4 % Against: 36.5 %	86,2 %	20 years
19. September 1978	20 to 18 years	For 33.8 % Against: 29.1 %	63,2 %	18 years

1978

In May 1978, the Parliament agreed to reduce the suffrage age from 20 to 18. At the referendum of 19 September of the same year, a majority voted in favour of lowering the suffrage age to 18.

2001

In 2001 the reduction of the suffrage age became an agreed policy for the Danish Youth Council.

2001-2007

Several European countries and federal states reduce their suffrage age to 16, including Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

2008

A number of parties in the Parliament state that they want to reduce the suffrage age to 16. Parliament reads the bill for setting up a suffrage commission.

2009

The Danish Youth Council executes a test election for 16-17 year olds at the 2009 municipal elections.

2010

The Danish Youth Council establishes a suffrage commission consisting of central representatives from all parties, NGOs, the media and experts. Former Chairman of Parliament, Christian Mejdahl (V), is Chairman of the commission. The commission will announce its report at the end of 2011.