

## 1953 –The Suffrage age lowered to 23 years

The suffrage age was lowered from 35 years for the Landsting and 25 years for Parliament to 23 years respectively. The reason was to recognize the efforts of young people during the Second World War along with a desire to give Danish youth the same rights as in other countries.

### Background

The background for lowering the age of suffrage in 1953 lies at the end of the Second World War and in the subsequent conflict between the resistance movement and politicians. This conflict resulted in an agreement to ensure the fundamental freedom rights, which had been violated during the Second World War, as well as to lower the suffrage age. The suffrage age was lowered because it, to a large extent, was young people under 25 years of age who had been involved in the resistance movement. According to the 1915 Constitution, the suffrage age was at that time 35 years for the Landsting and 25 years for the Parliament <sup>1</sup>. It

was deemed unfair that the youth, which had to a certain degree carried the resistance campaign, did not have suffrage.

### Constitutional commission

On 9 February 1946, the Danish Prime Minister Knud Kristensen founded a constitutional commission with the aim of establishing freedom rights and suffrage. Knud Kristensen became Chairman of the commission, and other commission members included Vilhelm Buhl, Aksel Larsen, K.K. Steincke and Hans Hedtoft.

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### COMPOSITION OF PARLIAMENT IN 1953

The composition of parliament following the parliamentary elections on 21 April, 1953, the last elections following the 1920 Constitution. Only Danish parties are included.

Parties	Party leader	Votes	Pct. of voting figures	Mandates
The Danish Social Democrats (S)	Hans Hedtoft	836.507	40,4 %	61
The Liberal Party of Denmark (V)	Erik Eriksen	456.896	22,1 %	33
The Conservative People's Party (KF)	Ole Bjørn Kraft	358.509	17,3 %	26
The Danish Social-Liberal Party (R)	Hans Jeppesen	178.942	8,6 %	13
The Georgist Party (DR)	Oluf Pedersen	116.288	5,6 %	9
The Danish Communist Party (DKP)	Aksel Larsen	98.940	4,8 %	7

Election turnout: 80.8 %

<sup>1</sup> The Danish parliamentary system consisted until 1953 of two chambers: An Upper Chamber (Landstinget) and Lower Chamber (Folketinget).

After the parliamentary elections in the autumn of 1947, Hans Hedtoft became Prime Minister. He re-organised the commission and took over as Chairman. The commission now consisted of Julius Bomholt, Aksel Larsen, K.K. Steincke and Knud Kristensen, amongst others, and Alf Ross as an election official.

### Selection task

On 26 February 1948, the commission formed a sub-committee for suffrage and referendums. The committee held a meeting, but was not able to present the result to the commission. As a consequence of disagreements and lack of results from this, as well as other committees, on 15-16 March 1949 a new committee was formed and a new foundation established for the commission's work.

All political parties, with the exception of the Communists, agreed that suffrage for Parliament should be lowered, and that suffrage for public assemblies should follow the suffrage for Parliament.

The desire to lower the suffrage age was significant, so it was agreed that from the parliamentary assembly 1948-1949 23 year olds would have the opportunity to vote in the parochial church council elections and in the municipal elections. After the change of government in the autumn of 1950, the commission had once again to be reorganised, now with Prime Minister Erik Eriksen (The Liberal Party) as Chairman.

### Disagreement about suffrage age of between 23 or 21 years of age

From 1949 the Commission's work was marked by major tension between the Liberal Party in particular, which wanted the age of suffrage of 23 years and the Social Democrats, who wanted the age of suffrage to be 21 years (in line with the age of majority).

Other players, including the Danish Youth Council, also wanted the suffrage age to be 21. In a statement to the constitution commission on 23 September, the Danish Youth Council emphasizes its wish for a suffrage age of 21:

“We believe it will strengthen young people's feeling of responsibility in a democracy by giving them participatory democracy. Danish youth naturally demands the same political rights as the youth in other countries that have a similar social and cultural development as Denmark.”

The commission's result and change of the Danish Constitution The commission only reached to a actual agreement in January 1953, when it was finalized, that the age of suffrage would be determined by referendum, with the choice being between 23 and 21 years of age. It was agreed that all people who had reached 21 years of age could participate in the referendum.

It was further agreed that the decision on the suffrage age should be transferred to the voting law, so that changes could be made to the suffrage age from here on, without the need to change the Constitution.

### Referendum

The result of the referendum was fairly close: 30 percent voted for the suffrage age to be lowered to 23 years, while 25 percent voted for it to be lowered to 21. The result of the seven year long process was thereby a reduction in the suffrage age to 23. The electorate was consequently expanded by 4.8 percent.

### GOVERNMENT POWER IN 1953

Both the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party had government power in 1953. Erik Eriksen (V) was Prime Minister. Aksel Møller (KF) was Home Secretary with responsibility for suffrage.

### 1953 REFERENDUM

The referendum for change to the suffrage age from 25 to 23 or 21 years took place on 28 May 1953.  
Result: Suffrage age lowered from 25 to 23 years of age.

	Number of valid votes	Percentage of total registered voters	Percentage of votes	Percentage of votes (total)
<b>For 23 years</b>	840.815	30,0	54,6	57,5
<b>For 21 years</b>	700.122	25,0	45,4	

## PARLIAMENT'S AND THE LANDSTING'S READING IN 1952/53

Reading of the Constitution of the Danish Constitution and foundation of the suffrage age following the constitution commission's preparatory work.

Date	Authority	Reading
<i>Ordinary Session</i>		
04.02.1953	Parliament	Submitted by Erik Eriksen (V)
10.02.1953	Parliament	1. reading
25.02.1953	Parliament	White paper
27.02.1953	Parliament	2. reading
03.03.1953	Parliament	3. reading
<i>Sent to the Landsting</i>		
05/06/10.03.1953	The Landsting	1. reading
26.03.1953	The Landsting	White paper
27.03.1953	The Landsting	2. reading
28.03.1953	The Landsting	3. reading
<i>Returned to Parliament</i>		
28.03.1953	Parliament	Committee's declaration submitted
28.03.1953	Parliament	Only reading
<i>Returned to the Landsting</i>		
28.03.1953	Parliament	Committee's declaration submitted
28.03.1953	Parliament	Only reading
<i>II. Ordinary Session</i>		
07.05.1953	Parliament	Submitted by Erik Eriksen (V)
09.05.1953	Parliament	1. reading
12.05.1953	Parliament	2. reading
12.05.1953	Parliament	3. reading The bill was passed with 81 votes against 11, while 44 did not vote.
<i>Sent to the Landsting</i>		
13.05.1953	The Landsting	1. reading
15.05.1953	The Landsting	2. reading
15.05.1953	The Landsting	3. reading The bill was passed with 58 votes against 4, while 2 did not vote.
28.05.1953	—	Referendum

## WHAT THE POLITICIANS SAID 1953

Quotes about suffrage from the Landsting and Parliament at the debate in 1953.

**Julius Bomholt**, Social Democrats at 1st reading of the bill in Parliament:

“During the liberation summer a solemn promise was made to the youth that they would get suffrage. Now that promise must be kept.”

“21 is the Nordic suffrage age, and it would be unfair if Denmark, based on an unjustified fear of working with the youth, was to take a position to the right of Norway, Sweden and Finland.”

“It is essential that the youth is included in co-responsibility and thereby grows in political maturity. It is a plus for democracy, for the political development, for the homeland.”

**Jørgen Jørgensen** (from Lejre), the Social-Liberal Party, at the 1st reading of the bill in Parliament:

“If the interests of democracy are to be maintained, then it is a compelling requirement for our youth of today to receive a greater co-influence and co-responsibility for the running of the country than is currently the case.”

“It is the very essence and nature of democracy that every time new population groups or new age groups are drawn into the responsibility for the country’s wellbeing, the country’s inner strength increases.”

**Hans Hansen**, the Social Democrats, at the 1st reading of the bill in Parliament:

“They (population, red.)...must realize that if they vote against or stay at home, then the counterpart response from the Landsting will be a 35 year suffrage age.”

**Aksel Larsen**, the Communist Party, at the 2nd reading of the bill in Parliament:

“The opportunity to lower the suffrage age is a sign of progress.”

(Aksel Larsen was vehemently opposed to the Constitution law change in general)

**Hans Jeppesen**, the Danish Social-Liberal Party, at the 1st reading of the bill in the Landsting:

“It cannot be right for Danish youth that the suffrage age is higher than in any other country in Europe.”

“If the interests of democracy are to be maintained for future generations, it is necessary that the youth has political responsibility; only this way you can, in my opinion, be in a position to give the youth an interest in social issues.”