

Ardern promises bill to lower voting age to 16 in New Zealand after discrimination ruling
Legislative move, which faces significant hurdles in parliament, follows judges' ruling that the existing age of 18 breaches young people's human rights

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Prime minister Jacinda Ardern has said the New Zealand government will draft legislation to change the voting age to 16, after a landmark supreme court ruling that the existing age of 18 was discriminatory and breached the human rights of young people.

Ardern said she personally supported changing the age to 16, but would take the question to parliament. "It is our view that this is an issue best placed to parliament for everyone to have their say," she said on Monday.

Her statement followed a supreme court ruling on Monday that marked the conclusion of a two-year case brought by a group of young campaigners, Make It 16, who argued that younger people should be able to vote on issues such as the climate crisis, which will disproportionately affect them and their futures.

The ruling does not automatically guarantee the right to vote will be extended – that can be done only by parliament – but it does mean that parliament is now breaching the fundamental human rights of younger voters, and forces legislators to consider a change.

"This is history," said the Make It 16 campaign's co-director, Caeden Tipler. "The government and parliament cannot ignore such a clear legal and moral message. They must let us vote."

However, the legislation will have a tough road ahead: changes to electoral law in New Zealand require 75% support in parliament, so a change would require the support of both Labour and the opposition National party to become law. The centre-right National party said on Monday: "Many other countries have a voting age of 18, and National has seen no compelling case to lower the age."

The governing Labour party has not yet announced a position on lowering the voting age. The Green party and Māori party have indicated they would support it, and the Act party will oppose.

It is also yet to be decided whether the legislation will be a party vote or conscience vote.

The Make It 16 campaign launched shortly after school strikes for climate began mobilising tens of thousands of teenagers across the country, and the climate crisis has loomed large in the background. "Three years ago, we saw school strikes for climate ... and there was a sort of global shift towards: how do we give young people more of a say and more of a way to make change on a large scale? Voting was one of those ideas," said Sanat Singh, Make it 16's co-founder.

While climate action had been a motivating force, Singh said the same logic – that young people should have a say in issues affecting them – applied to all politics, from public transport funding to mental health. "I was 16 in 2020, which was probably one of the most consequential elections in our lifetime – and issues that mattered to me about mental health, climate change and the state of our democracy were things that I was not able to have a say in," Singh said.

Only a handful of countries allow those under 18 to vote: Brazil, Cuba, Austria and Malta have voting ages of 16 and up. In Scotland, 16-year-olds can vote in Scottish parliamentary elections, but not the UK general elections. In recent years, however, international campaigns to lower voting ages have grown, with many arguing that young people should have a say on long-term democratic decisions, given they will have to live with the consequences. Prominent UK academic Prof David Runciman

has argued that the voting age should be lowered to six, saying ageing populations meant young people were now “massively outnumbered”, creating a democratic crisis and an inbuilt bias against governments that plan for the future.