



Evidence and Good Practice on Lowering the Voting Age to 16

Briefing for the UK Democracy Fund

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Contents

Introduction.....	3
Part 1: Evidence on the outcomes of lowering of the voting age to 16.....	4
1.1. Outcomes on young people’s participation in democracy.....	4
1.2. Potential impacts on wider society.....	6
1.3. A limited impact on electoral outcomes.....	6
1.4. Challenging inequalities in political participation.....	8
1.5. Arguments around maturity.....	9
Part 2: Successfully implementing a lower voting age.....	10
2.1. The case for comprehensive reform of the voting age.....	10
2.2. Implementation of voting age reform as a multi-dimensional process.....	11
2.3. Barriers to voting specific to young people.....	12
2.4. Investing in youth democratic engagement.....	14
2.5. Supporting political parties to enhance their engagement with young voters.....	14
2.6. Insights on the relationship between democratic education and voting age reform..	16
2.7. Enhancing young people’s self-efficacy beyond elections.....	17
2.8. Knowledge gaps and opportunities for continuing research.....	18
Conclusions.....	20
References.....	22

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Introduction

The United Kingdom's age of enfranchisement is currently inconsistent across its constituent countries. While 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland and Wales can vote in local and Scottish Parliament or Senedd elections, their peers in England and Northern Ireland cannot vote in any elections. The current government wants to give 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in all UK elections. This briefing paper summarises key evidence on the outcomes of lowering the voting age to 16 from countries that have extended the franchise to younger people, and provides an overview of emerging evidence on what is important in the implementation and delivery of voting age reform in the UK.

The first section summarises key insights into what happens when the voting age is lowered to 16, drawing on empirical evidence from countries that lowered the voting age to 16 for all elections (Austria, Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, and Nicaragua) as well as Scotland, Wales, and German federal states, where the voting age is 16 for some elections. The evidence shows that 16- and 17-year-olds are qualified to exercise their right to vote, that their inclusion in the franchise offers opportunities to increase young people's participation in democracy, and – while not changing the outcome of elections – how a lower voting age may affect society more widely.

In the second section, we investigate what is important in the implementation and delivery of voting age reform in the UK to harness the opportunities that lowering of the voting age to 16 offers. Looking at the experiences of countries that previously lowered the voting age to 16 for some or all elections, we derive examples of good practice on how to reduce structural barriers to young people's participation in elections and their democratic inclusion more broadly, what different institutional actors can and must do to support the implementation of the reform, and how young people can best be supported in their development of political efficacy.

Part 1: Evidence on the outcomes of lowering the voting age to 16

Research in countries that lowered the voting age to 16 suggests that the reform can offer opportunities to increase young people's participation in democracy and to give them the ability to have their say (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021). It has repeatedly been shown that the reform does not have negative outcomes – neither for young people nor society more widely.

1.1. Outcomes on young people's participation in democracy

Evidence from countries that implemented Votes at 16 suggests that a voting age lower than 18 is commonly associated with increased electoral turnout among those young people who benefit from it. When enfranchised, 16- and 17-year-olds tend to vote in greater numbers than young people who experience their first election at age 18 or older. It is suggested that this is because 16 is a better-suited age of enfranchisement than 18, as 16- and 17-year-olds often live in more stable and supportive environments (in the parental home, in full-time education) compared to 18- to 20-year olds, who often experience their first election in a highly transitory phase of their lives, e.g. whilst moving out of the parental home, taking up work or further education (Franklin, 2004). This finding is consistent across many contexts, for example, Austria, several Latin American countries, Scotland, and German federal states that lowered the voting age to 16 (see Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023a; Faas & Leininger, 2020; Franklin, 2020; Rossteutscher et al., 2022; Sanhueza Petrarca, 2020; Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014).

The benefits of gaining the right to vote at 16 or 17 compared to 18 or later can persist in the longer term, countering current trends of declining turnout among young people: in Austria and Scotland, young people who were enfranchised at 16 or 17 were more likely to turn out to vote in elections well into their 20s compared to young people who experienced their first vote at an election with a voting age of 18 (Aichholzer & Kritzinger, 2020; Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023a). In Germany, federal states in which the voting age is 16 for state-level elections saw larger increases in young adults' turnout in the 2021 federal elections (compared to the 2017 election) than states with a more restrictive voting age (Eichhorn & Huebner, 2022). This increased likelihood to vote among young people after the change of the franchise appears to also translate into higher turnout across the whole population in countries that lowered the voting age to 16, although the magnitude of this outcome is unclear: first, because circumstances and research methods have differed greatly between countries

and it is not possible to directly compare the relative effect sizes (Franklin, 2020; Huebner & Sanhueza Petrarca, 2024). Second, there are open questions about the causal mechanism and the circumstances associated with the uplift observed following the reform of the voting age. Comparisons show no differences in intentions to turn out to vote between young people who are eligible to vote at 16 or 17 and slightly younger peers who – while also eligible to vote from 16 – experience their first elections at a later age due to the timing of elections, suggesting that the benefits of voting from age 16 are not based in an effect of eligibility alone (Graf et al., 2024; Leininger et al., 2024).

It has been argued that gaining the right to vote changes young people's attitudes to democracy as well as their political behaviours. Aside from turnout, reforms in Austria and Latin America also point to lasting increases in trust in politics and satisfaction with democracy among young people who were enfranchised at 16 or 17, although the causal mechanism is difficult to establish here. For up to seven years following the reform of the franchise, Austrian 16- and 17-year-olds consistently showed higher levels of external efficacy – that is the belief that governments will respond to citizens' demands – and were more satisfied with democracy compared to 18- to 20-year-olds (Aichholzer & Kritzinger, 2020). Across Latin American countries that adopted the reform, people who were first eligible to vote at 16 or 17 show higher levels of trust in parliament and political parties and were overall more satisfied with democracy than citizens who could only vote at an older age (Sanhueza Petrarca, 2020).

Research also shows that once they are allowed to vote at 16 or 17, young people display different behaviours when it comes to political decision making, for example around information seeking. Compared to slightly younger peers who are not yet allowed to vote, young people who are enfranchised at 16 are more likely to seek out information on elections, use vote advice applications, or speak to their friends and family members about political issues (Leininger et al., 2024). Being allowed to vote affords 16- and 17-year-olds more maturity earlier, because it endows them with an opportunity to form autonomous opinions and take responsibility for their involvement in a democratic decision. Qualitative research with young people who came of age when the voting age was lowered to 16 in Scotland showed that they viewed the right to vote as an opportunity for emancipation (Sanghera et al., 2018, p. 549) and their experience with voting as critical in their transitions into autonomous adulthood (Breeze et al., 2017).

1.2. Potential impacts on wider society

The introduction of a lower voting age can have wider societal impacts beyond the young people who are immediately affected by a change in legislation. Public attitudes regarding Votes at 16 are far from stable. Research shows that opinions on the lowering of the voting age to 16 among the wider UK public are changing and malleable, meaning they vary in response to differences in framing (Greenwood-Hau & Gutting, 2021; Loughran et al., 2021a). Experience from Scotland shows that support for Votes at 16 can increase substantially after the lowering of the voting age. While in 2011, in line with attitudes in the rest of the UK, over two thirds of adults in Scotland opposed Votes at 16, after the change of the franchise in 2015 up to 60 percent of people in Scotland supported it for all elections (Scottish Parliament, 2015, p. 65).

Additionally, if young people are allowed to participate in elections at 16 and 17 while most are still living at home with their parents, they have the potential to shape political discussions within the family or household. Research has shown that young people can have a small, but sizable effect on the political opinions of adult family members on certain issues, especially those on which young and older voters tend to disagree: for example, migration, social justice, or climate change (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2023). Through this process of reverse socialisation both the acceptance of Votes at 16 as well as issues of intergenerational justice, and the political voices of young people in discussions thereof, can gain in importance in the public discourse. However, reverse socialisation is limited to certain issues and more likely to occur in families that are already politically interested and engaged (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2023).

1.3. A limited impact on electoral outcomes

To depoliticise debates, it may be helpful to emphasise that voting age reform is unlikely to change election outcomes. There are around 1.5 million 16- and 17-year-olds in the UK, equivalent to just under three percent of the population aged 16 and over (2.87 percent) and their proportion is not projected to increase until 2039 (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Due to the size of these cohorts in the population their inclusion into the electorate is going to have a negligible impact on overall vote shares, even in the most extreme (and improbable) scenario that all 16- and 17-year-olds turned out to vote and decided to vote in the same way. According to analysis carried out by the Office for National Statistics (2017), out of 650 parliamentary constituencies for Westminster elections, there were only 88 where the total number of 16- and 17-year-olds outnumbered the majority held by the MP elected in the 2017 general election. This means that the inclusion of 16- and 17-year-olds in the electorate has

only a theoretical chance of impacting election outcomes – that is only if all young people turned out to vote and voted for the same candidate – and in fewer than 15 percent of constituencies. However, no voter group participates at 100 percent, and young people do not vote homogeneously, so the actual number of constituencies with potential changes to election outcomes would be much lower.

Young people as a group have diverse political attitudes; they do not vote as a uniform ‘bloc’ and not always for the same political parties. Even though currently there is a clear age divide in voting behaviour in the UK, the extent to which age is a dividing line in support between major political parties has varied greatly over time (Curtice et al., 2023). Young people do not always tend to vote differently from older groups; sometimes, their voting behaviour hardly differed from that of the wider population. For example, at the 2022 Brazilian presidential election, young voters displayed preferences close to those of all other age groups (Datafolha, 2022). In the UK, young people’s support for political parties on the left is dependent on the number of policy proposals that directly address and are attractive to younger voters. Survey experiments show that this pattern of support could be reversed if another political party offered similar policies (Serra, 2024).

As a consequence, even for marginal elections, such as Scotland’s 2014 referendum on independence, the inclusion of 16- and 17-year-olds is not expected to change the outcome of elections as the youngest first-time voters vote in diverse ways (Eichhorn, 2014). Similar findings have been confirmed in other countries, where young people do not always vote for the same political parties and where the inclusion of 16- and 17-year-olds in the electorate did not change political landscapes or the outcome of elections. In Germany, for example, the Christian Democrats were the most favoured party among first-time voters in the 2017 federal elections, while in 2021 the top spot was shared by the Green Party and the market-liberal Free Democrats. In Austria, younger voters tended to support political parties on both ends of the political spectrum (Aichholzer & Kritzinger, 2020; Bronner & Ifkovits, 2019; Graf et al., 2024), but the inclusion of a new cohort of voters did not change the political landscape (Pleschberger, 2018).

1.4. Challenging inequalities in political participation

While enfranchisement at age 16 can have positive outcomes for voter participation overall, overcoming social stratification in democratic participation requires additional efforts. Scholars have raised concerns about inequalities in democratic participation within cohorts of new and younger voters (Schäfer et al., 2020). Because at age 16 or 17 most young people still live in the parental home, without adequate support their electoral participation is largely impacted by the political interest and voting habits of parents and other family members (though not necessarily their party preference, see Eichhorn, 2018a). Evidence from Wales illustrates how parents affect many aspects of the voting journeys of 16- and 17-year-olds, from helping them to register to vote to encouraging and accompanying them to the polling station (Huebner et al., 2021). Relying on this kind of parental support can lead to a replication of existing inequalities in electoral participation, with young people from more advantaged backgrounds more likely to turn out to vote and engage in the democratic process than less advantaged peers.

There are however also indications that a lowering of the voting age provides opportunities to address inequalities in democratic participation. In Scotland, newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds have consistently been found to be equally engaged with elections, regardless of their social class background (Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023a; Huebner & Eichhorn, 2022). Schools play a crucial role in compensating for the lack of parental guidance. Formal democratic education (sometimes called civic education) in schools has been found to have more of an impact on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds than on their more advantaged peers when it comes to stimulating political interest (Neundorf et al., 2016) and voting intentions (Hoskins et al., 2017), thus reducing political inequality. In contrast, unequal provision of democratic education in schools and across educational tracks risks further inequalities. In Germany and England, young people following academic tracks are more likely to turn out to vote than young people in vocational education (Hoskins et al., 2016; Janmaat et al., 2014; Rossteutscher et al., 2022). Earlier voter enfranchisement thus provides an opportunity to engage with inequalities in democratic participation among the youngest voters and to provide widespread support to address the unequal distribution of support young people have in their political development, but the opportunity must be actively used to expand benefits across the socio-economic spectrum.

1.5. Arguments around maturity

Arguments for the lowering of the voting age to 16 that are based on democratic inclusion and empirical assessments of the outcomes are overall more coherent than arguments that focus on levels of maturity or the cognitive readiness of young people to vote. The latter types of arguments are fraught with difficulty and can be played out in different ways, mostly because maturity of young people is not treated homogeneously for all and across issues.

First, arguments for or against a particular voting age that are based on categorical assessments of competence, maturity, or mental capacity (including biological questions of brain development) are inconsistent with established voting rights practices across the population. While legislation requires clear lines to be drawn, competence and maturity are diversely distributed among young people and the population at large. However, voting rights are not currently taken away from people who show deteriorating cognitive ability (e.g., in old age) nor are they subject to a test of personal cognitive ability. In research on the lowering of the voting age, participating young people commonly point out this inconsistency in the treatment of young and adult voters (Loughran et al., 2021b).

Second, competence and maturity are considered to be domain-specific, meaning the same young people may be deemed mature enough to vote, but not mature enough to drive or drink alcohol (Silbaugh, 2020, p. 280). With regards to voting, research shows that 16- and 17-year-olds make political decisions of the same quality as other, slightly older voters (Lang, 2023; Wagner et al., 2012), meaning they are able to correctly select the political party that best represents their views in the same way as older adults. This suggests that in the political domain, young people can be deemed mature enough to make decisions that best represent their interests.

Part 2: Successfully implementing a lower voting age

Whether or not, and to what extent, the lowering of the voting age to 16 brings about positive outcomes for young people's representation in democracy and wider society, depends on the implementation of the reform. In this section, we expand on the question of how a lower voting age can best be implemented and what is known about good practice to harness the positive opportunities it provides through good implementation practices. With more democracies around the world lowering the voting age to 16, there is emerging evidence on what is important in the implementation and delivery of voting age reform.

2.1. The case for comprehensive reform of the voting age

Evidence indicates that voting age reform is considered most successful for young people when it is implemented comprehensively nationwide and for all elections and when it addresses multiple dimensions of young people's inclusion in democracy. Comprehensive reforms that lowered the voting age nationwide and for all elections, such as in Austria, Brazil, Argentina and Ecuador, have shown the most pervasive and long-lasting changes in democratic participation (Aichholzer & Kritzinger, 2020; Franklin, 2020; Sanhueza Petrarca, 2020). In contrast, research in countries that have seen 16- and 17-year-olds allowed to vote in some, but not all elections (such as in Germany, Estonia, Scotland, or Wales) or where young people were only allowed to vote in trials (e.g. in Norway and Belgium) finds mixed evidence about the scope for and extent of democratic benefits.

In such cases of partial reform, young people who are allowed to vote tend to be acutely aware of their temporary or partial enfranchisement – the fact that they are allowed to vote in some, but not all elections – and experience frustration and injustice that can end up being demobilising (Huebner, 2021; Huebner et al., 2021; Leininger et al., 2022), thus limiting the scope for positive impact from voting age reform. In Scotland, young people who were eligible to vote in Scottish elections from 2015 were temporarily disenfranchised in subsequent UK elections. This raised strong negative feelings among some young people, in particular in the context of the 2015 and 2017 General Elections and the 2016 referendum on the UK's EU membership (Huebner, 2021). Similarly, young people who were allowed to vote in Wales and in regional and local elections in selected federal states in Germany expressed a sense of frustration

of being temporarily disenfranchised in subsequent elections at the national level (Huebner et al., 2021; Leininger et al., 2022). This means that it is more desirable for young people, and connected to better long-term outcomes in terms of turnout and satisfaction with democracy, when the voting age is lowered comprehensively for all elections nationwide.

2.2. Implementation of voting age reform as a multi-dimensional process

While enacting Votes at 16 itself can bring about positive outcomes for young people's representation in democracy and wider society, as evidenced in the first section, to maximise its pro-civic outcomes it is important for voting age reform and its implementation to be treated as a process that addresses multiple dimensions of young people's democratic engagement. In addition to the reform of the franchise itself, this requires cooperative and cross-departmental engagement over the medium term, also leveraging the extensive work undertaken by civil society organisations. This includes, but is not limited to, measures that address young people's knowledge and understanding of democratic processes. It is also important that the implementation of the reform addresses young people's efficacy and (perceived) inclusion in democratic life, and the way in which institutions such as parliaments, political parties, or the media enable their engagement.

Research in the context of the lowering of the voting age in Wales showed that Welsh decision makers primarily sought to address functional barriers by focusing on raising young people's knowledge and understanding of, as well as their commitment to engage with, democratic norms and processes (Huebner et al., 2021). Young people, and campaigners in the electoral sector who directly worked with them, deemed these interventions important too; however, they additionally highlighted relational and institutional barriers to young people's inclusion in the electorate, which were largely unaddressed during the implementation of the reform in Wales. This included young people not feeling able to have their voices heard in political debates, not being included in media reporting about political issues, a lack of awareness-raising measures around the change of the franchise and, in particular, voter registration, and a widely perceived failure of political parties to effectively communicate with and make appealing policy offers to the youngest voters (Huebner et al., 2021).

Examples of good practice to address these multiple dimensions of young people's democratic engagement as part of voting age reform include measures to increase young people's visibility and voice in society more broadly, and the way in which they are included and represented in democratic institutions. In Scotland, BBC Scotland

addressed the visibility of 16- and 17-year-olds in reporting on political issues and in wider programming by creating a panel of 50 16- and 17-year-olds from diverse backgrounds. The Generation 2014 panel served to provide input into BBC programmes, as panellists on productions on different political topics, and as audience members for special productions (Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023b, p. 47). The mainstreaming of young people's perspectives into media reporting can also be done successfully outside electoral contests, such as in the (at the time) [daily column written by young people in Norway's Aftenposten](#). In Austria, voting age reform was accompanied by nationwide awareness-raising measures as well as a large-scale reform of and investment into civic and citizenship education in schools (Aichholzer & Kritzinger, 2020). In Estonia, where schools play a particularly important political role due to tensions between Russian-language and non-Russian schools, voting age reform was accompanied by a joint review of national guidance for political discussions in schools that brought together and gave voice to young people, youth organisations, and practitioners as well as all political parties (Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023b).

2.3. Barriers to voting specific to young people

Young people aged 16 and 17 face barriers to turning out to vote in elections that other, older first-time voters do not commonly experience: problems with voter registration and the timeframe of it, insufficient engagement from political parties and the media, in particular in ways that are relevant to young people, and the timing of elections and conflicts with school holidays or final school assessments (Huebner et al., 2021). These barriers must be considered and addressed during the implementation of voting age reform, e.g. by allowing sufficient time and resources for institutions to adapt and appropriately support younger voters.

One of the largest barriers to young people's participation in elections in the UK currently is voter registration. While low rates of voter registration are a cross-societal problem that affects many lower-voting groups, such as renters and ethnic minorities, it also presents a specific challenge for young people. In the UK, 16- to 24-year-olds are significantly less likely to be registered to vote than older age groups, and there are indications that their registration rates have been declining in recent years (Electoral Commission, n.d.). Young people are also most likely to be unaware of the need to (re-)register to vote and they are least satisfied with the current system of registering to vote (Electoral Commission, 2024b). It is further plausible to expect that the requirement to present appropriate voter ID will be more problematic for younger people. In the 2024 general election, younger people seemed to be somewhat less aware about this requirement compared to older voters (Electoral Commission, 2024a), and 16- and 17-year-olds, in particular, may not yet have the required forms of ID,

meaning they need to go through additional steps to be eligible to vote. Research in the context of the lowering of the voting age in Wales showed that many of the 16- and 17-year-olds first eligible to vote in 2021 were not aware of the need to register to vote, did not receive or did not open official communication on registering to vote, or were not able to register to vote without additional support (e.g., not knowing that they needed National Insurance numbers or not having them to hand, Huebner et al., 2021). Disparities in the level of support young people received from family members and in the approaches local councils chose, led to big differences in the number of young people registered to vote in different local areas and ultimately to inequalities in voter participation among 16- and 17-year-olds across local areas and families (Barker & Flint, 2021).

Automatic voter registration would eliminate this barrier and bring the UK in line with the majority of the democratic world. Automatically registering 16-year-olds when they receive their National Insurance Number and adding alternative and age-appropriate forms of voter ID would be an effective step to enable more young people to use their new voting rights. Therefore, further automatic and assisted registration should be introduced alongside Votes at 16.

The timing of elections and awareness raising measures can present another major barrier to 16- and 17-year-olds' participation in elections. Research in Wales showed that many 16- and 17-year-olds missed out on their opportunity to vote in the 2021 Senedd election because they were not aware of their eligibility to vote, missed the registration deadline, or because the majority of campaigning, including the release of election manifestos, happened after the registration deadline and in the middle of exam period (Huebner et al., 2021). Similarly, in Germany, despite automatic voter registration and polling cards being sent out to individuals, one in five 16- and 17-year-olds were unaware of their eligibility to vote in the 2024 European Parliament election (Faas et al., 2024).

This shows that compared to older and more established voters, the mobilisation of newly enfranchised young people must follow a different – earlier and possibly longer – timeline to allow for young people to become aware, informed, registered, and mobilised ahead of an election. Crucially, if measures are to be delivered via educational institutions, timelines must take into account key dates of the academic year, such as school holidays and final assessment periods. After the lowering of the voting age for Scotland's independence referendum, the Electoral Commission recommended to leave at least six months prior to the beginning of the canvass to allow for the planning of broad awareness-raising measures as well as the delivery of initiatives addressing young people's political literacy (Electoral Commission, 2014).

2.4. Investing in youth democratic engagement

Overcoming these barriers to voting that are specific to young people requires appropriate timing and funding for implementing bodies, such as the Electoral Commission and EROs, as well as civil society and youth organisations that can effectively mobilise young people to vote.

If automatic voter registration cannot be implemented or not in time for the first election to include 16- and 17-year-olds, early cooperation with implementing bodies and election officials, most importantly the Electoral Commission and EROs, is important to help alleviate some of the inconsistencies in voter registration that are expected to be experienced by 16- and 17-year-olds. Automatic voter registration would substantially reduce the pressure on these bodies to get young people on the register and eligible to vote.

To use time and resources efficiently, good practice includes establishing, institutionalising, and funding networks of existing initiatives that can design and jointly deliver youth voter engagement work in an appropriate timeframe. Empowering youth-led organisations and organisations with existing networks among 16- and 17-year-olds is particularly promising as they can be better placed to address young people where they are (e.g. in schools, youth groups, or on social media) and because they can design interventions that address young people's visibility and efficacy beyond mere voter mobilisation. In Scotland, the Scottish Youth Parliament played a central role in the implementation of the voting age reform by developing a programme of workshops that were delivered by a network of local youth organisations, such as Youth Voice Highlands or local LGBTQI+ groups (Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023b, p. 38). In Wales, a democratic engagement network regularly brings together institutions in the electoral sector, non-partisan initiatives, and youth organisations to exchange plans, align approaches, pool resources, and create campaigns that target young first-time voters and other marginalised groups. It is particularly important for these networked approaches to be formed in time for a first election that includes 16- and 17-year-olds and for networks to be institutionalised, so that campaigns do not solely rely on ad hoc and project-based funding.

2.5. Supporting political parties to enhance their engagement with young voters

Political parties and candidates must be encouraged to scale up their engagement with younger voters, and this is particularly important when the voting age is 16. The feeling of being taken seriously by political parties is important for young people's perception

of their efficacy and, ultimately, their engagement with the political process (Eichhorn, 2018b). Yet, to date, young people rarely get to interact with elected representatives, and on average less frequently than older voters. Many schools, further education colleges, or youth groups are not visited by political representatives: less than five percent of English secondary schools are visited by an elected politician (Weinberg, 2021). Experience in the context of the lowering of the voting age in Wales showed that many young people did not get mobilised and believed there to be little incentive to exercise their right to vote, because political parties across the spectrum did not communicate with or make appealing policy offers to younger people (Huebner et al., 2021; see 2.2).

The need to scale up efforts to address 16- and 17-year-olds as voters applies to political parties, candidates, and initiatives from across the political spectrum. In Scotland, ahead of the 2014 referendum on independence, the Scottish Youth Parliament put pressure on all campaign teams to make their positions more accessible to young people (Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023b). Such pressure from non-partisan organisations can increase the likelihood that offers across the political spectrum are adequately communicated to young people and establish consensus on the benefits of youth voter engagement work. In Wales, such cross-party consensus ultimately allowed for local government and the civil service to become involved in the implementation of measures that support voters, such as plans for a central voter information platform (Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023b; Loughran et al., 2021b). Other effective measures could include embedding political parties in voter engagement work and democratic education initiatives (such as [The Politics Project's Digital Surgeries](#)), ensuring that 16- and 17-year-olds receive appropriate campaign information (including youth party manifestos), and stimulating political parties' investments into the recruitment of younger members.

As political views and voting preferences among young people are heterogeneous and not fixed (see 1.3), more direct engagement of political parties with young people, while increasing efficacy, is also in parties' own interest. Young people do not simply follow their parents' party-political preferences (Eichhorn, 2018a). Instead, they are very open to being engaged with a wide range of political arguments and ideas. In addition to convincing potential new voters and potentially impacting their families and peers through reverse socialisation (see 1.2), explicit outreach efforts can also lead to increases in youth participation in political parties (Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023b, p. 23). Furthermore, when debates on lowering the voting age advance, parties opposing it can begin to be perceived as blocking younger people's voices – even among young people who otherwise support their policy positions.

2.6. Insights on the relationship between democratic education and voting age reform

The lowering of the voting age to 16 offers an opportunity to review standards of democratic education in schools. While effective democratic education is not a direct requirement for the implementation of voting age reform, it is expected by many – young people, parents, and teachers – and can greatly enhance young people’s experiences of and engagement with elections at age 16 and 17. There is ample evidence that high-quality democratic education is associated with various aspects of young people’s political attitudes and behaviours, such as efficacy, confidence, interest and trust in politics. Participating in democratic education can then also increase a young person’s likelihood of voting (Quintelier & Hooghe, 2013) and have a lasting impact: in Scotland, for example, young adults who remembered taking classes in school in which political issues were discussed, were more likely to turn out in elections throughout their 20s (Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023a).

The type and quality of democratic education young people receive matters greatly. Generally, the more deliberative this democratic education is, the better. While transferring knowledge and an understanding of the political system is of value, the most important aspect of impactful democratic education is that it is deliberative and discursive, opening up space for the discussion of political issues in a qualified manner (Dassonneville et al., 2012; Eichhorn, 2018a; Torney-Purta, 2002). Participatory and experiential approaches to learning that directly allow young people to practice their democratic skills and to get in contact with real-life political issues as well as politicians enhances the value of democratic education in schools (Neundorf et al., 2016; Weinberg, 2022). As the vast majority of 16- and 17-year-olds are in secondary education, the lowering of the voting age to 16 offers a great opportunity for young people to develop democratic competences and directly apply them.

Research also shows that young people as well as their parents have high expectations of democratic education delivered in schools. After the lowering of the voting age in Austria and Scotland, 16- and 17-year-olds felt an obligation to become informed about politics and assigned most of the responsibility for the provision of information to schools (Huebner, 2021; Schwarzer & Zeglovits, 2013). They saw schools as places to not only to learn factual things, but to also to discuss politics, and some research participants complained about schools failing to provide either. Similarly, around seven in ten parents find it important for their children to be taught about politics in schools, and a majority of teachers feel responsible for providing education that develops young people’s democratic competences (Weinberg, 2021, p. 18).

However, there are many barriers to the comprehensive delivery of high-quality democratic education. Not all schools offer curricular citizenship education or provide spaces to meaningfully undertake democratic education activities in other subjects. Competing demands on time, expertise, and curriculum content in secondary education make it difficult for democratic education to be delivered comprehensively. Research among secondary schools and teachers in England showed that less than a third of schools offered weekly lessons in politics or citizenship education as part of the curriculum (Weinberg, 2021, p. 15). The vast majority of teachers do not feel adequately prepared or are concerned about a lack of support and resources to discuss political issues in the classroom (Weinberg, 2021; Farrar et al., 2023). Additionally, independent (fee-paying) schools and schools in less deprived communities in England are more likely to offer opportunities to engage with politicians and political issues than schools in deprived areas (Weinberg, 2021, 2022). This highlights the need to address teacher support to alleviate teachers' fears to talk about voting and political decisions in the classroom and to provide resources, so all schools can engage in democratic education activities.

In the same way that lowering the voting age to 16 can have a positive impact in its own right, so does democratic education. The lowering of the voting age presents a great opportunity to invest in high-quality, statutory democratic education and address teachers' perceived lack of support to discuss real-life political issues in the classroom. When both are enacted jointly, they complement each other and can enhance their respective effects: when 16- and 17-year-olds are enfranchised, democratic education enables young people to engage with elections with confidence, while enfranchisement increases young people's desire to learn about and engage with political issues in education settings. Without investments into the widespread and statutory provision of democratic education, however, there is a risk that only some young people benefit from the synergies between democratic education delivered in schools and the lowering of the voting age to 16 and that inequalities in democratic engagement persist.

2.7. Enhancing young people's self-efficacy beyond elections

Finally, it is important to stress the importance of supporting the development of self-efficacy among 16- and 17-year-olds beyond their involvement in elections. Initiatives that allow young people opportunities to be meaningfully involved in democratic decision making outside of elections further stimulate political interest, knowledge, and trust in political actors – all important precursors to electoral behaviour. While worthwhile in their own right, these initiatives increase the range of experiences that

help young people to develop self-efficacy as democratic citizens, thereby also enabling more young people to feel able and confident to vote in elections (Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023b, p. 39).

In particular, decision making at local level, where young people can directly experience results, can further strengthen democratic participation. A great example of local initiatives that support young people's engagement with democratic decision making are citizen budgets for young people, for example [in the city of Vienna](#). Organised through schools and deliberative processes, pupils get to develop proposals for measures in their locality that are voted upon by all young people within a certain age range. A dedicated budget from the city enables the implementation of winning measures. Similar initiatives that allow young people to experience and develop their self-efficacy are often already run by charities, research partnerships, and non-partisan initiatives, for example the [BeeWell programme](#) in Greater Manchester and Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth, and Southampton. Due to the nature of project funding, these initiatives are often not institutionalised or do not run long term. Setting up structural funding opportunities for initiatives that strengthen young people's self-efficacy would therefore be desirable.

2.8. Knowledge gaps and opportunities for continuing research

The evidence collated in this briefing paper highlights that, thanks to existing research, we have an increasingly good understanding of what can be expected when the voting age is lowered to 16 and which factors are important in the implementation of voting age reform. However, it also reveals gaps in knowledge about the mechanisms of how voting at a younger age relates to attitudinal and behavioural change among young people and how long-lasting the opportunities can be that the lowering of the voting age to 16 offers. Therefore, investments into research in the following areas would be particularly promising or necessary:

- **Examining longer-term developments:** While we have first insights on the democratic participation of young adults that takes into account their age of enfranchisement, we are currently not able to assess the impact of voting age reform over time and its distribution among different groups of young people. Studies that compare cohorts by their age of enfranchisement at the first election tend to find lasting effects on turnout (e.g. Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023a; Franklin, 2020), while slightly different study designs that examine the marginal impact of age at the first election do not (Graf et al., 2024). These studies all rely on cohort comparisons based on cross-sectional evidence.

To robustly assess outcomes of voting age reform over time, however, we need analysis of longitudinal data that follows young people as they age. This is particularly important for making robust claims about the kinds of young people that benefit from voting age reform and to address inequalities in democratic participation. There is to date no data source that allows for this sort of assessment over time.

- **Educational interventions:** While discursive democratic education, e.g. in open classroom settings, is shown to be positively associated with greater democratic engagement and these effects can be amplified through earlier enfranchisement, it is unclear how this interaction works. There are few empirical evaluations of interventions in democratic education and none that allow for a rigorous comparison of which formats of education generate the most positive civic payoff in the context of the voting age being lowered. A detailed examination of this question and more rigorous evaluation of educational interventions (or access to data that evaluates these) would allow for more targeted recommendations on how precisely Votes at 16 should be accompanied with effective democratic education.
- **Reverse or retroactive socialisation:** There are strong indications that enfranchised young people affect their parents and peers politically, especially when they are empowered through good democratic education. However, we lack insights into how this can best be initiated and supported. Furthermore, systematic research into this topic would allow us to better understand what motivates and enables young people to proactively engage with family and friends on political issues and how social inequalities in the likelihood to engage could be reduced.
- **Supply side of politics:** While we know that young people respond positively to political institutions and actors, such as candidates and political parties, who reach out to them sincerely, we do not have systematic evidence on how such meaningful interactions can be motivated and supported. Additionally, an examination into what outreach mechanisms resonate most with 16- and 17-year-olds could help increase engagement with formal political institutions.

Conclusions

Lowering the voting age is a policy that can have many positive outcomes for young people. Existing research demonstrates that nothing bad happens in terms of the political engagement of young people when they are enfranchised at age 16 and that young people are, overall, capable of meaningfully engaging in elections.

Additionally, there is the potential for multiple positive civic effects when the voting age is lowered to 16, including:

- Higher level of turnout amongst first-time voters;
- Longer-term increases in turnout of young adults;
- Increases in the political efficacy of young people;
- Enhanced visibility of young people and improved views on their democratic engagement by society more widely;
- Engagement in reverse political socialisation (i.e. young people engaging their family and friends politically);
- An amplification of positive civic effects of democratic education and opportunities to reduce social inequality in political engagement.

The extent to which these outcomes can be realised, however, depends on the quality of the implementation of voting age reform. To enfranchise young people meaningfully, the following are important when lowering the voting age to 16:

- **Being comprehensive:** Changing the voting age at all levels to avoid the frustration of young people being able to participate in some – but denied the opportunity to take part in other – elections;
- **Enacting voting age reform as a multidimensional process:** Making sure that “Votes at 16” is about more than young people voting, because political engagement is shaped by efficacy perceptions of young people which should be enhanced;
- **Reforming institutional processes:** Reducing barriers to the participation of younger voters, especially by considering automatic registration, improving access to voting processes and leaving enough time for a lower voting age to be implemented;

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- **Supporting political parties to engage:** Establishing good practices for political parties to reach out proactively to engage young people across the spectrum of political views;
 - **Enhancing democratic education:** Adapting education offers in the context of pupils being able to vote to amplify positive effects from enfranchisement and education;
 - **Increasing self-efficacy beyond elections:** Engaging young people in democratic processes beyond electoral contexts (for example, through deliberative decision making at a local level); and
 - **Improving the research base:** Deepening our understanding of the precise mechanisms enhancing democratic engagement in the long run through voting age reform by filling current research gaps.

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