

Evidence from Germany: Does reducing the voting age to 16 lead to higher turnout at elections?

*Allowing those aged 16 and 17 to vote in elections can increase political engagement among young people. But do these effects persist over time? Drawing on new research, **Jan Eichhorn** and **Christine Huebner** illustrate that German states with a voting age of 16 also appear to have higher turnout increases among voters in their late teens and throughout their 20s.*

Following the German federal elections in 2021, the new coalition government committed to lowering the voting age to 16 at the federal level and for European Parliament elections. In doing so, Germany joined other EU countries in making commitments to earlier enfranchisement such as Belgium, which has lowered the voting age for the upcoming European Parliament elections.

While the opposition Christian Democrats have opposed the move, new evidence from the elections suggests that earlier enfranchisement may indeed be a good idea. A comparison of the turnout rates of young people who previously could vote in lower-level elections at the age of 16 to those who could not adds to the increasing evidence from various countries that a lower voting age may provide opportunities for youth political engagement.

Germany is similar to the UK in its non-uniform approach to the voting age. While voting at general elections is restricted to those aged 18 years or older, whether you can vote at 16 in other elections depends on where you live. In Scotland and Wales, elections for the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments as well as local elections are open to those aged 16 and over, while those aged 16 and over in England and Northern Ireland have no opportunities to participate in elections.

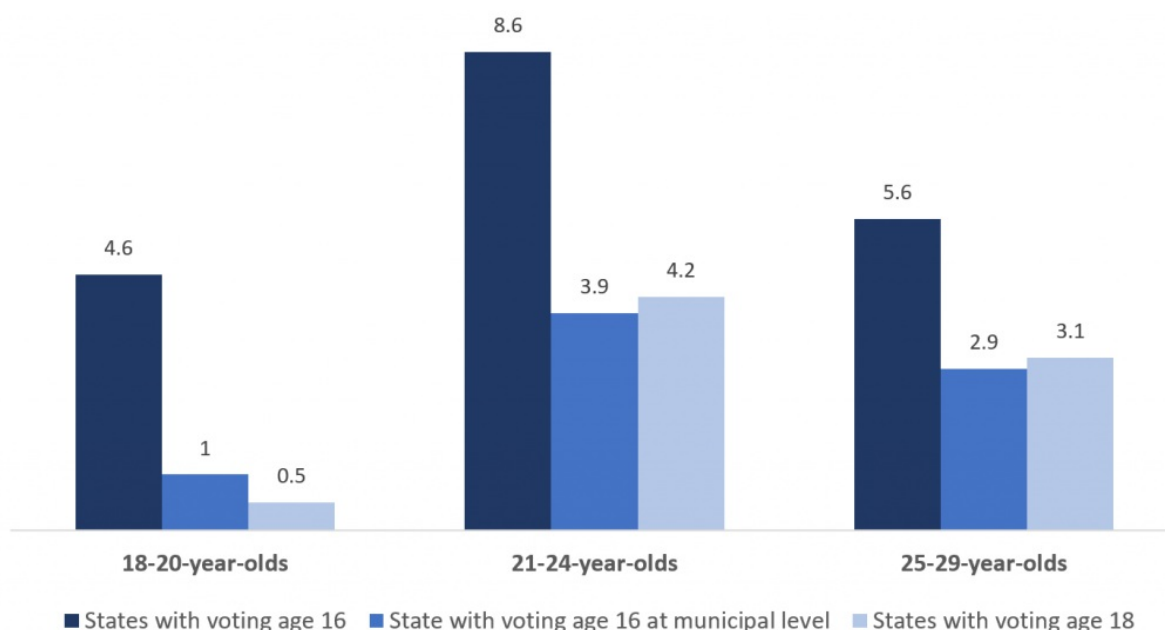
The same holds true for Germany with the added complication that there are some states in which the voting age is lowered for municipal elections, but not those at the state-level, resulting in a three-tier system of enfranchisement. Until recently, only

Hamburg, Bremen, Brandenburg and Schleswig-Holstein gave the right to vote at 16, while those in Hessen, Rheinland-Pfalz, Saarland, Sachsen and Bayern had to wait until they were 18 to vote in any context. There is momentum for earlier enfranchisement, however, with more states changing rules, including some with conservatives in government, such as Baden-Württemberg and Nordrhein-Westfalen.

While differences in enfranchisement ages across various levels [can frustrate young people](#), it provides us with an opportunity to study whether voting at a younger age may be associated with greater turnout in future elections. Indeed, in 2015 we found that young people who had been enfranchised to vote at age 16 in the Scottish independence referendum [were much more likely than their peers](#) in the rest of the UK to show a desire to participate in other UK elections (if they had been allowed to do so). While some of this was driven by the excitement surrounding the referendum, the effect was much [more pronounced for young people](#) than the population overall, suggesting a genuine impact of getting to vote earlier.

In Germany, in the context of normal elections, we see a similar result, further corroborating these findings. Using the [official figures](#) of the German election commissioner for the 2021 general election, we can distinguish turnout levels of young people depending on the type of state they live in – differentiating those where they could vote at age 16 in state elections from those where they could only do so in municipal elections and those where the voting age was consistently 18. Overall, youth turnout in the 2021 general election increased. But that increase was not distributed evenly.

Figure 1: Mean increase in voter turnout from 2017 to 2021 in German general elections by state voting age and age groups



Note: Figures indicate percentage points.

As the figure shows, turnout increases were far more strongly pronounced in those states where the voting age was 16 for state elections. For those aged 18-20, there was an increase of 4.6 percentage points in turnout in those states compared to the 2017 general election. The turnout increase for people in the same age group in states with a voting age of 16 at municipal elections only was just 1 percentage point and even smaller in states with a voting age of 18 at 0.5 percentage points.

Importantly, this pattern persists in older age groups, too, albeit with smaller differences in the proportions. With 8.6 percentage points, the turnout increase in states with earlier enfranchisement for state elections was more than double the increase elsewhere for those in the 21-24 age group. Even for those aged 25 to 29, differences persist: states with a voting age of 16 at state elections saw an increase in turnout of 5.6 percentage points compared to around 3 percentage points in other places.

These findings are compelling, as we also discuss in our wider report on [youth participation in the 2021 German federal elections](#). The turnout increase is distinctively higher for states with a lower voting age. Obviously, on its own this data has some limitations: as young people age, they are more likely to move and thus the older they are the less clear-cut geography-based results become. It is therefore even more

remarkable, however, that we also find this positive association between a lower voting age at state elections and turnout increases for young people in their mid- and late-20s.

We should also note that all these states are based in the North of Germany, however their makeup is mixed (two city-states, two larger-area states with rural communities and some more and some less affluent states, including one in East Germany). It will be important to repeat these analyses as states in other parts of the country lower their voting age, too.

Overall, the results [match findings from elsewhere](#). Therefore, we can have confidence in their accuracy. They add to studies that have identified positive longer-term turnout impacts in [Austria](#) and [Latin American](#) countries. Furthermore, other analyses in Germany have shown that [differential experiences](#) in enfranchisement (being able to vote in one election but not in others) can have frustrating consequences for young people. This could explain why we do not see any distinctive effects for young people who can only vote in municipal elections at age 16, but not in state elections.

In summary, turnout patterns from the 2021 general election in Germany add to the growing body of [international evidence](#) that enfranchisement at age 16 may have positive consequences for turnout, if done comprehensively. While the German government can implement the change they committed to for European Parliament elections with their majority in the Bundestag, it will be interesting to see whether this encouraging empirical evidence will help them in convincing the opposition Christian Democrats to change general election rules. To change those, a constitutional amendment is required that would need their support in both chambers of Parliament. The debate on votes at 16 is therefore set to continue.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Glenn Carstens-Peters](#) on [Unsplash](#)
