

There is much that can be learned from Scotland's decision to lower the voting age for the Independence referendum

By Democratic Audit UK

The Electoral Commission this week began a publicity drive to ensure that people register to vote in the referendum. It has launched a dedicated website and is working with Facebook to target potential younger voters including 16 and 17 year olds who will be able to vote for the first time. **Andy Mycock** looks at the enfranchising of younger people and the lessons for the whole of the UK. He says much can be learnt but there shouldn't be an uncritical implementation of 'votes at 16' in all elections.



Will they vote? (Credit: [Scottish Government](#), CC BY NC 2.0)

In the lead up to a special 'youth cabinet' event held in Glasgow in June 2014, Scottish First Minister, [Alex Salmond](#), noted that it was vital that young people engaged with the referendum debate as independence was 'the opportunity of a lifetime'. He went on to claim that allowing 16 and 17 year-old Scots to vote in the referendum highlighted young people were 'at the heart of the debate'. Salmond's claims that lowering the voting age in Scotland have energized young people to engage with the independence debate would appear to be evidentially-supported.

Over 80% of young Scots have registered to vote on September 18th 2014, thus confounding overly-pessimistic predictions that only middle-class teenagers would be [proactive](#) in joining the electoral register.

Many young people are also deeply-involved in campaigning for both the 'yes' and 'no' camps and enthusiastically participating in the large number of debates and mock referendums hosted in schools, colleges, universities and local communities. [Kyle Thornton](#), the former Chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament, has persuasively argued that lowering the voting age for the referendum has had marked positive effect on levels of youth political literacy and encouraged a change in political culture.

He argues that increased engagement is due to the ability to get greater access to 16 and 17 year-olds voters, who are mainly still in some form of statutory education or training. And he points to the non-party political nature of the referendum that has opened new pathways towards a 'more inclusive type of politics'.

Questions remain however regarding motivations and impact of lowering the voting age in Scotland and the long-term development of youth citizenship more widely. The case for reducing the voting age in all elections to 16 was

briefly outlined in the Scottish Government's draft referendum bill [consultation paper](#), published in 2011, which stated:

Denying 16 and 17 year-olds the vote risks them becoming disengaged from the political process at the very point society expects them to take on rights and responsibilities such as getting married or serving in the armed forces. Reducing the voting age to 16 would encourage participation by young people in Scotland's democratic processes and will give them a voice on matters that affect them.

Some have suggested the Scottish government's desire to enfranchise young voters was motivated by [narrow electoral interests](#). However the Scottish National Party (SNP) has proven a steadfast supporter of 'votes at 16' for all elections and recent research indicates that if there was any attempt to benefit from lowering the voting age that appears to have failed as a majority of those young people enfranchised state they intend to vote 'no' in [the referendum](#).

However, the Scottish Government's decision to lower the voting age could not be described as an example of evidence-based policy. They have adopted an approach that has failed to fully engage with existing research or undertaken any detailed consideration of the potential implications of lowering the voting age beyond a [brief examination](#) of complexities of registration of young voters and recent pilots held for [health boards](#) and crofting commission elections in Scotland.

For example, the [Youth Citizenship Commission \(YCC\)](#), on which I served, examined whether the voting age should be lowered to 16 as part of its remit. In declining to recommend a lowering of [the voting age](#), the YCC recommended that the UK government could consider devolving responsibility for the voting age to the devolved legislatures for sub-state national and local elections. Although the Scottish Government were formally approached and offered opportunities to discuss the YCC's findings on the issue, they chose not to respond.

The Scottish Government's justification for lowering the voting age in Scotland appears to be founded on two key arguments. First, it is argued that there is an urgent need to correlate the political rights of 16 and 17 year-old citizens with a range of social and economic rights. However these rights are not universally realized at the age of 16 and Scottish Government has overlooked the general upward trajectory in terms of ages of responsibility in Scotland as well as the rest of the UK. Although urged by the YCC to undertake a more substantial review of the legal and social terms of 'youth' and 'adult' citizenship, Scottish Government declined to do so. As such there has been scant acknowledgement of the potential that lowering the voting age for all elections could create a 'two-tier citizenship' where 16 and 17 year-olds voters could be viewed as 'second class' citizens by politicians and might thus become disengaged at an earlier age.

Second, lowering the voting age is claimed to have the potential to have a lasting positive and empowering effect on youth political participation. However [evidence](#) from those states that have lowered the voting age for all or some elections to 16 is not conclusive, particularly in terms of aiding long-term political literacy and engagement. Although considerable efforts have been made to [provide young people](#) with information about the referendum, many still complain they would like more [before voting](#).

Of more concern has been the lack of discussion about how to improve the political knowledge, skills and activism of young people beyond the referendum. The established provision of citizenship education in Scottish schools remains patchy and inconsistent and only a third of young Scots take a Modern Studies course covering history, politics and current affairs. It is instructive that the Scottish Government has sought to stimulate Scottish national consciousness through the introduction of Scottish Studies rather than develop political literacy in schools.

While the future of young Scots has been persistent theme utilized in justifying the cases both for and against independence, the extent to which young people in Scotland have been democratically empowered during the independence debate is also open to question. Although both sides have invested considerable political capital in mapping out possible futures for young Scots, there is scant evidence that young people have been extensively consulted or been substantially involved in designing policies.

Of more concern has been the failure of both the 'No' and 'Yes' campaigns to design and articulate progressive reform agendas that seek to engage and empower young people through the reform of Scottish political institutions

and cultures. This is somewhat surprising when considering that the average age of members of the Scottish Parliament is 50 – the same as Westminster. There is little evidence at present that further devolution or independence will strategically enhance youth democratic voice and political efficacy in Scotland. Indeed, while young people have been offered numerous opportunities to deliberate and campaign, the increasingly febrile and negative tone of the independence debate may actually produce young citizens who are schooled in a type of politics that is reductive and deeply-adversarial.

It is somewhat surprising then that lowering the voting age to 16 for the independence plebiscite has garnered uncritical support from across the political spectrum in Scotland and, [according to one commentator](#), is now 'driving' debate across the rest of the UK. But rather than taking its lead from Scotland, there is evidence of a more deliberative approach emerging elsewhere that acknowledges that lowering the voting age is not alone a panacea to youth political disengagement.

Though opinion is divided on the principle of '[votes at 16](#)', there is widespread acceptance of the need to introduce a wider package of progressive reforms to enhance youth political literacy, skills and experience in schools and local communities prior to enfranchisement (at 18 or 16). There is also agreement on the need for political parties and institutions to reform the political culture that shapes British democracy to ensure it is more responsive to and representative of [young people](#).

There is much to learn from the experience of lowering the voting age for the independence referendum. However, rather than uncritically implement 'votes at 16' in all elections, what is required is a more considered and evidentially-informed approach. [Recent calls](#) for referendum on lowering the voting age offer opportunities to further stimulate a national conversation about the democratic role and political contribution of young people. This would mirror the government in the [Republic of Ireland's](#) commitment in July 2013 to hold a referendum on lowering the voting to 16 before the end of its term in office in 2016. Protagonists in the independence debate might well profit from engaging with this more enlightened debate about 'votes at 16' and wider issues of youth citizenship.

This post is part of a series on youth participation based on the Political Studies Association project, [Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission](#). For further details, please contact [Dr Andy Mycock](#). An electronic copy of the [Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission: Young People and Politics](#) volume can be downloaded [here](#). It originally appeared on the [Future of the UK and Scotland site](#). It represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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