

Beyond anecdotes on lowering the voting age: new evidence from Scotland

*The question whether to lower the voting age in the UK has been the subject of ongoing debate. **Jan Eichhorn** (University of Edinburgh) writes that, although much of the discussion has been based around normative arguments and personal stories, it is crucial to review the evidence so that the empirical arguments prevail.*



Deputy First Minister John Swinney meeting members of [Young Scot](#), 2015. Photo credit: Scottish Government, via ([CC BY-NC 2.0](#))

In November 2017 the House of Commons debated a [private members' bill](#) on reducing the UK voting age to 16. The quality of [the debate](#), however, was disappointing and failed to engage with the range of research conducted recently on the topic. Many proponents brought normative points forward about young people's engagement and the responsibilities they otherwise have. While those points are important, they are easily countered by pointing out the rights 16-year-olds do not have, and by highlighting the complexities of normative arguments made around [citizenship and youth engagement](#). Within the UK it is possible to draw on empirical experiences from the Scottish independence referendum, which several Scottish MPs supporting early enfranchisement indeed did. Yet most of their accounts stayed were restricted to anecdotes, except for the recognition that roughly 75% of 16- and 17-year-olds voted in that referendum.

The reliance on normative points and personal stories meant that apparently empirical rebukes by opponents of the bill (most notably Bernard Jenkins MP) were not engaged with critically, but only in terms of general dismissal. Two commonly cited concerns had to do with turnout and public acceptability. With regard to the former it is frequently – and mostly correctly – said by those in favour of letting 16-year-olds vote that usually the youngest age group of voters (typically 18-24 or 18-29) shows the lowest level of voter participation. Thus, we might expect that extending the franchise would only reduce overall turnout further and gives us an indication that the youngest voters do not want to take part, yet.

Yet this does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. It is a mistake to extrapolate from the behaviour of those between 18 and 24 how 16- and 17-year-olds would behave, as their situation is rather different. We already know that the [younger first time voters](#) are, the greater their participation. This effect is [observed in multiple studies](#) and is strongly pronounced for 16- to 17-year-olds. It could also be observed in the Scottish context where the above-cited participation rate for these ages (75%) [was much higher](#) than the estimate for 18-24-year-olds (54%). Voting earlier, while still being in school and more likely to live at home, is likely to increase voter participation, not reduce it.

The other often-cited criticism, also repeated in the House of Commons debate, is that the majority of the population opposes the prospect of 16-year-olds having a vote. Early enfranchisement is only supported by roughly [one third of the UK population](#). This was also the case in Scotland before people actually experienced young people taking part in the voting process. Support has now nearly doubled with roughly [60% of the Scottish population agreeing](#) with the reduced voting age. Both sets of findings suggest that in order to properly appraise earlier enfranchisement, we need to engage with evidence from when younger people are actually allowed to vote rather than making assumptions about their behaviour from observing older peers.

For the Scottish context, we then find, for example, that the levels of [political interest](#) in the independence referendum amongst those younger than 18 was very similar to that of the adult population overall. Crucially though, in order to gain a deeper insight that was not specific to the referendum itself, we can helpfully compare young Scots who have experienced the voting age reduction to their counterparts in the rest of the UK. We did this in a [survey ahead of the 2015 general election](#), which formed part of a broader study into [UK constitutional change and attitudes amongst publics and elites](#). The goal was to enable us to see whether levels of political engagement and political attitudes systematically differed for 16- and 17-year-old Scots compared to their peers in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

[Our analyses](#), controlling for socio-demographic differences, confirmed that the newly enfranchised young people in Scotland indeed show substantially higher levels of engagement with representative democracy (through voting) as well as other forms of political participation (such as signing petitions and taking part in demonstrations); and they engage with a greater range of information sources about politics and reflect greater levels of political efficacy. While an impact of the Scottish independence referendum can be seen, it does not explain all the variation between Scotland and the rest of the country. While commonly found factors affecting youth participation are also shown to be influential here (especially discursive civic education in schools and parental socialisation), different levels thereof in Scotland do not explain all the differences in the outcomes compared to other parts of the country.

The findings indeed suggest that earlier enfranchisement, together with other factors (such as the referendum, civic education, and parental socialisation) had a positive impact on young people in Scotland. Further research will be required to examine whether these positive effects are long-lasting. Evidence from Austria – where the voting age was lowered in 2007 and where similar [first-time boosts](#) could be observed – is encouraging, as [later observations](#) still confirmed the initial patterns. It would have been great to see more of these insights reflected in the parliamentary debate – demonstrating a genuine engagement with the issue.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It was originally posted on the [LSE British Politics and Policy](#) blog.

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About the Author



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