

Extending the franchise in Scotland to 16 year olds was progress which should be capitalised on, not rolled back

By Democratic Audit UK

*The Scottish referendum was not only historic for its constitutional implications, it was also the first time in the UK that 16 and 17 year olds were allowed to vote. But what are the reasons for including younger people in the electorate, and what might the consequences be for their future participation? **Emily Rainsford** analyses the potential impact.*



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September 18th, when the Scottish independence referendum was held, is not only historical (and controversial) because of the uniqueness of the referendum, but also because this is the first time in the UK that 16 and 17 year olds could vote in a national ballot. Lowering the voting age is something that the SNP has supported for a long time, but [polls show](#) that the Scots might not be as enthusiastic about expanding electoral franchise.

Why Votes at 16?

There are almost as many arguments votes at 16 as there are supporters of it. Some base their argument on competency, arguing, like the Power Inquiry, that 16 and 17 year olds are competent enough to vote. Some even argue young people today are in fact more competent than adults, as [John McDermot](#) of the Financial Times suggests. Others argue that it is a matter of consistency, like the [votes @16](#) campaign, which points out that 16 year olds have other rights and responsibilities that separate them from younger young people.

Many argue from an engagement perspective, such as [Ben Kisby](#) in the New Statesman blog, who suggests that by lowering the voting age we take one step in the direction of increasing young people's interest in politics. However, lowering the voting age may not be enough to increase engagement, as Ben points out. The recent [Political Studies Association](#) publication [Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission](#) also argues for a wider perspective on increasing youth participation.

The last argument presented above is also concerned with the potential consequences of lowering the voting age, and this is the issue I find particularly interested in. Not in terms of whether (and if so how) the newly franchised voters affected the [outcome of the referendum](#), or what the consequences might be in terms of wider engagement

with politics (Although this generation of young people will be a very interesting group to do further research on to see how their political engagement develops). Rather, I'm interested in the consequences this might have on the political experience of this particular generation of young people.

A shift in political engagement?

We know from [studies on voting behaviour](#) that if you've voted once, you are much more likely to vote in the future. And if you voted in the first election you were eligible to vote in you are more likely to continue to vote at every opportunity you get. The young Scots who will get the opportunity to vote in the referendum are in many ways privileged compared to previous and following generations of young people because they will have a say in the future of Scotland.

However, they will only have a say in the referendum. The next day these 16 and 17 year olds will yet again be disenfranchised and not considered mature enough to vote in national elections. It will also be the case for a large proportion of 16 year olds that they will be allowed to vote in the referendum, but not in the next Scottish parliamentary elections in 2016.

What does this experience tell these young people about their value as citizens? If I was a Scottish 16 year old I would be pretty frustrated and annoyed that I one day was considered important enough to have a say on the future of my country, but the next day not be allowed to have a say in who is to run it!

[Extensive research has shown](#) that young people are already alienated from formal politics and do not think that politicians and political parties care about them. My own [research](#) has showed that this even holds for those who are politically engaged. We also know from [research on political socialisation](#) that the early years of youth are formative in terms of political attitudes and behaviour.

[Sir Bernard Crick](#) emphasised the importance of the experience of politics and experiential learning when he proposed the introduction of citizenship education. Temporarily giving young people the right to vote, and then taking it away again, may reinforce young people's negative attitudes towards politics and politicians.

Perhaps worse, the experience that these young Scots are presented with is one of inconsistency and disappointment. The question is what effect this will have on their future political participation and attitudes?

Engagement or Alienation?

Introducing a lower voting age in the referendum was a big win for proponents of the policy. It seems however as if the consequences of temporarily lowering the voting age have not been fully considered.

Although I am in favour of giving young people more influence in politics, we need to be careful with how it is done because we are dealing with a group that is already very sceptical of the politics politicians do. Politics may be designed to disappoint, [as Gerry Stoker](#) argues, but this disappointment comes from politics being about compromise- not one day having the right to vote but the next day not. Young people are already at the margins of decision making in society (by choice or institutional rules) – let's not alienate them even more.

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Emily Rainsford works as a Researcher at Newcastle University and has recently completed her PhD thesis on young people who are politically active in political parties, the British Youth Council and attended the 2010 student demonstrations in London. She is also the PGR convenor of [the PSA Young People's Politics Specialist](#) group and contributed to the recent [Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission](#).

