

Votes-at-16 in Scotland

2014 – 2021

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Executive summary

In Scotland, young people aged 16 and 17 have been included in the franchise for the 2014 referendum on independence and, since 2015, for all Scottish and local elections. What are the longer-term outcomes of the lowering of the voting age for young people who benefited from the reform of the franchise in Scotland seven years ago?

Using original survey data collected among young people in Scotland in the context of the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, this report examines how different cohorts of young people aged between 16 to 31 years engage in politics. The analysis distinguishes those who were first enfranchised at age 16 or 17 from those who were aged 18 years or older when they were allowed to vote for the first time. Key insights of this analysis are:

1. Scotland has maintained a boost in electoral engagement among first-time voters enfranchised at 16 or 17. Seven years after the initial lowering of the voting age in Scotland, we observe that young people who benefited from the lowering of the voting age to 16 in Scotland were more likely to turn out to vote in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections than young people who were first eligible to vote in an election aged 18 or older. This applies to both those young people who are considered the “pioneers” of voting age reform and who were first enfranchised for the independence referendum 2014 and to those who were allowed to vote for the first time at age 16 or 17 in later elections. There is a significant follow-through effect in voter turnout among young people who experienced and were allowed to vote in their first election at ages 16 or 17. This suggests a lasting positive effect of being allowed to vote from 16 on young people’s voter turnout as they grow up.
2. In contrast to voting, there are no longer-term positive effects of earlier enfranchisement on young people’s wider engagement with politics beyond voting in elections in Scotland: not on their engagement with demonstrations, petitions, or elected representatives, their information source usage to get information on political issues, or on their perceived political efficacy.
3. Inequality in political engagement – that is disparities between the kinds of young people who engage and those who do not engage with politics based on characteristics such as the family’s socio-occupational class – although initially mitigated, reasserts itself for most cohorts of young people regardless of their age of enfranchisement. Any potential decrease of political inequality observed for Votes-at-16 pioneers in 2015 and that we see for today’s 16- and 17-year-old first-time voters wears off in the longer-term and is not sustained as young people grow older. This suggests that, so far, the opportunities to mitigate inequalities in political representation of young people provided by lowering the voting age are not being fully exploited in Scotland.
4. Young people’s political engagement between 16 and 31 is strongly impacted by their family contexts and circles of friends. This means that without interventions existing inequalities in political participation are likely to be replicated in Scotland as young people grow older. Deliberative political literacy education at school has the potential to mitigate some of this inequality as it can positively impact young people’s engagement – even years after they leave school.

The report concludes with a set of key *recommendations* that, in summary, propose to:

- Strengthen provisions of political literacy education in Modern Studies and beyond across all Scottish schools;
- Ensure systematic nation-wide provision of opportunities to discuss political issues in the transition to early adulthood, including in places where young people work and the further education sector;
- Improve the data base for research into the experience of Votes-at-16 through the longitudinal collection of evidence of the impacts and outcomes of voting age reform using dedicated new surveys or expanding existing cohort studies;
- Engage in UK-wide and international networks to contribute evidence to better understand longer-term outcomes and success factors of Votes-at-16;
- Advocate for a lowering of the voting age to 16 for all UK elections to give more young people the opportunity to benefit from Votes-at-16.

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Introduction & Background

Young people aged 16 and 17 years have been allowed to vote in Scottish and local elections for several years now. In 2014 Scottish 16- and 17-year-olds were included in the franchise for Scotland's referendum on independence first, and shortly after for all Scottish elections. Since then, 16- and 17-year-olds have been allowed to vote in the 2016 and 2021 Scottish Parliament elections and the 2017 Scottish local council elections, but not in UK-wide elections for which the franchise remains a matter reserved to the UK parliament at Westminster. This report seeks to explore the longer-term outcomes of Votes-at-16 for young people who benefited from the reform of the franchise in Scotland.

A key argument often put forward by proponents of the lowering the voting age is that the reform leads to a sustained increase in political engagement among younger people and greater voter habit formation. To evaluate such claims, it is key to provide empirical insights into the political behaviour of young people several years after first being enfranchised. While there is general agreement that previous reform of the voting age, the lowering of the age of enfranchisement from 21 to 18 years, did not come with such positive outcomes,¹ research from countries that had lowered the voting age to 16 prior to Scotland (including, for example, Austria, Brazil, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Argentina) points towards a lasting increase in youth voter engagement in up to the first 20 years after such reform.² To date there has been no such evaluation of longer-term outcomes of the reform in Scotland.

Much research on the lowering of the voting age in Scotland focused on the reform's immediate outcomes among the pioneering cohort of young people who were first allowed to vote at ages 16 and 17 in the 2014 independence referendum. Immediately after the 2014 independence referendum, the voting age reform was evaluated as a success by most measures. In the referendum itself, newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds turned out to vote in greater numbers than their slightly older peers³, albeit still at lower rates than the average public, and this finding matched results from other countries having lowered the voting age to 16, such as Austria.⁴

Beyond electoral engagement, the first cohorts of Scottish young people who benefited from the reform of the franchise were found more engaged with demonstrations, petitions or writing to a member of parliament, and using more sources for information on politics than peers in the rest of the UK.⁵ Inequality in political participation – that is disparities between the kinds of people who engage and those who do not engage with politics based on characteristics such as people's socio-economic background – was found to be lower among young people immediately after the lowering of the voting age in Scotland compared to other age groups and young people elsewhere in the UK.⁶ Particularly 16- and 17-year-olds

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1. Mycock, A. J., Loughran, T. I., & Tonge, J. (2021). The lessons of 1969: policy learning, policy memory and voting age reform. *British Politics*, 1-19. For other countries see: Franklin, M. N. (2004). *Voter turnout and the dynamics of electoral competition in established democracies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 2. Franklin, M. N. (2020). Consequences of Lowering the Voting Age to 16: Lessons from Comparative Research. In J. Eichhorn & J. Bergh (Eds.), *Lowering the Voting Age to 16: Learning from Real Experiences Worldwide* (pp. 13–42). Palgrave Macmillan. For Austria see also: Aichholzer, J. & Kritzinger, S. (2020). Voting at 16 in Practice: A Review of the Austrian Case. In J. Eichhorn & J. Bergh (Eds.), *Lowering the Voting Age to 16: Learning from Real Experiences Worldwide* 81–101). Palgrave Macmillan.
 3. Electoral Commission (2014). *Scottish independence referendum. Report on the referendum held on 18 September 2014* (ELC/2014/02). The Electoral Commission.
 4. Eichhorn, J., & Bergh, J. (Eds.) (2020). *Lowering the Voting Age to 16: Learning from Real Experiences Worldwide*. Palgrave Macmillan.
 5. Eichhorn, J. (2018b). Votes at 16: New insights from Scotland on enfranchisement. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 71(2), 365–391.
 6. Huebner, C. & Eichhorn, J. (2022). The Tide Raising all Boats? Social Class Differences in Political Participation among Young People in Scotland. *Scottish Affairs*, 31(2), 165-189.

from working-class or non-working families⁷ were found to be equally likely to be engaged with politics as their more affluent peers immediately after the initial lowering of the voting age – a finding pointing to more equality in political engagement and ultimately political efficacy among young people in Scotland who benefited from earlier enfranchisement. Young people’s political engagement also became more visible through direct campaigns of youth organisations⁸ and was recognised by media outlets providing more space for young people in the discussion of political issues.⁹

As a consequence, public and ultimately political opinion on voting age reform in Scotland shifted. While only around a third of adults in Scotland supported Votes-at-16 before its introduction a majority was in favour subsequently¹⁰, rising up to 60 per cent.¹¹ This positive experience was also shared by the Scottish Conservative Party¹² – who had initially opposed the enfranchisement change for 2014, but voted in favour of it in 2015. A unanimous vote of the Scottish Parliament in 2015 then paved the way for a permanent change in the franchise and for 16- and 17-year-olds participating in all local and Scottish Parliament elections.

Seven years after the initial lowering of the voting age, it is not clear however how sustained these positive effects were for subsequent cohorts of young people and for other elections. Initial research suggested that the positive effects observed in young people’s engagement were not all attributable to an overall effect of voter mobilisation in the independence referendum.¹³ However, subsequent Scottish Parliament and local elections brought about markedly less buzz and the salience of elections matters for the mobilisation of voters.¹⁴ Qualitative studies found evidence suggesting that some young people in Scotland were less interested in voting in subsequent elections than they were in the referendum.¹⁵ Yet, representative data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey finds that the perceived importance of voting in Scottish Parliament elections has increased over the past decade, most notably among young people up to 34 years, by 28 percentage points from 64 per cent in 2004 to 92 per cent in 2019.¹⁶

This report presents new and original empirical data on the longer-term outcomes of the lowering of the voting age to 16 in Scotland seven years after the initial reform of the franchise. Using cross-sectional survey data collected in the context of the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, we analyse the political behaviour of cohorts of young people who benefited from the reform of the franchise and have been

7. Measured in terms of the highest socio-occupational class of their parents when they were 16.

8. Huebner, C. & Eichhorn, J. (2020). Votes at 16 in Scotland: Political Experiences Beyond the Vote Itself. In: Eichhorn, J. & Bergh, J. (Eds). 2020. *Lowering the Voting Age to 16: Learning from Real Experiences Worldwide*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

9. For example, the BBC Scotland Generation 2014 panel, bringing 16- and 17-year-olds into mainstream programming: see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01gf7rb> (accessed 12 May 2022).

10. Kenealy, D., Eichhorn, J., Parry, R., Paterson, L. & Remond, A. (2017). *Publics, Elites and Constitutional Change in the UK: A Missed Opportunity?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

11. Electoral Commission (2014). *Scottish independence referendum. Report on the referendum held on 18 September 2014* (ELC/2014/02). The Electoral Commission.

12. Davidson, R. (2015). ‘Why Ruth Davidson supports votes at 16.’ *Electoral Reform Society* (24 June), available at <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/why-ruth-davidson-supports-votes-at-16/> (accessed 12 May 2022).

13. Eichhorn, J. (2018b). Votes at 16: New insights from Scotland on enfranchisement. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 71(2), 365–391.

14. There are several possible reasons for the link between salience and voter mobilisation: (1) Citizens may consider their vote to be less important in less salient elections or elections for levels of government that are perceived to have less status and fewer powers (second order hypothesis); (2) Because parties and media devote less attention to less salient elections, information is less easy to acquire and voters must exert more effort to obtain it (cost hypothesis).

15. Mackie, A. (2019). *Young People, Youth Work and Social Justice: A Participatory Parity Perspective*, PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh. See also Huebner, C. (2021). How Young People in Scotland Experience the Right to Vote at 16: Evidence on ‘Votes-at-16’ in Scotland from Qualitative Work with Young People. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 74(3), 563-580.

16. Reid, S., Montagu, I. & Scholes, S. (2020). *Scottish Social Attitudes 2019: attitudes to government and political engagement in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government and ScotCen Social Research.

allowed to vote in different kinds of elections at ages 16 and 17 – comparing them to those who had their first voting experience at age 18 or later. The findings provide an insight into what has been achieved in Scotland through the introduction of Votes-at-16 and highlight opportunities to further address youth voter engagement seven years after the reform of the franchise. The report also contributes to a growing body of international evidence on earlier enfranchisement and its longer-term outcomes for different cohorts of young people.

Research strategy

To study longer-term outcomes of voting age reform, we conducted an online survey collecting data on political behaviour and political attitudes from a representative sample of 16- to 31-year-olds in Scotland in the context of the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections.¹⁷ The data is representative for the population of young people in Scotland by gender, region, and parental social class after applying population weights. A total of 904 young people were included in the final weighted sample, representing cohorts of young people enfranchised at either 16 or 18 and older in all elections in Scotland since the 2010 UK general election. Sample sizes for all cohorts are provided in Table 1. Details of the survey design, sampling strategy, weighting, and robustness checks are provided in the methods note.

In the design of the data analysis, we made use of the unique mixture of cohorts enfranchised at different ages and in the context of different kinds of elections that Scotland offers. Some of current under 32-year-olds in Scotland have been enfranchised at age 18 or older before the independence referendum of 2014 and the associated change in the franchise – either at the 2010 General Election, the 2012 Local elections, or the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections. Some young people were aged 18 and 19 when they first joined the electorate for the 2014 independence referendum, while others were allowed to vote in the referendum for the first time aged 16 or 17. And even after the reform of the franchise in Scotland, not all young people in Scotland experienced Votes-at-16. While some had their first opportunity to turn out to vote at ages 16 or 17, for example in the 2016 and 2021 Scottish Parliament elections or the 2017 local elections, others had to wait until age 18 or 19 to be able to vote for the first time, for example in the 2019 General Election for the UK parliament at Westminster (because the voting age to UK elections remains 18)¹⁸ or the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections. Table 1 provides an overview of the different cohorts by age of enfranchisement and first election at which they were enfranchised.

17. The data collection was funded through a grant from the Scottish Government.

18. Additionally, there were other votes at UK-level: the General Elections of 2015 and 2017 and the Brexit referendum of 2016, all of which had a voting age of 18. However, all participants had been enfranchised at a different election beforehand and thus experienced their first vote in one of the elections in focus on here.

Table 1: First-time voter experience groups in the final weighted survey sample, N=904

Age range (in years) in May 2021	First election enfranchised at	Age at 1st election	Sample size (N)
16-17	Scottish Parliament 2021	16-17	178
18-19	Scottish Parliament 2021	18+	90
19-20	General Election 2019	18+	30
20-21	Local Elections 2017	16-17	89
21-22	Scottish Parliament 2016	16-17	99
22-24	Independence referendum 2014	16-17	110
24-26	Independence referendum 2014	18+	91
27-28	Local Elections 2012	18+	32
28-29	Scottish Parliament 2011	18+	35
29-31	General Election 2010	18+	150

This variation among cohorts and types of elections at which young people in Scotland first joined the electorate is unique and it allows us to compare political behaviour among cohorts of young people who were enfranchised at different ages and in elections of differing salience and perceived importance. This is different from countries that lowered the voting age to 16 for all elections (including, for example, Austria, Brazil, Nicaragua, and Argentina) and those that lowered their voting age for municipal elections (such as Estonia) or in certain parts of the country only (such as Germany). In Scotland, we can compare the experiences of first-time voters at 16 or 17 with that of young people enfranchised at age 18 or older across a wide range of elections held in the same country. These include arguably higher salience elections (such as General Elections or the independence referendum) as well as lower salience elections (such as local elections) in both groups (those getting to vote first and 16 or 17 and those enfranchised at 18 first). This allows us to make a comprehensive assessment of potential differences in political behaviour among young people enfranchised at different ages while also accounting for the fact that it is not just be the voting age itself, but also the type of election that may affect turnout.

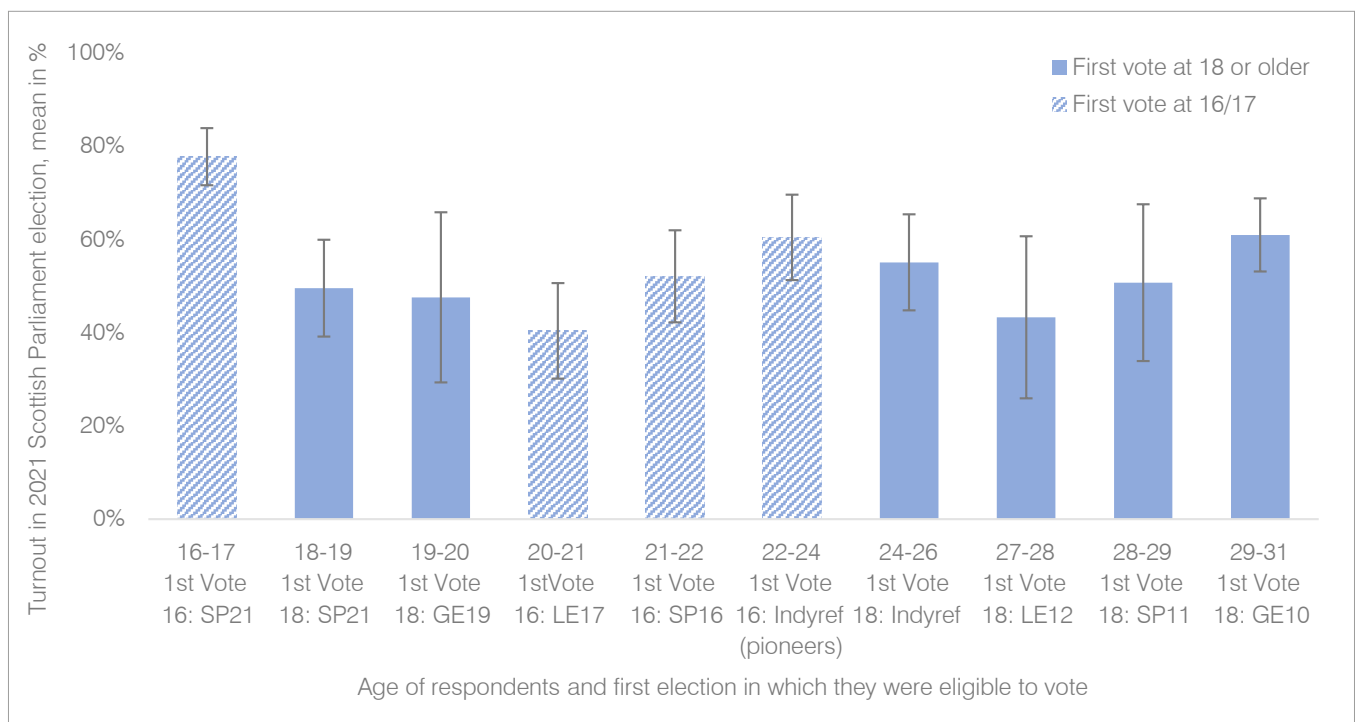
While change over time is ideally studied using panel data (in which the same people are interviewed repeatedly over several years), this kind of data on young people’s political behaviour in Scotland is not available. Instead, we make use of the number of different cohorts and their different first election experiences in a cross-sectional research design, comparing their political behaviour at one point in time only, the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections. This allows us to examine potential differences in political engagement at this time differentiating young people according to their respective ages of enfranchisement and to analyse whether seven years after the initial lowering of the voting age in Scotland, the Votes-at-16 “pioneers” from 2014 continue to engage with politics at higher rates compared to those who were enfranchised at 18 or older, either in the independence referendum or before in elections to the Scottish Parliament (2011), the House of Commons (2010) and local elections (2012). It also offers the opportunity to examine whether similar to the 2014 Votes-at-16 “pioneers” the most recent cohorts of 16- and 17-year-old first-time voters

also show distinct levels of political engagement. We evaluate differences in turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections between groups of young people depending on their first voting experience, and potential differences in outcomes on non-electoral forms of political engagement and political attitudes.

Finding 1: Carry through effects - higher turnout among young people enfranchised at 16

Seven years after the initial lowering of the voting age in Scotland, we observe a significant follow-through effect in voter turnout among young people who experienced their first election and were enfranchised at ages 16 or 17 in Scotland. This means that, consistent with findings from other countries¹⁹, Scotland has maintained a boost in electoral engagement of its earliest first-time voters, and it is also showing some follow-through effect of heightened voter turnout among young people enfranchised at age 16 or 17 in later years. Figure 1 shows the level of self-reported turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections for each cohort of young people.

Figure 1: Voter turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election²⁰ per cohort, self-reported (mean in %, with 95%-confidence interval²¹): 16- to 31-year-olds, N=904 (weighted)



We usually expect turnout of young people to roughly follow a U-shape, with a drop in turnout from 16 and

19. Zeglovits, E., & Aichholzer, J. (2014). Are people more inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18? Evidence for the first-time voting boost among 16-to 25-year-olds in Austria. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties*, 24(3), 351–361; Aichholzer, J., & Kritzing, S. (2020). Voting at 16 in Practice: A Review of the Austrian Case. In J. Eichhorn & J. Bergh (Eds.), *Lowering the Voting Age to 16: Learning from Real Experiences Worldwide* (81–101). Palgrave Macmillan.

20. Question wording (amongst eligible voters): "Many people have told us that they didn't manage to vote in Scottish Parliament election on May 6th. How about you – did you manage to vote in the election?"

21. A confidence interval is a measure of the degree of uncertainty that arises from the random variation that all sample surveys are subject to. It provides us with an indication of how likely it is that the estimate obtained in our sample matches the true value in the population. A confidence interval of 95% suggests that in 95 out of 100 randomly drawn samples of the target population (young Scottish people), the result could be expected to fall within the range shown. Conversely, and slightly simplified, we may infer that we could be 95% certain that the actual population result would lie within that range.

17 to the mid-twenties and then an overall increase for quite a few years of getting older due to various contextual factors of transitions into adulthood, such as moving out of the parental home, going to university, joining the labour market, or starting a family.²² However, in Scotland, the shape across cohorts looks more like a “W” with strikingly higher levels of turnout among cohorts aged 21 to 26 years, where we would expect to see the lowest levels of turnout according to lifecycle patterns. The introduction of Votes-at-16 appears to partially disrupt the normal lifecycle pattern. In other words: there is a decline in voter participation during early adulthood years, but the decline looks to be smaller for young people whose first election was either the 2014 independence referendum or one in which they were enfranchised at age 16.

There are two key aspects to this finding. Firstly, the Votes-at-16 “pioneers” from 2014 – the young people who experienced their first opportunity to vote at age 16 or 17 in the context of the 2014 independence referendum – reported higher levels of voter turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections than those who had their first vote at age 18 in most other elections. It is particularly noteworthy that today’s level of participation among the Votes-at-16 “pioneers” – now aged between 22 and 24 years – is roughly equal to the self-reported turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election of today’s 29- to 31-year-olds, those who were enfranchised at age 18 in the General Election 2010. This is markedly different from the usual lifecycle pattern we would expect to see for voter turnout of these age groups.

Secondly, a significant follow through effect in self-reported turnout in 2021 also holds for all young people who have been enfranchised at ages 16 or 17 in Scotland, regardless of the type of election in which they first joined the electorate. We find that those enfranchised at age 16 had significantly higher levels of turnout (see Figure 2) compared to those enfranchised at age 18 or older. This means that the experience of being enfranchised at age 16 in Scotland appears to be positively associated with voter turnout in young people so far: on average, young people who were enfranchised at ages 16 or 17 in Scotland reported higher levels of turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections than those who experienced their first vote aged 18 or older – regardless of their age, gender, region, or socio-economic background.

To establish this finding across the different elections, we group all young people who experienced their first election and were allowed to vote from age 16 and compare their self-reported turnout to those whose first election happened at age 18 or later. Both groups include young people who had their first voting experience in a higher salience election (such as a General Election or the 2014 independence referendum) and in a lower salience election (such as Scottish local elections), therefore accounting for the fact that different types of elections mobilise voters in different ways, ultimately affecting turnout. This finding remains robust when we control for additional factors that may differentiate young people – in particular, their age to take account of the lifecycle effect, but also their gender, region, and their family’s socio-economic background using the highest socio-occupational class of their parents when they were 16 (see Table 2).

22. Bhatti, Y., & Hansen, K. M. (2012). Leaving the Nest and the Social Act of Voting: Turnout among First-Time Voters. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 22(4), 380–406.

Table 2: Regression²³ results for four political engagement measures – contrasting enfranchisement age at first election with controls (16- to 31-year-olds)

	Voted in SP 2021	Non-electoral participation	Information source usage	Political efficacy
First vote's eligibility age: 16 (compared to 18)	+	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.

+/- indicate statistically significant positive/negative associations at the 10%-level;²⁴ n.d. indicates no significant association)

Displayed are the associations between the factors by which young people were differentiated for the analysis and the four political engagement measures of interest (controlling for: age, gender, region, socio-occupational class of the parents at age 16).

The finding also remains robust, if we only analyse those aged 18 to 31 (i.e., if we do not consider the group with the highest electoral participation, namely the current 16- and 17-year-olds). This is important because we find that 16- and 17-year-olds voted in substantially greater numbers in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections than their 18- and 19-year-old peers (compare Figure 1). This latter group – despite being formally enfranchised from age 16 in Scotland – in practice missed out on benefitting from the reform of the voting age, because of the reform's limit to and the timing of recent Scottish elections (with no Scottish or local elections taking place between June 2017 and April 2021, compare Table 1). If the voting age were lowered to 16 for all elections, including UK general elections, then elections in which 16- and 17-year-olds could participate would take place more frequently, meaning that more young people would benefit from earlier enfranchisement in the longer term, including from the associated higher average levels of electoral participation.

Finding 2: No long-term effects on non-electoral engagement and political attitudes

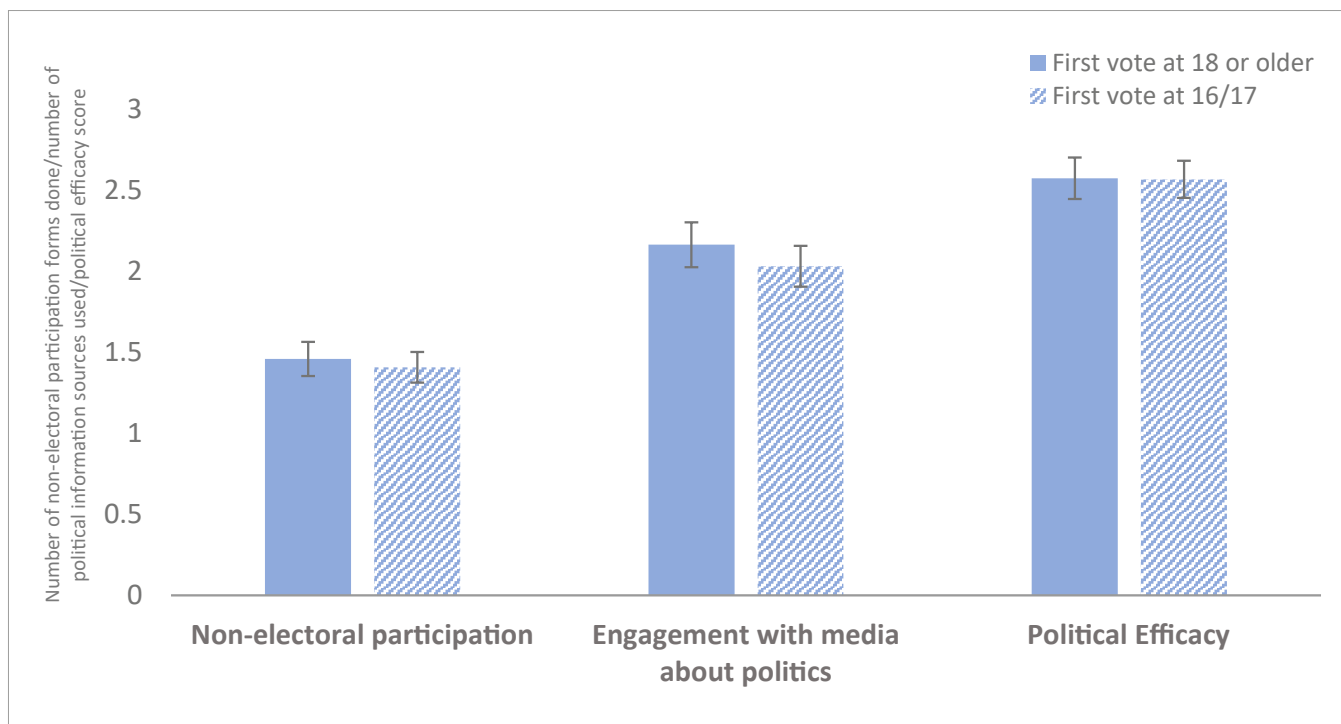
In contrast to the significant carry through effects observed for voter participation among young people first enfranchised at ages 16 or 17, there are no longer-term effects of earlier enfranchisement on young people's engagement with politics beyond voting in elections and their perceived political efficacy (see Table 2). In February 2015, immediately after the Scottish independence referendum, 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland were found to be more engaged in lawful demonstrations, petitions, and similar forms of non-electoral political participation and more likely to seek out a greater range of information sources about political questions than their non-enfranchised peers elsewhere in the UK.²⁵ These immediate positive effects of the lowering of the voting age on non-electoral political engagement and engagement with the media on political issues do not seem to carry through in the long run as young people become older and engage with further elections.

23. For electoral participation a logistic regression was estimated. For the other variables, ordinal regression models were estimated.

24. Given the limitations in sub-group sample sizes in a multivariate regression model, displaying results within a slightly wider significance range is appropriate, which is why the 10%-range was selected.

25. Kenealy, D., Eichhorn, J., Parry, R., Paterson, L. & Remond, A. 2017. *Publics, Elites and Constitutional Change in the UK: A Missed Opportunity?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Figure 2: Non-electoral political participation²⁶, number of political information sources used²⁷ and political efficacy perceptions²⁸ by age of enfranchisement at first election, self-reported (mean, with 95%-confidence interval): 16 to 31-year-olds



When it comes to engaging in lawful demonstrations, petitions, and similar forms of non-electoral political participation, we observe no significant difference between young people enfranchised in different elections contexts and at different ages in the context of the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections (Figure 2). Similarly, contrasting different ages of enfranchisement, there is no significant difference in how many types of sources young people used to get political information in the context of the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections. Also, both groups perceive roughly equal degrees of political efficacy. These findings are robust when we control for respondents' age, their gender, the region they live in, and the socio-occupational class of their parents (see Table 2).

So, while we identify a positive association between Votes-at-16 and turnout at the first and subsequent elections, we do not observe the same longer-term outcomes of earlier enfranchisement for non-electoral political engagement, information usage, or broader political attitudes. This is in line with earlier research which suggested that at least some of the higher levels of non-electoral political behaviour among young people in Scotland and their information type usage immediately after the lowering of the voting age may have had to do with a referendum effect and the high levels of political mobilisation among the population in Scotland overall rather than the lowering of the voting age in its own right. While immediately after the change in the franchise differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK in terms of turnout and future voting intentions were more pronounced for 16- and 17-year-olds than the rest of the population, this was not the case for non-electoral engagement.²⁹

26. Question wording: "Below you will find a list of some different forms of political action that people can take either in person or online. Please indicate for each one whether you have actually done this thing, whether you might do it or whether you would never, under any circumstances, do it. Participating in demonstrations, signing petitions, writing to a member of parliament, participating in boycotts"

27. Question wording: "Have you followed the news about politics in the UK during the last three months using any of the following sources?" Print newspapers; Online news websites; Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram; TV programmes; Radio programmes; Publicity materials from political parties; Other.

28. Question wording: "How much of a difference do you think it makes who wins in general elections to the UK House of Commons at Westminster?"

29. Eichhorn, J. (2018b). Votes at 16: New insights from Scotland on enfranchisement. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 71(2), 365–391.

It is impossible to disentangle any potential causal relationship between higher levels of political engagement among young people in Scotland in 2015, overall higher levels of voter mobilisation in the context of the 2014 independence referendum, and a potential first-time voter engagement boost with the data we have available. However, we can state that in contrast to the carry through effect of earlier enfranchisement on voting, a similarly positive tendency has not been maintained for other forms of political engagement and young people's perceptions of political efficacy. This raises the question why we might not see a greater association between Votes-at-16 and political engagement beyond participating in elections. In the remaining sections, we will therefore turn to findings on inequalities in young people's political engagement in Scotland and aspects of political socialisation that impact these.

Finding 3: Inequality in political engagement bounces back for most cohorts of young people

In 2021, young people's political engagement in Scotland was clearly stratified by the socio-economic backgrounds young people grow up in. This means that young people from families of higher social classes were more likely to turn out to vote in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, were more likely to engage in other forms of non-electoral political participation in the context of the election, used more types of media to get information on political issues, and perceived higher levels of political efficacy than their less well-off peers (see Figure 3). While this stratification of political engagement and political attitudes by social class is a typical finding for people of all ages, for young people it means that up to the age of 31 the extent of their political engagement is at least partially determined by their parents' social or socio-occupational class and the circumstances the young people grew up in.³⁰ These findings are robust when we take into account whether a young person had been enfranchised at age 16 or 18, as well as their gender, region, and age and they hold similarly for non-electoral political engagement, information source usage on political issues, and perceived political efficacy (see Table 3).

30. We ask respondents to think back to their household's circumstances at age 16 and use an occupational measure of their parent's social class – the classification according to the National Readership Survey NRS scale – where we distinguish young people from (1) upper- and middle-class households (A + B, such as higher or intermediate managerial, administrative, or professional workers) from (2) lower middle-class households (C1, for example supervisory, clerical, and junior managerial, administrative, or professional workers), (3) skilled working-class households (C2, e.g., semi-skilled workers), and (4) working class households or households of non-working parents (D/E).

Figure 3: Voter turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election by socio-occupational class of the parents at age 16 of the respondent, self-reported (mean in %, with 95%-confidence interval): 16 to 31-year-olds

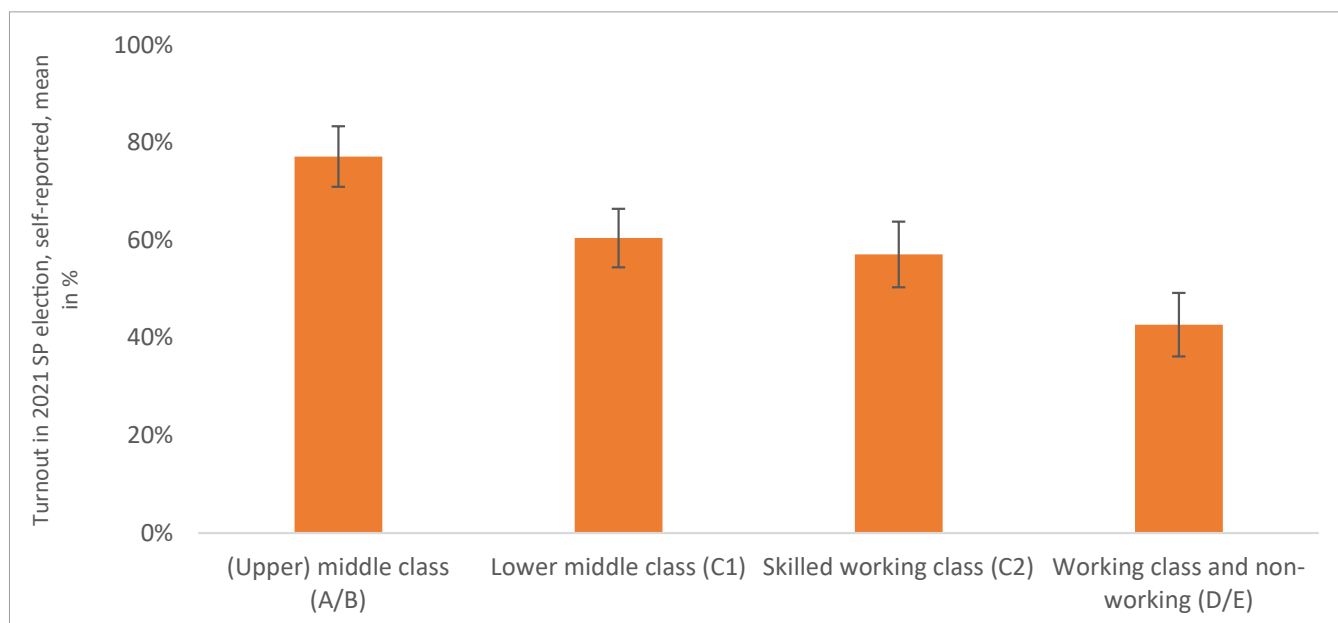


Table 3: Regression³¹ results for four political engagement measures – contrasting enfranchisement age at first election and social class, with controls (16- to 31-year-olds)

	Voted in SP 2021	Non-electoral participation	Information source usage	Political efficacy
First vote's eligibility age: 16 (compared to 18)	+	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
<i>Associated with</i>				
Social class (higher compared to lower)	+	+	+	+

(+/- indicate statistically significant positive/negative associations at the 10%-level; n.d. indicates no significant association)

Displayed are the associations between the factors by which young people were differentiated for the analysis and the four political engagement measures of interest (controlling for: age, gender, region).

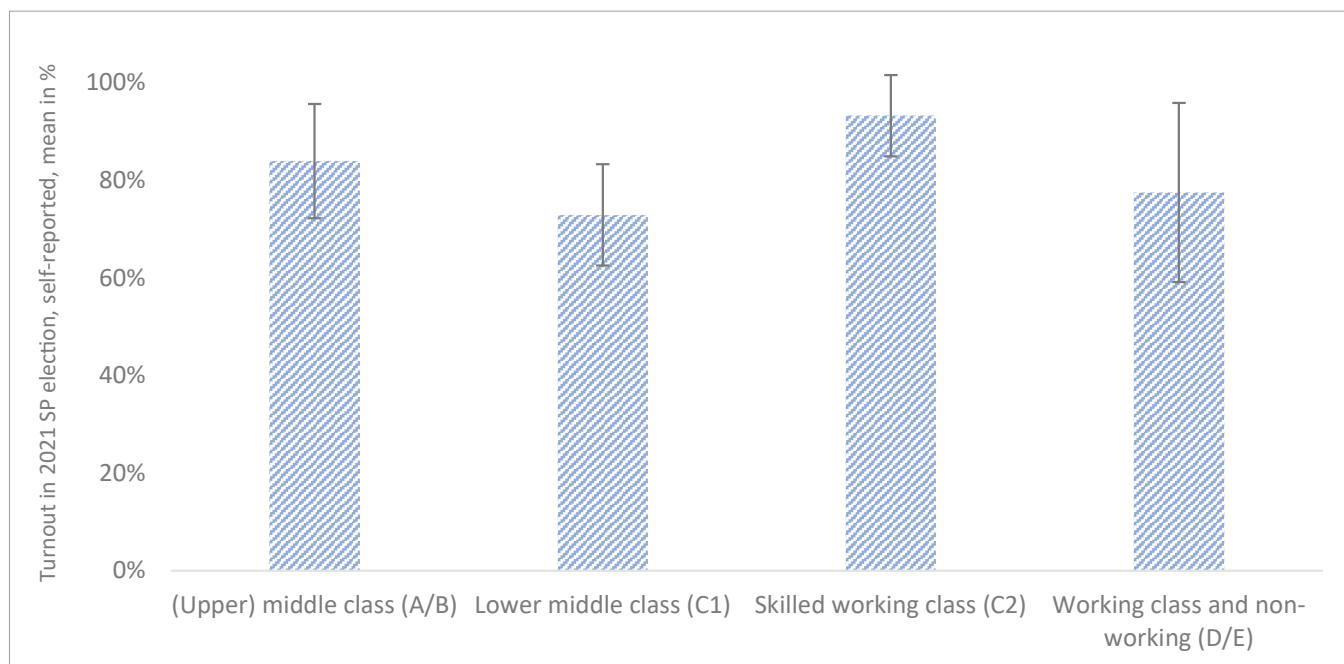
This is very different from patterns of political inequality found immediately after the lowering of the voting age and the pattern we find if we only look at today's 16- and 17-year-olds – those who were eligible to vote in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections for the first time. One of the most intriguing findings in the aftermath of the independence referendum was that 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland showed lower levels of inequality in political participation by the social class of their families than their peers elsewhere in the UK. In one study in February 2015, there were no major differences in voting, non-electoral participation, or information source usage between 16- and 17-year-olds of different social classes in Scotland.³² For the same age group elsewhere in the UK classic patterns were still observed. This difference could not be attributed to a general Scotland-effect, as usual inequality patterns were observed for Scottish adults.

31. For electoral participation a logistic regression was estimated. For the other variables, ordinal regression models were estimated.

32. Huebner, C. & Eichhorn, J. (2022). The Tide Raising all Boats? Social Class Differences in Political Participation among Young People in Scotland. *Scottish Affairs*, 31(2), 165-189.

In line with the finding of less political inequality by social class for the Votes-at-16 pioneers in 2015, we also find no major differences between today's 16- and 17-year-olds of different social classes in their turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections (Figure 4), their levels of non-electoral political engagement, their use of different information sources on political issues and their political efficacy (table 3). Unlike older age groups and similar to first-time voters in the 2014 independence referendum, 16- and 17-year-olds from all social classes were rather equally likely to turn out to vote in this most recent election, to engage with demonstrations, petitions, or other forms of political expression beyond voting, and used similarly many different sources to gain information on political issues.

Figure 4: Voter turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election by socio-occupational class of the parents at age 16 of the respondent, self-reported (mean in %, with 95%-confidence interval): 16- to 17-year-olds only



This finding raises important questions about the connection between enfranchisement at ages 16 and 17 – when most young people are still in school and living in the parental home – and inequality in political engagement and the robustness and durability of this link as first-time voters become older and experience further elections. It suggests that in Scotland any positive effects of earlier enfranchisement on reducing political inequality may be limited to the immediate experience of voting for the first time for young people enfranchised first at ages 16 or 17. With the available data we cannot establish whether other cohorts of young people enfranchised at age 16 may have displayed similarly equal patterns of political engagement across social class backgrounds when they first joined the electorate or not. We can however state that any potential decrease of political inequality that we might have seen for Votes-at-16 pioneers in 2015 and see for today's 16- and 17-year-old first-time voters is not sustained as young people grow older and thus wears off in the longer-term.

Table 4: Regression³³ results for four political engagement measures – by social class, with controls (16- and 17-year-olds only)

	Voted in SP 2021	Non-electoral participation	Information source usage	Political efficacy
Social class (higher compared to lower)	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

(+/- indicate statistically significant positive/negative associations at the 10%-level; n.d. indicates no significant association)

Displayed are the associations between the factors by which young people were differentiated for the analysis and the four political engagement measures of interest (controlling for: age, gender, region).

Finding 4: What impacts young people’s longer-term political engagement

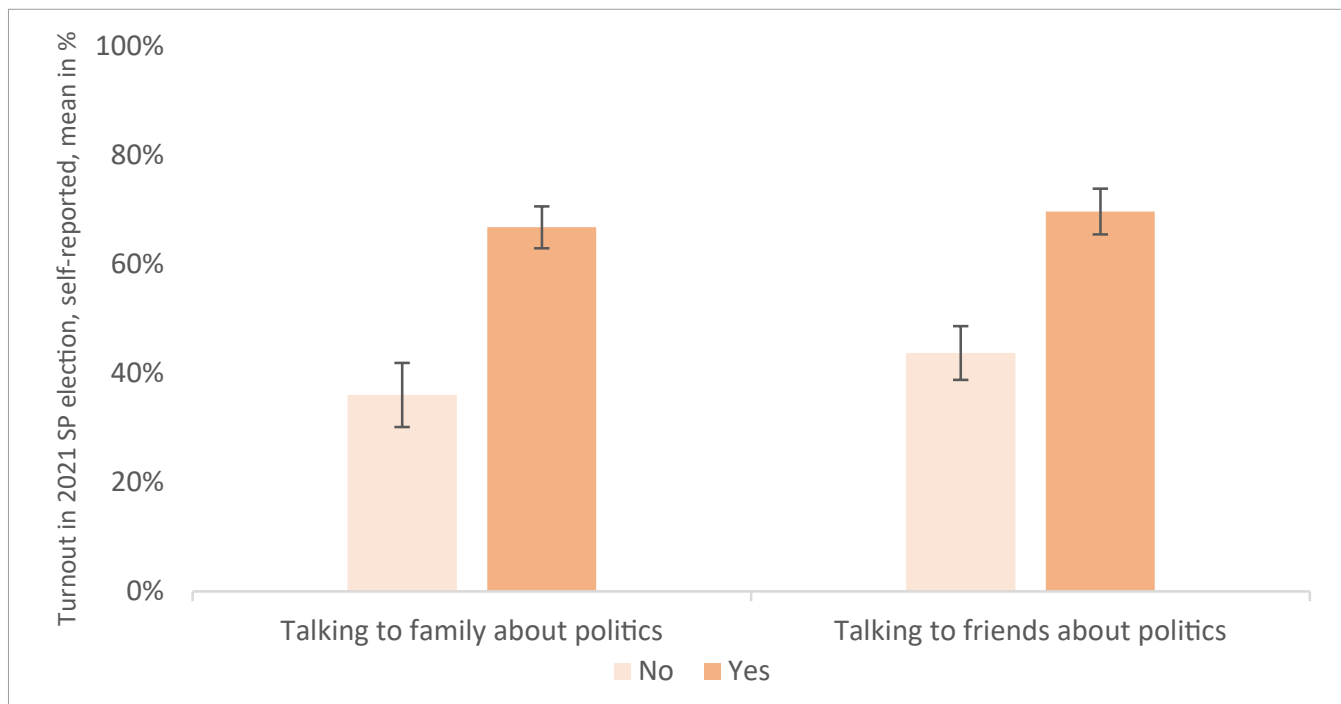
The findings on young people’s higher turnout when enfranchised at age 16 or 17 and the differences in observed levels of political inequality for different cohorts pose questions about what might influence certain young people to be more likely to turn out to vote in elections – and continue to do so later in life – than others. We set out to review to what extent factors of socialisation, such as a young person’s family background, their circle of friends, and the education they receive to develop their political literacy skills, shape their likelihood to engage with politics. Ultimately, we are interested in exploring whether or not changes in the provision of opportunities for any of these socialisation factors can help stimulate turnout and political engagement among young people.

While it is known that young people in Scotland do not necessarily follow their parents’ political choices,³⁴ whether they engage politically in the first place is still strongly influenced by young people’s family contexts. Young people of all ages who had talked about politics with their families were much more likely to have voted in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections compared to young people who did not. The same holds for having conversations about politics with friends, but the parental socialisation effect is substantially stronger (see Figure 5), especially for younger cohorts who might still be living in the parental household. The effects are robust when taking into account other factors discussed above (see Table 4). Because political engagement and interest in politics are socially stratified in the population as a whole and political discussions hence much more likely to occur in some families or friendship circles than in others, without any intervention, these results mean that existing inequalities in political participation are likely to continue to be replicated in Scotland.

33. For electoral participation a logistic regression was estimated. For the other variables, ordinal regression models were estimated.

34. Eichhorn, J. (2018a). Mobilisation through early activation and school engagement – the story from Scotland. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21(8), 1095-1110.

Figure 5 Voter turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election by talking to family and friends about politics³⁵, self-reported (mean in %, with 95%-confidence interval): 16- to 31-year-olds



One factor that has the potential to partially mitigate such inequalities is good, deliberative political literacy education. A number of studies around the world have shown that certain types of citizenship education can indeed increase young people's political engagement.³⁶ Around the Scottish independence referendum, major efforts were made inside and outside schools to provide young people with the means to engage in political discussions with confidence. This was not always easy, and teachers faced a number of obstacles³⁷, but the impact was found to be largely positive. In 2015, young people in Scotland who had received good political literacy education – especially when that was deliberative, that means when the educational setting allowed young people to openly discuss political issues to help form their own opinions – were more likely to engage politically.³⁸ It was not the case that young people who had discussed the referendum in the classroom were more likely to favour one side or another.³⁹ As others have also shown outside Scotland,⁴⁰ the combination of earlier enfranchisement and deliberative citizenship education can be a particularly potent lever for youth political engagement. Giving young people the right to vote at age 16 or 17 and the provision of nation-wide deliberative citizenship education to develop political literacy skills can be mutually reinforcing in the positive association with political engagement.⁴¹

35. Question wording: "Who have you talked to about how Scotland is governed in the last three months, if anyone at all? Of the following choose as many or few as apply."

36. Torney-Purta, J. (2002). The School's Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-Eight Countries. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6(4), 203-212.

37. Head, G., Hill, M., Lockyer, A. & MacDonald, C. (2014). Schools, Political Literacy and the 2014 Scottish Referendum. Glasgow: Stevenson Trust for Citizenship & University of Glasgow.

38. Eichhorn, J. (2018a). Mobilisation through early activation and school engagement – the story from Scotland. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21(8), 1095-1110.

39. Eichhorn, J., Heyer, A., and Huebner, C. (2014). *Who influences the formation of political attitudes and decisions in young people? Evidence from the referendum on Scottish independence*. Berlin: dj|part.

40. Hoskins, B. & Janmaat, G. (2019). *Education, Democracy and Inequality. Political Engagement and Citizenship Education in Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

41. Milner, H. (2020). Political Knowledge, Civic Education and Voting at 16. In: Eichhorn, J. & Bergh, J. (Eds). 2020. *Lowering the Voting Age to 16: Learning from Real Experiences Worldwide*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Table 5: Regression⁴² results for four political engagement measures – contrasting enfranchisement age at first election, social class and socialising influences, with controls (16- to 31-year-olds)

	Voted in SP 2021	Non-electoral participation	Information source usage	Political efficacy
First vote's eligibility age: 16 (compared to 18)	+	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
<i>Associated with</i>				
Social class (higher compared to lower)	+	+	(+) ^a	(+) ^b
Ever having taken Modern Studies	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Ever had classes with political discussions	n.d.	+	+	n.d.
Talking about politics with family members	+	+	+	+
Talking about politics with friends	+	+	+	+

(+/- indicate statistically significant positive/negative associations at the 10%-level; n.d. indicates no significant association)

Displayed are the associations between the factors by which young people were differentiated for the analysis and the four political engagement measures of interest (controlling for: age, gender, region).

^aDifference is only significant for comparison between AB and DE social class groupings.

^bDifference is only significant for comparison between AB and C1 social class groupings.

Deliberative political literacy education plays an important role for young people's engagement with politics beyond their days in school. We find that to some extent the importance of this kind of education still manifests years after young people leave school, meaning that deliberative education that helps develop political literacy has positive longer-term effects on young people's political engagement. In our sample of 16- to 31-year-olds, those who had taken classes in school in which political issues were discussed, were more likely to vote in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, more likely to engage with political issues in ways other than voting, and more likely to use different information sources to keep up to date with political issues. The effect is, of course, stronger for younger cohorts who have been in school more recently, but it remains robust when taking into account respondents' ages, their socio-economic background, gender and region (Table 5).

42. For electoral participation a logistic regression was estimated. For the other variables, ordinal regression models were estimated.

Having taken a particular subject, like Modern Studies, by itself does not show a similar kind of association, although we cannot establish the exact causality here as these factors may be linked when somewhat older young people think back to their school education after having left school. What matters is that education indeed includes opportunities to discuss political issues (and not, for example, just the passive learning of legislative processes). For many pupils in Scotland, this is likely to be the case in Modern Studies, but discussion of political issues and development of political literacy skills can also occur in other kinds of classes.⁴³

Access to this kind of political literacy education, however, continues to be different across Scotland. While the curriculum calls for all young people to receive citizenship education, the decision as to what it entails exactly can vary – not just between schools, but also between local authorities. Leading up to the 2014 independence referendum, schools in some of Scotland's 32 local authorities could host hustings and debates on the referendum, while in others young people were only allowed to engage with the general legal process of the vote, but not discuss any issues. Such imbalances resulted in some young people being denied the opportunity to benefit from positive civic consequences of deliberative citizenship education. This was noted by the Scottish Parliament's Devolution (Further Powers) Committee in its report on the introduction of Votes-at 16.⁴⁴ The report called for comprehensive relevant education for all young people across Scotland. This has not been implemented so far. Local authority variation continues. This inconsistency across Scotland in the implementation of political literacy education is a problem as it prevents this type of education to act as a partial mitigator for family-based inequalities in political participation – and might further exacerbate the issue potentially by denying some young people the opportunity to benefit from the positive effects of learning to discuss political issues well.

43. In other words, Modern Studies is for many young people indeed a space in which good citizenship education takes place. However, it is important that this is done in a deliberative way. Indeed, when the models are run only checking whether respondents had taken Modern Studies – without taking into account whether respondents had engaged in political discussions in class – there was a positive association.

44. - Scottish Parliament (2015). *Devolution (Further Powers) Committee*. Stage 1 Report on the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill, 4th Report (SP Paper 725).

Conclusion and recommendations

When the voting age was initially lowered in Scotland, it was overall evaluated as a success. Greater levels of participation among newly enfranchised young people compared to their slightly older peers as well as young people in other parts of the UK coupled with greater visibility of young people and their political engagement across Scotland resulted in a shift of public opinion supporting Votes-at-16. This study finds that some of these positive tendencies from immediately after the lowering of the voting age have been maintained to date.

In this study of 16- to 31-year-olds in Scotland, we find that the young people who were first eligible to vote in an election at age 16 or 17 were more likely to participate in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections compared to those who experienced their first election at age 18 or older. Importantly, the findings do not only apply to the “pioneers” enfranchised in the context of the 2014 independence referendum, but more widely to all young people who get to vote for the first time at age 16 or 17 as compared to those first eligible to vote at age 18 or older. The findings are robust to taking into account young people first enfranchised at different types of elections, the young people’s gender, age, socio-economic background of the family, and where in Scotland they live. Overall, it appears that the introduction of Votes-at-16 in Scotland has somewhat disturbed the classic lifecycle pattern of young voters: in Scotland, it is not the case anymore that young people in their mid-20s show the overall lowest voter turnout; instead, it is those young people who have to wait until they are aged 18 or older to vote in an election for the first time. Additionally, we continue to see a significant boost in electoral participation among 16- and 17-year-old first-time voters. Earlier enfranchisement in Scotland appears to have both a short-term as well as a longer-term effect on voter participation among young people.

Aside from electoral participation, we do not observe lasting longer-term effects of voting age reform on non-electoral forms of political engagement, on how young people seek out information and use information sources on political issues, and on young people’s perceived political efficacy. Those enfranchised at 16 do not fare worse on any of these measures compared to those enfranchised at 18 in the long run, but there is also no observable positive effect of earlier enfranchisement. Additionally, we observe continued social inequality in political engagement among young people in Scotland. Contrary to the immediate aftermath of the independence referendum, political participation of young people is heavily stratified by parental background as they move through their 20s. While current 16- and 17-year-olds also show lower levels of social inequality in political engagement, this does not appear to be a lasting pattern as young people grow older. Any potential decrease of political inequality that we might see for 16- and 17-year-old first-time voters wears off in the longer-term. This suggests that, so far, the opportunities provided by lowering the voting age are not being fully exploited in Scotland.

To sustain positive effects on young people's electoral participation and mitigate political inequalities among young people in Scotland, comprehensive measures benefiting all young people in Scotland are required. Political literacy skills, when provided in nation-wide citizenship education, run in a deliberative way with classroom discussions of political issues, can play an important role in that regard. Without it, inequality in participation is likely to persist for future cohorts of young people, unless more is done to enable young people everywhere to benefit more from the opportunities of a lower voting age. The following measures could be considered to ensure that the potential of earlier enfranchisement is better utilised in increasing political engagement of all young people in the longer term:

- Political literacy education should be further strengthened, and crucially aligned, through appropriate policy changes across Scotland. This should be done with a particular emphasis on deliberative formats of this type of education through which students learn to how to discuss political issues in a reasoned way. In schools where Modern Studies is taught, it should be ensured that teachers are enabled to moderate the discussion of political issues. Where Modern Studies is not taught, either it should be introduced (with that mode of delivery) or deliberative engagement with political issues should be provided in different courses. Crucially, regional variation in the extent to which citizenship education can include the discussion of political issues should be reduced to ensure all young people can benefit from it.
- There should be a systematic nation-wide provision of opportunities to discuss political issues also outside secondary school context. This is necessary to tackle replication of inequalities in political engagement among young people and ensure that positive tendencies at age 16 and 17 can be maintained longer-term. Such efforts could include the enabling of youth organisations and civic society organisations to run programmes focussed on bringing young people, including young adults over the age of 18, into spaces in which they can discuss political issues. A possible setting in which political literacy education could continue more explicitly for many young people is the Further Education sector. Providing opportunities for political learning and discussions of political issues as core of continued formal education could help maintain positive tendencies in political engagement throughout transitions to adulthood. Also, programmes that bring civil society actors into schools to connect different settings could be helpful and should be funded.
- The data base to evaluate youth political engagement in the context of earlier enfranchisement should be improved. Currently, high-quality data on political engagement of young people in Scotland is very limited. Particularly longitudinal data is required to understand how political engagement changes during transitions into adulthood. Collecting data on the same young people as they transition from adolescence into adulthood would provide insights into how their engagement may be shaped by different experiences (such as employment, further or higher education). Funding dedicated survey projects or extensions of existing cohort studies would provide new opportunities for work that would be recognised internationally given how rare such studies are. Emerging insights would enable us to develop more targeted approaches to address the needs of specific groups of young people in enhancing their civic and political engagement.

- As new research insights emerge elsewhere in the UK on early enfranchisement (such as Wales) and internationally, it would be very helpful for Scottish actors to stay connected to networks of researchers, civil society organisations and officials exchanging insights from their experiences. These include experimental trials on election administration options (such as in Wales) and large-scale reform efforts (such as in Germany). Research from Scotland has been used extensively in other countries to inform the implementation of Votes-at-16 there. Gaining knowledge from the experiences in those other places can now help to further enhance the work in Scotland.
- Within their means, Scottish and UK politicians, policymakers and civil society representatives should advocate for a lowering of the voting age to 16 for all UK elections to give more young people the opportunity to benefit from Votes-at-16, including young people in Scotland who may be enfranchised at 16, but miss out on participating in an election until age 18 or older.

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Overview of methods

This study was designed to answer research questions on the longer-term outcomes of the lowering of the voting age in Scotland. The data for this study was collected in July 2021 over a period of three weeks using an online survey and respondents from online panels. The questionnaire was designed using established surveys of political and social attitudes in Scotland as well as surveys specifically designed to investigate youth political engagement⁴⁵ – thus allowing for comparisons with other research findings. The study has been designed in line with and reviewed by the University of Edinburgh’s School of Social and Political Science ethics committee, assuring anonymity and data protection for survey participants, full transparency on survey aims and processes (including the right to not answer questions and to not complete the survey), and the adherence to purdah period restrictions ahead of the Scottish Parliament elections. The programmed survey was piloted in a soft launch to test its functionality before being implemented more widely.

To obtain samples sufficiently large to distinguish very specific age ranges, we worked with a survey provider who was able to combine respondents from three different online panels.⁴⁶ Respondents were cross-validated to avoid duplicate participation in multiple panels. Sampling was done using quotas to reflect population characteristics of 16- to 31-year-olds in Scotland as well as possible. To accomplish the greatest degree of representativeness achievable, we used quotas for gender, region, and parental social class based on the most up-to-date official population statistics (or survey-based proxies, where official statistics were not available). We also monitored the distributions of gender and parental social class within sub-groups of age to balance the sample across all age groups. We used an occupational measure of parental social class – the classification according to the National Readership Survey NRS scale.

This resulted in a sample that matched the characteristics of the target population of Scotland as closely as possible. Where deviations existed (in particular, there was an oversampling of female respondents and higher socio-occupational class of parents – as is common in such a survey), we accounted for those by producing design weights that adjust for the biases to achieve population characteristics. In total 904 young people were included in the final sample.

Using the sample of 16- to 31-year-olds only, we analyse differences between groups of young people according to their age of enfranchisement at the first election or vote they could participate in. We created cohorts of young people according to the first election or referendum they were eligible to vote in by matching election dates with the young people’s survey responses on their year and month of birth. Using cut-off points for eligibility to vote in an election, respondents were coded to belong to a particular cohort based on their birthday (see Table 5). Upon completion of initial analyses and publication of first outputs, the data will be deposited with the UK Data Service for use by other researchers. Further information on the methods and approach can be obtained from the authors upon request in the meantime.

45. Including the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey and a survey developed, piloted and implemented specifically for young people in the context of the Scottish independence referendum: Eichhorn, J., Paterson, L., MacInnes, J., & Rosie, M. (2014). Results from the 2014 survey on 14-17-year-old persons living in Scotland on the Scottish independence referendum. *AQMeN Briefing Paper*.

46. The provider was Breaking Blue.

Table 5: Cohort composition in the final weighted sample

Cohort by age at first vote	Age range in May 2021	Birthdate range	Sample size (weighted)
Aged 16-17 at 2021 Scottish Parliament elections	16-17	May 2003 – April 2005	178
Aged 18-19 at 2021 Scottish Parliament elections	18-19	December 2001 – April 2003	90
Aged 18-19 at 2019 General Election	19-20	May 2001 – November 2001	30
Aged 16-17 at 2017 Scottish Local Elections	20-21	May 2000 – April 2001	89
Aged 16-17 at 2016 Scottish Parliament elections	21-22	September 1998 – April 2000	99
Aged 16-17 at 2014 Independence referendum 2014	22-24	September 1996 – August 1998	110
Aged 18-19 at 2014 Independence referendum	24-26	May 1994 – August 1996	91
Aged 18-19 at 2012 Scottish Local Elections	27-28	May 1993 – April 1994	32
Aged 18-19 at 2011 Scottish Parliament elections	28-29	May 1992 – April 1993	35
Aged 18-20 at 2010 General Election	29-31	July 1989 – April 1992	150