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# 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

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Within the UK, Scotland offers a unique case study of ‘Votes-at-16’ in practice. Research provided evidence on the immediate effects of voting age reform on young people’s engagement with politics, but little is known about how young people experienced being allowed to vote from the age of 16 years. This article analyses qualitative evidence about young people’s experiences with the right to vote at 16 since the voting age reform in Scotland. Drawing on data from interviews with young people, we find that ‘Votes-at-16’ brought about a mix of experiences. In combination with the experience of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum it marked a uniquely mobilising life event that boosted confidence in youth voice and led to a perceived increase in political efficacy. It also raised frustrations with young people, however, about their lack of voting rights in other elections and about a perceived gap between expectations and reality regarding the role of schools. By examining young people’s experiences with ‘Votes-at-16’ in Scotland, this article contributes to debates about the implications of voting age reform in the Scotland and beyond.

**Keywords:** Civic Education, Political Participation, Scottish Referendum, Voting Age, Youth Engagement

## 1. Introduction

In Scotland, young people can vote from the age of 16 years. In a one-off decision 16- and 17-year-olds were included in the franchise for Scotland’s 2014 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 Scottish Parliament 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. How have young people experienced their right to vote since the introduction of 'Votes-at-16' in Scotland?

With early voting experiences assumed to be habit-forming (Franklin, 2004; Dinas, 2012), insights into young people's experiences with elections are key for understanding the impact of voting age reform in the short term and on voting behaviour throughout the life course. Research on the lowering of the voting age in Scotland has focused on immediate outcomes of voting age reform on young people's political attitudes and levels of engagement (Eichhorn *et al.*, 2014; Breeze *et al.*, 2015; Hill *et al.*, 2017; Eichhorn, 2018b, 2018a). Few studies have investigated how young people experienced their newly acquired right to vote (notable exceptions are Breeze *et al.*, 2017; Sanghera *et al.*, 2018) and to date, there has been no research on young people's experiences with 'Votes-at-16' in Scotland since the 2014 independence referendum.

This article offers insights into how young people in Scotland have experienced the right to vote at 16 in the years after the 2014 independence referendum. It goes beyond evaluations of the immediate outcomes of voting age reform and focuses on young people's experiences with 'Votes-at-16' in the years since the referendum, including in subsequent elections.

We begin with an overview of factors known to impact young people's early voting experiences, before taking a detailed look at the Scottish case and what is known about the impact of 'Votes-at-16' in this context. We then discuss the data and qualitative methods used to gather insights into young people's experiences with voting age reform in Scotland. Four data analysis sections illustrate how: (i) the participants experienced a new kind of civic confidence with 'Votes-at-16'; (ii) attaining the right to vote mobilised them, but not equally for all kinds of elections; (iii) inconsistencies in enfranchisement frustrated the participants and (iv) they experienced civic education in the context of 'Votes-at-16' in Scotland. The insights raise questions on the potential impact of the lowering of the voting age, the longevity of these effects and on the unintended consequences of voting age reform in Scotland and beyond.

## 2. Young people's experiences of attaining the right to vote

Participation in elections, especially in one's formative years, is found to be self-reinforcing (Dinas, 2012) and, some even say, it is habit-forming (Franklin, 2004). Whether voting eventually becomes a habit or not depends to a large extent on how young people experience their first elections (Franklin, 2004; Dinas, 2012).

The age at which young people are enfranchised matters for early voting experiences. Younger people are generally found to be less likely to vote compared

with the older people, because they are believed to experience higher 'start-up costs' before voting becomes a habit (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Plutzer, 2002). However, when comparing only those voting in their first-ever elections, younger first-time voters have higher chances to turn out than their slightly older peers (Bhatti and Hansen, 2012; Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014). One possible explanation for this pattern of voting likelihood is that younger people are more likely to still live at home when they experience their first election and thus benefit from the socialising effects of being embedded in the family or in school (Bhatti and Hansen, 2012).

Indeed, the impact of the family and of education in schools is crucial for young people's early voting experiences, as numerous studies show (cf. Beck and Jennings, 1982; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Quintelier, 2010, 2013, 2015; Hoskins *et al.*, 2012; Keating and Janmaat, 2016; Eichhorn, 2018a). When younger people are enfranchised, schools and civic education gain importance in shaping early voting experiences (Franklin, 2004). There are surprisingly few investigations, however, of how young people experience the role of schools in the context of earlier enfranchisement (notable exceptions are Hill *et al.*, 2017; Schwarzer and Zeglovits, 2013). Schwarzer and Zeglovits (2013) show that after lowering of the voting age in Austria, 16- and 17-year-olds felt an obligation to become informed about politics and assigned most of the responsibility for the provision of information to schools. They saw schools as places to not only to learn factual things, but to also discuss politics, and some participants complained about schools failing to provide either.

In addition to the age of enfranchisement, the salience and electoral context of one's first-ever election can also have a lasting effect on how young people come to experience electoral politics. Those who experienced a highly salient first election when coming of age have been found to have higher rates of turnout in later life (Dinas, 2012) and elections of low salience can end up being demobilising for young people (Franklin and Hobolt, 2011). Exceptional circumstances surrounding young people's enfranchisement can further shape their early voting experiences. Ødegaard *et al.* (2020) explain how the terror attacks in Norway in 2011 mobilised an entire generation of young people by leading to an increased appreciation of political discussion and democratic solutions among those who came of age during this exceptional time.

Others argue that the experience of voting age reform and even just the act of enfranchisement itself can constitute a 'life event' (Zeglovits and Zandonella, 2013) or 'hype' (Bhatti *et al.*, 2016) big enough to shape young people's engagement in elections. In the context of voting age reform in Austria, newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds were found to develop higher level of interest in politics than their non-enfranchised peers (Zeglovits and Zandonella, 2013) and they perceived a greater sense of efficacy with regard to their ability to affect

political change (Schwarzer and Zeglovits, 2013). These experiences eventually translated into higher voting likelihood in subsequent elections, but also to increased support for extreme political positions among young people in Austria (Bronner and Ifkovits, 2019).

The effect of enfranchisement as a ‘life event’ might be offset, however, by inconsistencies in young people’s eligibility to vote. Faas and Leininger (2020) hypothesise that partial or temporary enfranchisement of young people—for example, when young people are only allowed to vote in some, but not all elections—can lead to an experience of injustice that ends up being demobilising. Surveys among young people in German federal states with different ages of enfranchisement find that 16- and 17-year-olds experienced high levels of frustration when they were temporarily disenfranchised (Faas and Leininger, 2020, p. 162). Although such inconsistencies in the extent of enfranchisement have been common side effects of recent voting age reforms—for example, in Germany, Scotland, Wales and parts of the USA—it is not clear to date how they affect young people and their experience of elections.

### 3. ‘Votes-at-16’ in Scotland

The introduction of ‘Votes-at-16’ in Scotland brought together several of the factors assumed to shape young people’s early voting experiences and thus allows us to examine them. In a one-off decision, 16- and 17-year-olds were first included in the franchise for Scotland’s referendum on independence that was held in September 2014—a highly salient and narrowly contested vote that was preceded by a long and exceptionally mobilising campaign. Research conducted over the course of the referendum campaign found young people to be motivated to become engaged (Sanghera *et al.*, 2018), similarly interested in politics as the rest of the population (Eichhorn, 2014), and to hold nuanced views of the issue at stake (Breeze *et al.*, 2015). Many young people were involved in the campaign and in activists groups (Breeze *et al.*, 2017) and the number of 16- and 17-year-olds who said they felt close to a political party increased over the course of the referendum campaign (Eichhorn *et al.*, 2014).

On the day of the referendum, an estimated 75 per cent of registered 16- and 17-year-olds turned out to vote (Electoral Commission, 2014, p. 64). This was lower than the overall turnout at just under 85 per cent, but higher than among slightly older young people of 18–24 years, of whom 54 per cent reported to have voted (Electoral Commission, 2014, p. 64). Although political parties did not specifically target young first-time voters, the period immediately after the referendum saw a surge in young people joining political parties (McLaverly *et al.*, 2015). A few months later, the cohort of newly enfranchised young Scots was found more willing to participate in elections, more engaged with other forms of

political participation, such as demonstrations, petitions or writing to a member of parliament, and used more sources for information on politics than their peers in the rest of the UK (Eichhorn, 2018b).

Some of the young people coming of age during this time was found to view their experience with 'Votes-at-16' and the referendum as critical in their transitions into autonomous adulthood (Breeze *et al.*, 2017). For them, the right to vote was an opportunity for emancipation (Sanghera *et al.*, 2018, p. 549). Through it, they learnt to form their own opinions, to trust and take responsibility for their political decisions (Breeze *et al.*, 2017). Many had discussed politics with family and friends, and particularly discussions about politics in school had proven key in raising young people's understanding of politics (Eichhorn, 2018a) and boosting their 'political confidence' (Hill *et al.*, 2017, p. 64). In contrast, simply receiving civic education in school, for example, by taking Modern Studies, a civics-style subject offered in many Scottish schools, did not substantively impact young people (Eichhorn, 2018a). However, it is not clear to date how sustained these effects were for other elections and subsequent cohorts of young people (MacLeod and Eichhorn, 2020).

After the referendum, the power over the franchise in Scotland was transferred from Westminster to the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh and it was soon decided to permanently lower the voting age to 16 years for all Scottish elections. Following the reform of the voting age, Scottish 16- and 17-year-olds were eligible to vote in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election and the 2017 Scottish local election, but they were not enfranchised in the UK's General Elections in 2015 and 2017 and in the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union. This represented a situation of temporary and partial disenfranchisement for young people. As discussed by Faas and Leininger (2020a) such partial disenfranchisement can end up being experienced as frustrating, unjust and ultimately, demobilising by young people.

Compared with the independence referendum, subsequent Scottish elections brought about much less buzz. Although turnout in both the 2016 Scottish Parliament and 2017 Scottish local election increased slightly overall (Electoral Commission, 2017), Mycock *et al.* (2020, p. 56) claim that this was driven by 'the ongoing resonance of the independence question among older voters' rather than the particular involvement of newly enfranchised young people. Representative quantitative data to evaluate this claim are lacking, but Mackie (2019, p. 209) notes that the young participants in his qualitative study had 'no interest in voting in either the Scottish Parliamentary Election, local council elections or the UK General Elections', because in contrast to the independence referendum, these elections did not offer the opportunity to impact immediate and far-reaching political and social change.

#### 4. Methods and data

To explore how young people in Scotland experienced ‘Votes-at-16’ in the years after the voting age reform, this section draws on qualitative data from a project that examined young people’s experiences of citizenship, including of political citizenship and ‘Votes-at-16’, in Scotland. A total of 20 young people aged 15–18 years participated in in-depth interviews in 2017 and 2018. O’Toole (2003, p. 74) argues that in-depth qualitative methods are the key for researching young people’s experiences of politics to ‘allow young people to express their views and experiences in their own terms’. This project was thus designed to treat young people as competent experts and to allow them to narrate their own experiences of having and not having the right to vote.

Interviews were planned as ‘conversations with a purpose’ (Burgess, 2000, p. 84), conducted one-to-one or in small groups of friends. Each interview took between 35 min and 1 h 45 min and included a mix of questions and narrative elements. Participants were asked to recount memories of the time of the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence and the initial lowering of the voting age, their experiences with ‘Votes-at-16’ and the electoral process since, experiences of recent elections (the 2016 Scottish Parliament elections and the UK’s referendum on EU membership, the 2017 General Election for the UK House of Commons and the 2017 Scottish local council elections) and their experiences with civic education in this context. Some interviews were repeated a few weeks or months after the first interview, initially just to allow for more time to explore the young people’s experiences with ‘Votes-at-16’ in depth. In some instances, this also allowed for an investigation of how the young people reflected on their enfranchisement after their first-ever elections and on their transitions into adult citizenship.

Participants were recruited from a range of secondary schools in and around a city in the east of Scotland. In an effort to hear from young people with different experiences, a broad range of young people was approached through workshops in different secondary schools. These were in the inner city, in suburbs and commuter towns, in affluent and less affluent parts of the city. At the end of each workshop, the young people were asked if they wanted to participate in further conversations about their thoughts regarding different political issues they cared about. Interviews were then conducted with those who volunteered, at a time and in a location of their choice. Some interviews were conducted on the school premises during lunch time; others took place in public spaces, such as cafés. Ethical approval was granted by the university faculty’s ethics committee,<sup>1</sup> local councils, participating schools and the teachers involved in hosting the initial

<sup>1</sup>Ethics review reference number: 226871.

workshops. Consent was sought in writing from all participating young people before the first conversation and from parents of those participants who were under the age of 16 at the time of the first interview.

All participants were between 15- and 18-years-old and in secondary education. The claim is not that this group of participants is necessarily a representative sample of young people in Scotland. The aim of this project was not to achieve representativeness but depth about how young people experienced the right to vote at the age of 16 years. Including 15- to 18-year-olds provided opportunities to explore young people's expectations of voting when they were not yet enfranchised as well as their first, and sometimes second, experience with voting. None of the participants had voted in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, few had been eligible to vote in the 2016 Scottish elections, and most had been enfranchised in time for the 2017 Scottish local elections. In total, 12 participants were females and 8 were males. An overview over the participants and their key characteristics is provided in [Table A1](#), provided in the Appendix.

All conversations were transcribed verbatim, reflecting the young people's language, including local dialects, specific jargon, stoppages and filler words. The transcripts were coded thematically, concentrating on issues of citizenship, politics and political engagement. For this paper, the interviews were analysed with a focus on young people's experiences of voting and elections. Particular attention was paid to themes coded as the lowering of the voting age, 'Votes-at-16', interest and current engagement in electoral politics, considerations for future political engagement, and experiences and evaluations of civic education.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. 'Votes-at-16' and increased confidence in youth voice

For most participants, the lowering of the voting age to 16 was a positive experience. In line with [Schwarzer and Zeglovits' \(2013\)](#) contentions from Austria, there is an evidence for increase in political efficacy among the young people who participated in this study. Many said the introduction of 'Votes-at-16' gave them a boost of confidence in young people's voices and a feeling that they had power to affect change. Emma (17) explained how she drew strength from the lowering of the voting age and how, as a young person, she felt her voice now mattered more than before the introduction of 'Votes-at-16':

Emma (17): And I think there this sort of strength that's come with the voting age being lowered in the Scottish referendum. 'Cause like before it was kind of like constant 'Young people don't care about anything.'

(...) And then they lowered the voting age and then suddenly there was this feeling of ‘Our voices do matter. And we can be engaged.’

Interestingly, while for some participants it was the act of voting itself that made them realise their newly gained power, others experienced a similar boost in confidence regardless of attaining the right to vote. For them, the lowering of the voting age countered often repeated claims about youth political disengagement and young people’s lack of maturity and interest in politics. Ross (18) explained how he felt more powerful after using his right to vote for the first time in the 2017 Scottish local elections. In contrast, for Matt (15), the mere expectation of being allowed to vote from 16 rather than 18, raised his confidence. Being allowed to vote at 16 gave him hope that he would be taken seriously as a young person.

Ross (18): I definitely... I feel like I definitely got more power. I have sort of a say on like who’s gonna go and be in power. So, I definitely feel good about being able to vote. Definitely. (...) I think like my votes will like change things. Like the local elections that I took part in, like my vote helped to like lower the majority that a party held, which was like, I felt quite proud about.

Matt (15): I have the chance to like actually have a voice and actually be taken seriously as well instead of just being kind of like the laughingstock, like ‘Oh, you’re a teenager. You don’t really know what you’re doing.’

Like the participants in [Breeze et al. \(2017\)](#), some of the young people in this study viewed gaining, and using, the right to vote as a critical step in their transition into autonomous adulthood. Ashlain (16) believes that at 16 ‘we’re already kind of grasping what adult life is going to be like, before the tsunami of life kinda hits us at eighteen.’ Similarly, for Ben (16), being allowed to vote from 16 goes hand in hand with ‘transitioning’—going to senior school, thinking about college and university and assuming other adult responsibilities:

Ben (16): I think that sixteen is the point where we’re transitioning. Certainly like, you know, we’re in senior school, where we really have to start thinking about college and Uni and all those other... Having to think about all those other responsibilities, I think, in a sense makes you want to invest in your future. And I think having the lower voting age allows us to be able to voice our opinions.

## 5.2. *The referendum effect and ‘Votes-at-16’ as a mobilising ‘life event’*

In line with the idea that early enfranchisement itself can constitute a mobilising ‘life event’ ([Zeglovits and Zandonella, 2013](#)), some participants viewed the introduction of ‘Votes-at-16’ in Scotland as somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

They attributed their own newly gained interest in politics to the lowering of the voting age and believed that ‘Votes-at-16’ impacted other young people in the same way (in line with [Breeze et al., 2017](#); [Sanghera et al., 2018](#)). Amy (17) recalls first starting to talk about politics when she turned 16 because before ‘I couldn’t vote, so like I didn’t talk about it that much cause I was like, “well I can’t, I have no power, I can’t vote in anything”.’ Similarly, Hamish (16) believed that some of his previously disengaged peers became curious about and motivated to engage in politics precisely when and because they were given the right to vote at 16.

Hamish (16): So, I think they almost don’t really care about it because they don’t need to care about it, because there’s nothing that they can do. Or at least they feel like there’s nothing they can do to actually change anything. And they’ll only really care once it swings around (. . .) because ‘Oh, I’m sixteen. This means I can vote!’ And then there’ll be the curiosity. ‘Well, I’m gonna go see what this is like.’ So, I do think having it at 16, eh, brings more young people engaged in politics.

For other participants, their early experiences with politics were so bound up with the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence that the two are difficult to disentangle. As the introduction of ‘Votes-at-16’ in Scotland coincided with the independence referendum, the two events are inextricably linked. This is also how many participants saw it, even though they all came of age in the years after the referendum and were not actually eligible to vote in it. Several participants recalled the time of the independence referendum as when they first took an interest in politics. Lauren (16) said the referendum was the trigger that got her interested in politics, for Hamish (16) it was ‘the first time that I really properly considered politics’, and Ben (16) describes it as his ‘political awakening’.

From the participants’ accounts, we can identify two distinct factors, which contributed to the particular mobilisation of young people during the time of the 2014 independence referendum. On the one hand, the referendum constituted an exceptionally salient contest that mobilised large parts of the population, including many young people. Thinking back to the amounts of debate and political discussion in the lead up to the referendum, several participants said that it was impossible to avoid getting caught up in it, Ben (16), for example:

Ben (16): I mean, like no one could avoid it. So, I mean, debate was pretty much inevitable certainly. Eh, it was certainly interesting to be able to see other people’s opinions and that kind of stuff.

Emma (17) narrates the referendum experience in relation to a uniquely mobilising life event. This is similar to [Ødegaard et al.’s \(2020\)](#) argument that the circumstances brought about by the 2011 terror attack in Norway contributed to the particular mobilisation of an entire generation of young Norwegian voters. In

the Scottish version of this argument, Emma contends that the independence referendum in Scotland marked a unique life event that other generations, like that of her grandfather, did not experience and that, for her and her peers, happened to fall into the ‘critical time’ of coming of age.

Emma (17): It wasn’t like there was a referendum when my granddad was 16, so there was no whirlwind of political activity he could have been caught up in, to kind of start that. . . I think it’s a kind of critical time of your life where you are kind of forming who you are as a person and you’re deciding what your interests be, what you’re gonna do, and this has been a sort of time where there’s access for young people to get involved.

In addition to being an exciting time in Scottish politics, the independence referendum had a particularly mobilising effect on young people because it offered an opportunity to impact, and possibly change, the future of the country. In this sense, the experience of the referendum and, with it, the independence question itself, bled into the young people’s experiences of political agency. Interestingly and in contrast to the participants in previous studies (Breeze *et al.*, 2015, 2017; Sanghera *et al.*, 2018; Mackie, 2019), this was also the case for a number of the young people who participated in this study, even though they themselves had not been eligible to vote in the independence referendum. Ben (16) explained that while he might not have reflected on the importance of the referendum consciously at the time, he sensed that experiencing such an important election had made a difference to his involvement in politics.

Ben (16): So, because we were all slightly too young to be able to kind of realise the connotations of, eh, and the kind of importance of such a, such a, you know, important vote. But it’s kind of, that—for me at least—kind of showed where I personally should take more of an interest in politics rather than just being passively kind of ‘Oh, I’ll vote for something because like, oh, because my whole family has voted for Labour or SNP before.’ And, you know, that, I think it created a lot more political interest certainly.

Subsequent Scottish and local elections, in contrast, did not offer a similar promise and thus, did not seem to instil the same kind of agency in young people. Regarding the Scottish Parliament elections, Matt (15) said he did ‘not really have a huge interest in like Scottish politics, it’s not particularly interesting’ and Ross (18) alleged he was less interested in the local council elections because ‘like the scary stuff in politics around the world really just doesn’t happen in like local areas’.

Several participants also said that, compared with the referendum, information was harder to get by for Scottish and local elections. As a consequence, they felt less informed and less inclined to vote in these. Emma (17), for example, said

she did not know who to vote for in the local council election, because she did not know any of the candidates. Similarly, Megan (17) admits that despite being eligible she did not vote in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election as she felt she did not know enough about it.

Emma (17): For the council election I was just kind of like ‘Don’t really know what’s...’—I feel like there’s kind of a divide between like local politics and like national politics. Whereas like national politics is quite easy to get involved in, with your council you’re just like ‘I don’t know who any of these people are personally. I’ll just like vote randomly’.

Megan (17): Yeah, I feel like for me like... I dunno... When there was like—we didn’t have the chance to vote in the referendums, but like to vote for parliament, we did. And I didn’t vote. (...) For me like, when it came to like voting for MSPs and stuff like I don’t really know much about it and I didn’t know individual people.

### 5.3. Frustrations with ‘Votes-at-16’, experiences of injustice and disenfranchisement

In contrast to the experience of empowerment associated with the independence referendum and the initial lowering of the voting age, there was also a palpable sense of frustration among the young people of this study about what they saw as unintended consequences of ‘Votes-at-16’ in Scotland. As hypothesised by [Faas and Leininger \(2020a\)](#), the fact that young people who were eligible to vote in Scotland were temporarily disenfranchised in subsequent UK elections indeed raised strong negative feelings, in particular in the context of the 2015 and 2017 General Elections and the 2016 referendum on the UK’s EU membership. Having experienced how engaged young people were in and after the independence referendum in Scotland, Joana (16) experienced this as an ‘injustice’ that she felt ‘really, really strongly’ about, while for Lauren (16), not being allowed to vote in all elections made her feel like a partial citizen:

Lauren (16): I mean, I feel like a citizen, but I feel like a partial citizen in a way that I don’t have the same rights as everybody else.

Hamish (16) noted that ‘Votes-at-16’ in Scotland brought about a peculiar situation in which Scottish 16- and 17-year-olds were allowed to vote, whereas young people elsewhere in the UK were not. For him, this marked a democratic imbalance that needed addressing.

Hamish (16): The English 16-year-olds certainly, they don’t get to vote in their council elections. But then the Scottish ones do. And that’s not fair. It’s not part of a balanced democracy in that case.

Some participants even suggested that their differential enfranchisement increased their allegiance to Scottish political institutions vis-à-vis those of the UK as a whole. Ross (18) was convinced that he could ‘politically affect Scotland more than I can affect Great Britain as a whole’ and Emma (17) said, despite feeling a UK citizen by heritage, politically she felt ‘more of a citizen of Scotland’.

Emma (17): So like whilst I feel a citizen of the UK in that I live here and that’s like a part of my heritage, I feel more of a citizen of Scotland in the sense that I can actually be engaged here and my voice is worth something.

For some of the participants, it was difficult to accept that the timing of elections could result in a long wait until they first got to use their right to vote. Even though not an immediate outcome of voting age reform, these frustrations were fuelled by the hype that the introduction of ‘Votes at 16’ brought about. Hamish (16) was frustrated that despite being enfranchised at 16 he might have to wait another four years until he got to vote in his first election, and for Joseph (15), it felt ‘hard’ to justify why he should follow and get informed about political events in the here and now when he would not be able to vote until much later:

Hamish (16): When you’re sixteen you can vote once every five years and that’s almost the only time you have to express your opinion of things. I’ve only just—I turned 16 in October—so I haven’t voted in the Scottish Parliament elections or the council elections. So, it can take ages ‘till I get to express my opinion like that’.

Joseph (15): If you can’t vote, it’s very hard to, you know, be like ‘I’m gonna learn all about this’ and then watch the General Election float past you and you’re like ‘Well, I wish I could vote’ and you can’t do anything about it.

#### 5.4. *The role of schools and civic education for ‘Votes-at-16’*

The young people who participated in this study, similar to those in [Schwarzer and Zeglovits \(2013\)](#) and [Mackie \(2019\)](#), placed much importance on political knowledge and on making informed choices when they attained the right to vote. Some felt they often lacked the necessary information to make informed choices on political issues. They saw most of the responsibility to seek out information with themselves as individuals, but schools were believed to be important contributors to young people’s political capabilities, too.

There was broad consensus among the participants that schools were not doing enough to live up to this expectation. This was a strongly held belief among

the participants, regardless of the type of school they went to and the type of civic education they received there. Participants complained of not learning enough, not learning what they considered relevant, or being repeatedly taught the same things. Specific civics classes were even experienced as ‘condescending’ (Matt, 15) and ‘patronising’ (Hamish, 16) by some.

Lauren (16): I swear for Modern Studies we have learnt about democracy in Scotland for the last four years. I’ve been told Nicola Sturgeon is First Minister and Theresa May and David Cameron were Prime Minister so many times. (...) And all that stuff I’ve learnt ten million times and I’ve retained that information.

Joana (16): Modern Studies particularly, it’s all about like electoral systems and like what is the House of Lords and what is the House of Commons and stuff, it’s... it’s not really interesting, doesn’t captivate anyone.

Hamish (16): Yeah, I think it’s just... it feels a bit like they’re teaching us stuff as if we were a lot stupider than we are. As if we can’t really think for ourselves while actually people can think for themselves and they make their own decisions.

While few of the participants wanted to simply learn about ‘the different groups, how to vote, just knowledge about different politicians’ (Ashlain, 16), most expected schools to provide space for debate and to teach young people how to form their own opinions.

Lauren (16): I think it’s not only learning about like politics and stuff. It’s about forming opinions or... evaluating opinions or just having a discussion and improving your social skills and your confidence because that lacks in school.

Those who had experienced some room for debate in school said it was most likely to happen in Modern Studies—a subject dedicated to social and political issues that is often offered for a limited amount of time or as an elective. Lauren (16) said ‘when we have debates, we have debates in Modern Studies and they’re great’ and Ross (18) remembered that whenever there was room for debate in his Modern Studies class ‘it was always good to get opinions out and to chat about it’. Some participants, however, noted that offering political education and room for debate only in a subject like Modern Studies risked preaching to the converted, while leaving behind young people who were less interested in politics. According to Ross (18) ‘if you’re interested, well, you’re probably already taking Modern Studies ‘cause you’re interested in stuff’ and Emma (17) notes that ‘you’re gonna have people like left behind who don’t really understand this’.

## 6. Discussion

All in all, for the young people who participated in this study, ‘Votes-at-16’ in Scotland came with a mix of experiences. The lowering of the voting age gave them a sense of confidence in youth voice and in young people’s power to affect politics. Some participants directly attributed this feeling of empowerment to the introduction of ‘Votes-at-16’, supporting the idea that enfranchisement itself, and certainly the lowering of the voting age, can constitute a uniquely mobilising ‘life event’ (Zeglovits and Zandonella, 2013; see also Bhatti *et al.*, 2016). For others, however, the enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland was so bound up with the experience of the 2014 independence referendum—likewise a unique and highly mobilising life event—that the two are virtually inseparable. This is a remarkable finding in that contrary to other studies (cf. Breeze *et al.*, 2017; Sanghera *et al.*, 2018; Mackie, 2019) the participants of this study all came of age well after the 2014 referendum and were not actually eligible to vote in it. It evokes questions about the extent to which the unique combination of the referendum experience and the lowering of the voting age affected multiple cohorts of young people in Scotland, including those who were enfranchised in the years immediately after the referendum.

In the context of questions on Scottish independence, the extension of the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds offered young people a sense of agency and a chance to directly impact the future of the country. This was less the case, however, for subsequent Scottish and local council elections; these were considered less important, less interesting and less pervasive by the participants of this study. In contrast to British and world politics, some participants also felt it was harder to get informed on Scottish and local politics, and for some this was a reason not to turn out vote. From this study we cannot gauge how many 16- and 17-year-olds made use of their right to vote in subsequent Scottish or local council elections, and reliable quantitative data on youth turnout in these elections is missing. If validated by data, however, this finding would raise questions about the specific circumstances in which ‘Votes-at-16’ impacts youth engagement with electoral politics and about the longevity of such an effect in Scotland and beyond. To evaluate the impact of voting age reform we need more and reliable data on youth turnout in all elections, including local and regional elections, as well as further evidence on young people’s early voting experiences.

In light of the recent introduction of ‘Votes-at-16’ in another part of the UK, Wales, it is also relevant to consider the unintended, and potentially negative consequences of voting age reform. For the participants of this study, gaining the right to vote at 16 in Scotland translated into frustrations about being temporarily disenfranchised until the age of 18 years in UK-wide elections. Although this study does not allow for conclusions on the potential impact of these frustrations

on youth turnout, they could be particularly problematic in cases where less salient elections with 16- and 17-year-olds enfranchised coincide with highly contested elections for which young people are not allowed to vote. There is a need for longitudinal research into the potential impact of such frustrations on young people's relationships with electoral politics in the mid- to long-term. Likewise, the perspective of those whose voting age remains 18 needs to be considered. As Hamish (16) pointed out, with 'Votes-at-16' in Scotland and Wales 'the playing field is not level' in the UK and this situation might end up being deeply dissatisfying and even alienating for some young people.

In relation to unintended consequences of 'Votes-at-16', we also need to take note of the finding that some participants in this study associated their partial enfranchisement in only Scottish elections with an increased allegiance to Scottish, rather than British, political institutions. This raises questions on the kinds of political institutions that young people feel they can impact when they gain the right to vote at 16 and on the ways in which they feel efficacious as young citizens. In addition to considering matters of devolution, future research also needs to ask the question whether voting age reform teaches young people that voting is the only available way to impact political institutions. Such an understanding would not only be problematic for it fades out other forms of political engagement, but also for it might portray a limited picture of young people's transitions into full and equivalent citizenship.

Lastly, all discussions about the potential impact of voting age reform overall need to consider which kinds of young people are mobilised to engage with politics. Even though in no-way representative of the population of young people in Scotland, the small group of participants in this study alone already point to vast gaps between expectations and reality regarding the role of schools in preparing young people to participate in elections. These could become consequential in the long run, particularly for those young people who cannot rely on socialising influences in the family or the wider community. Considering the increased importance ascribed to schools in theory (Franklin, 2004) as well as empirically by young people of this and other studies (cf. Schwarzer and Zeglovits, 2013; Hill *et al.*, 2017), it is imperative that the school as a community—and not just specialist civic education—is seen as a key resources in the activation of young people.

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## APPENDIX

**Table A1.** Overview over participants and key background data

#	Name <sup>a</sup>	Sex	Age <sup>b</sup>	School pseudonym <sup>c</sup>	School type
1	Amy	F	17	Elmridge High School	Local Authority, non-denominational school
2	Ashlain	F	16	Southside High School	Local Authority, non-denominational school
3	Ben	M	16	St Alfa's High School	Local Authority, Roman-Catholic school
4	Connor	M	17	Rosewell Academy	Independent school
5	Damian	M	17	Rosewell Academy	Independent school
6	Emily	F	16	Greenfield High School	Local Authority, non-denominational school
7	Emma	F	17	Greenfield High School	Local Authority, non-denominational school
8	Farah	F	16	St Alfa's High School	Local Authority, Roman-Catholic school
9	Hamish	M	16	Rosewell Academy	Independent school
10	Hannah	F	18	Greenfield High School	Local Authority, non-denominational school
11	James	M	17	Greenfield High School	Local Authority, non-denominational school
12	Joana	F	16	St Alfa's High School	Local Authority, Roman-Catholic school
13	Joseph	M	15	Rosewell Academy	Independent school
14	Katie	F	17	Elmridge High School	Local Authority, non-denominational school
15	Lauren	F	15	North Beach Academy	Local Authority, non-denominational school
16	Matt	M	15	Rosewell Academy	Independent school
17	Megan	F	17	Greenfield High School	Local Authority, non-denominational school
18	Rachel	F	16	Greenfield High School	Local Authority, non-denominational school
19	Ross	M	18	Elmridge High School	Local Authority, non-denominational school
20	Sophie	F	17	Rosewell Academy	Independent school

<sup>a</sup>Participants were asked to choose their own pseudonyms.

<sup>b</sup>In cases, several interviews were conducted, this is the age at the time of the first interview.

<sup>c</sup>To further protect the identities of those involved in the research all schools were assigned pseudonyms.