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# Longer-Term Effects of Voting at Age 16: Higher Turnout Among Young People in Scotland

Jan Eichhorn [1] and Christine Huebner [2]

[1] School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, UK
[2] Sheffield Methods Institute, University of Sheffield, UK

**Correspondence:** Jan Eichhorn (jan.eichhorn@ed.ac.uk)

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## Abstract

Debates about the lowering of the voting age to 16 often include claims about the possible longer-term outcomes of earlier enfranchisement for the electorate. It has been shown that, when eligible to vote, 16-and 17-year-olds turn out to vote in higher proportions than slightly older peers (Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014). However, questions remain regarding the longevity of this early voter boost and whether it carries on as young people grow older (Franklin, 2004, 2020). Using original survey data collected from 863 young people in Scotland, we investigate the outcomes of being eligible to vote in elections from age 16/17 and its effects on political behaviour for young people aged up to 24. We compare levels of political engagement, including voting in the 2021 Scottish parliament elections, among cohorts of young people who were enfranchised at age 16/17 to cohorts who experienced their first election aged 18 or older. We show that young people who were eligible to vote at 16/17 exhibited greater levels of turnout in the 2021 Scottish parliament elections, up to seven years after the initial lowering of the voting age than those who got to vote for the first time at 18 or older. This finding provides new evidence in support of theories on the longer-term effects of voting at age 16/17 on electoral political engagement. However, we find no similar pattern for non-electoral political engagement, showing that the outcomes of the lowering of the voting age may be limited to turnout.

## Keywords

enfranchisement; political participation; Scotland; votes-at-16; voting age; youth

## 1. Introduction

Supporters of the lowering of the voting age to 16 often argue that the reform leads to a sustained increase in political engagement among younger people and greater voter habit formation. While there is general agreement that previous reform (the lowering of the age of enfranchisement from 21 to 18) contributed to a long-term decline in voter turnout (Franklin, 2004; Mycock et al., 2023), there are reasons to believe that for young people who experience their first election at ages 16 or 17, the longer-term outcomes may be more positive. Based on theories of political socialisation and voter habit formation, Franklin (2004, p. 65) first argued that when young people start voting at age 16 or 17, while still living in the parental home and in full-time education—instead of in the often highly transitory stages of ages 18 and beyond—there is more support and there are more opportunities for young people to form long-lasting habits of voting.

This article investigates this argument empirically by comparing levels of political engagement, including voting among cohorts of young people who were enfranchised at age 16 and 17 to cohorts who experienced their first election aged 18 or older. To what extent do young people enfranchised at age 16 or 17 show lasting higher levels of turnout and non-electoral political engagement when compared to peers who experienced their first election aged 18 or older?

So far, much research on the lowering of the voting age to 16 focused on the reform's immediate outcomes, showing that voter turnout among newly enfranchised 16-and 17-year-olds can be higher than among slightly older first-time voters (Electoral Commission, 2014; Faas & Leininger, 2020; Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014) and that young people benefit from earlier enfranchisement in terms of political interest, engagement with political information, and non-electoral political engagement (Eichhorn, 2018; Sanhueza Petrarca, 2020; Zeglovits & Zandonella, 2013). There are doubts however about the durability of these outcomes beyond the initial boost of a reform of the voting age (Eichhorn, 2018; Franklin, 2020; Huebner, 2021).

To address questions on the durability of outcomes of earlier enfranchisement, we take a longer-term perspective, using original survey data from Scotland collected, among 16-to 31-year-olds, seven years after Scotland lowered the voting age to 16. The data was collected specifically to allow for the consideration of cohorts with different ages of enfranchisement. The survey sample includes cohorts of young people who experienced their first opportunity to vote at age 16/17 as well as cohorts who experienced their first election aged 18 or older, between four years before and up to seven years after the change of the franchise. Due to the timing of elections in Scotland and because the voting age for UK general elections remains 18, our sample also includes cohorts who experienced their first election at age 18 or older even after the lowering of the voting age for Scottish elections.

We make use of this unique mixture of cohorts of young people between the ages of 16 and 31, who were enfranchised at different ages and in the context of elections of different relevance, saliency, and marginality, in a cross-sectional research design. We compare levels of turnout and non-electoral political engagement for cohorts of young people who experienced their first election at age 16/17 to those who first voted aged 18 or older, controlling for other relevant factors of political socialisation such as family background, peers, and access to civic education.

Evidence on what voting age reforms can mean for young people's political engagement in the medium to long-term is important and particularly timely in the context of persistent debates about declining turnout rates and wider democratic disaffection (c.f. Blais et al., 2004; Grassi et al., 2024; Norris, 2011; Zilinsky, 2019). As debates about lowering the voting age to 16 have emerged in more than 25 countries (Huebner & Sanhueza Petrarca, 2024), a longer-term view of what happens when the minimum voting age is lowered has significant potential to inform the decision-making on and implementation of future reforms.

We first give an overview of the factors that explain young people's political behaviour and the extent to which they form different habits of voting and non-electoral political engagement, before outlining what can be expected based on theories of political socialisation and voter habit formation when the voting age is 16 instead of 18. We review existing evidence from countries that lowered the voting age to 16 prior to Scotland and introduce our original empirical data and analytical strategy. Our findings show that young people in Scotland who were eligible to vote at 16 or 17 exhibited greater levels of turnout in the 2021 Scottish parliament elections, seven years after the lowering of the voting age, than those who got to vote for the first time at 18 or older. This provides new evidence in support of a likely longer-term effect of lowering the voting age to 16 on turnout. However, we find no similar pattern for non-electoral political engagement, showing that the outcomes of the lowering of the voting age may be specific to electoral participation. Using representative data that was timed to allow for the consideration of people enfranchised both before and after they turned 18 allows us to deepen our knowledge about how earlier enfranchisement does or does not affect political engagement. This will help to inform ongoing policy debates adding relevant nuance.

## 2. Political Socialization and the Effects of the Voting Age

Political behaviour, such as voting in elections or engaging with political issues outside of elections, is learnt behaviour. A young person's political engagement is shaped by different socialisation factors: parents and the socio-economic status they pass on (Neundorf et al., 2013; Quintelier, 2015b; Verba et al., 2005), peers and social networks (Jennings et al., 2009; Quintelier, 2015a), civic education and what experiences young people have in schools (McDevitt & Chaffee, 2000; Neundorf et al., 2016; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). These socialisation factors contribute to determining whether someone engages in things such as petitioning, protesting, or political consumerism, and, when a young person is eligible to vote in their first-ever election, whether they turn out to vote or abstain.

Once young people experience their first-ever election, their future political behaviour is additionally shaped by the experience of voting itself. Voting in elections is theorised to be habit-forming (Denny & Doyle, 2009; Dinas, 2012; Gerber et al., 2003; Meredith, 2009; Plutzer, 2002). All else being equal, young people who turned out to vote in their first-ever election are more likely to vote in future elections. This means that some young people will become habitual voters, while others will abstain repeatedly. Research similarly suggests self-reinforcing effects over time for non-electoral behaviour, meaning participation experiences earlier in life can have persistent effects into adulthood (Marien et al., 2010; Quintelier & Hooghe, 2011), and there is evidence of a close relationship between voting and other forms of non-electoral engagement, meaning those who become habitual voters may also be more likely to engage in things such as petitioning, protesting, or political consumerism over the course of their lives (Blais, 2010; Oser, 2017).

### 2.1. The Significance of the Voting Age

The age at which young people experience their first-ever election can have an impact on how these processes of political socialisation and habit formation play out. Compared to older people, young people typically have lower levels of engagement with elections: the likelihood of turning out to vote increases with age until it falls again late in life (Dassonneville, 2017). This is largely attributed to factors that make voting difficult earlier in life, such as increased residential mobility, lower political efficacy, and less stable social networks. In particular, first-time voting comes with considerably higher costs for young people, such as having to register to vote and develop an understanding of party differences (Plutzer, 2002). Young people are also less often targeted by political campaigns (Endres & Kelly, 2018), cannot usually rely on friends and peers who are voters to get mobilised, and are most likely affected by transitory circumstances (e.g., finishing secondary education or moving out of the parental home)—all factors that depress turnout.

When exactly young people experience these difficulties associated with first-time voting may have a longer-term effect: Franklin (2004) argues that the lowering the voting age to 18 contributed to a lasting decline in turnout in established democracies—not only because it added more people to the electorate who were generally less likely to vote, but also because over the course of their lives, cohorts of young people who were enfranchised at age 18 continued to vote at lower rates compared to people who started voting at 21. However, when young people are enfranchised earlier than age 18, some of these barriers to electoral participation may be diminished. Franklin (2004) hypothesises that, when young people experience their first election at 16 or 17, while they still live in the parental home and are in secondary education, they may experience more support to form the habit of voting. Therefore, cohorts who are eligible to vote at 16 may exhibit lasting higher levels of engagement compared to cohorts whose first vote was at age 18. Bhatti and Hansen (2012) show that young people are indeed more likely to vote when they experience their first election whilst still living in the parental home. They attribute this finding to the effect of parents, who, if themselves engaged, can support the political engagement of their children, compared to the growing influence of low-voting peers later. Instead of simply increasing with age, turnout in fact declines in the early years after a young person becomes eligible to vote before increasing again later into adulthood (Bhatti et al., 2012). If more young people had their first election at an earlier age and were thus more likely to still live at home, we might find that their turnout trajectory would start from a higher baseline, similarly leading to higher levels of engagement with political issues outside of elections. While we would still expect a drop in political engagement in early adulthood, as young people move out of the home and go through many major transitions, the level of turnout in the early 20s may not be as low, as it would have been the first election already fallen into this early adulthood phase for more young people.

Due to the close relationship between voting and forms of non-electoral political engagement, a higher baseline for turnout may also influence longer-term engagement with political issues outside of elections. Insights from qualitative research with young people affected by voting age reform suggest that being allowed to vote earlier affords young people an opportunity to form autonomous opinions and take responsibility for their involvement in democratic decisions—important precursors for electoral and non-electoral political participation alike (Breeze et al., 2017; Sanghera et al., 2018). Indeed, discussions about a lowering of the voting age often note the engagement of young people beyond elections as one of the key features that could be enabled alongside electoral participation. The initial lowering of the voting age to 16 in Scotland, spurred by the extensive engagement of youth civil society organisations that were able to

reach out to a wider range of young people than before (Eichhorn & Huebner, 2023), saw strong waves of engagement with political issues other than voting among young people, such as in demonstrations, boycotts, political parties, or with members of parliament (Huebner & Eichhorn, 2020).

However, longer-term habit formation through voting in elections has previously only been shown to hold for voting, not for other forms of political engagement (Dinas, 2012). Even though political engagement outside of elections can enhance the likelihood of regular voting, evidence from older voters suggests that "casting a ballot only boosts turnout, not non-electoral participation" (Dinas, 2012, p. 431). For non-electoral political engagement, barriers to participation and the specific age at which young people collect their first participation experiences may be less decisive. Unlike voting, access to less institutionalised forms of engagement is not formally restricted by age and thus can be more straight-forward, at least for some young people (Arya & Henn, 2021). Young people are also shown to choose a variety of ways to voice political opinions outside of elections (Pickard, 2019) and, rather than compromising in high-barrier institutionalised forms of politics, young people often see opportunities in movement-based engagement forms shaped by younger people themselves (Pickard et al., 2020). This highlights the need to distinguish the investigation of longer-term outcomes of the voting age on voting behaviour from outcomes for other forms of political engagement.

### *2.2. Empirical Insights From Countries With Voting Age 16*

Few countries afford empirical insights into what happens in the longer-term, when the voting age is lowered from 18 to 16. Research from countries that lowered the voting age prior to Scotland (including Austria, Brazil, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Argentina) points towards a lasting increase in youth voter engagement in up to 20 years after such reform (Aichholzer & Kritzinger, 2020; Franklin, 2020). Franklin (2020) compares turnout in Austria and several Latin American countries that lowered the voting age to 16 (Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and Nicaragua) to countries that did not adopt the reform, finding that countries that enfranchised young people at age 16 saw a significant boost in turnout in the ten to 20 years following the reform. Similarly, but applied to reform at the sub-national level, young people in Germany who were enfranchised at 16/17 turn out at higher levels than older first-time voters (Rossteutscher et al., 2022) and federal states that allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in regional and local elections showed a distinct boost in turnout from 2017 to 2021 federal elections (Eichhorn & Huebner, 2022). This turnout increase was held for cohorts as old as 25–29 years, who benefited from a lowering of the voting age in their federal state up to 10 years prior.

Two studies provide possible explanations for this lasting turnout increase, linking it to factors that are important in electoral and non-electoral political engagement. Aichholzer and Kritzinger (2020) find signs of lasting earlier political socialisation in Austria. For up to seven years following the reform of the franchise, Austrian 16 and 17-year-olds consistently showed higher levels of external efficacy and were more satisfied with democracy compared to 18-to 20-year-olds. Across Latin American countries that adopted the reform, Sanhueza Petrarca (2020) finds that these effects last as young people grow older, with people who were first eligible to vote at 16 or 17 showing higher levels of trust in parliament and political parties (though not the government) and being overall more satisfied with democracy than citizens who could only vote at an older age.

There are doubts however about the durability of these longer-term effects of being eligible to vote from age 16. Some of the effects of early participation experiences may well diminish with increasing age. Over time, new social connections and particularly salient political events lead people to re-orient and change

their participation habits established earlier in life (Dinas, 2014). This means that the persistence of voting habits may be overstated (Rapeli et al., 2023). In particular, social connections and discussions with peers contribute to changing participation patterns (Quintelier, 2015a; Rapeli et al., 2023). Investigating this argument empirically is additionally complicated by the fact that findings may be subject to recall error (Franklin, 2020) and that the electoral context in which a young voter is enfranchised matters for a cohort's starting level of political engagement (Smets & Neundorf, 2014).

Few countries so far afford insights into cohorts enfranchised at 16 over the long run. Data from Scotland, where the voting age was lowered to 16 first for the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence and from 2015 for all Scottish but not UK-wide elections, allows us to look across cohorts enfranchised in different kinds of elections, distinguishing short-term transitory effects on turnout that are primarily affected by a specific election from longer-term outcomes affecting turnout and non-electoral political engagement not just at young people's first election but beyond. Due to the timing of Scottish elections and because the voting age for UK-wide elections remains 18, a decade after the lowering of the voting age in Scotland, there are cohorts of young people who experienced their first election (a) in different electoral circumstances, (b) aged 16/17 or 18 and older, and (c) shortly before and after the voting age was lowered. Research conducted in the context of the reform of the franchise in Scotland found a positive effect of being eligible to vote at age 16/17 on young people's likelihood to vote in future elections, while any increase in political engagement outside of elections was largely explained by the particularly high levels of political mobilisation in the population overall, at the time around the 2014 referendum (Eichhorn, 2018). Qualitative research with young people in Scotland also cast doubt on the extent to which this positive effect on voting behaviour would carry forward to future elections and future first-time voters (Huebner, 2021).

Building on the theoretical reflections and existing empirical evidence, we address two research questions:

> RQ1: Controlling for the impact of family socialisation, civic education, and peers, are young people who were enfranchised and experienced their first election at age 16 or 17 more likely to report having voted in the 2021 Scottish parliament election than young people who were allowed to vote at age 18 or older?
>
> RQ2: Controlling for the impact of family socialisation, civic education, and peers, are young people who were enfranchised and experienced their first election at age 16 or 17 more likely to report being engaged in non-electoral political action than young people who were allowed to vote at age 18 or older?

## 3. Methods

We address these questions using original survey data collected among 16-to 31-year-olds, seven years after Scotland lowered the voting age to 16. Panel data on young people's political engagement over time is not available and Scottish election studies do not typically include sample sizes large enough for breakdowns among cohorts of young people. We, therefore, conducted an online survey (with the provider Breaking Blue) on political engagement among young people using an online panel provider and quota-based sampling to encourage representativeness. The questionnaire was based on existing Scottish social surveys: the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, Growing Up in Scotland, and previous surveys on youth political

engagement (Eichhorn et al., 2014, 2021). The study was reviewed by the ethics committee of the University of Edinburgh, ensuring adherence to ethical, data protection, and purdah standards.

The data was collected online over a period of three weeks after the 2021 Scottish parliament election. To represent the target population of 16—to 31-year-olds in Scotland, we used quota-based sampling, specifying quotas for gender, region, and parental social class based on the most up-to-date population statistics or, where official statistics were not available, proxies based on the latest Scottish Social Attitudes survey. The final sample matched the characteristics of the target population of 16—to 31-year-olds in Scotland, except for an oversampling of female respondents and higher socio-occupational classes—as is common in surveys on political behaviour (Keusch, 2015). In total, after cross-validating respondents to avoid duplicate participation, 863 young people were included in the final sample. To adjust for deviations from population statistics, we use individual design weights in all analyses (Huebner & Eichhorn, 2025).

### *3.1. Analytical Approach*

Using this sample of 16-to 31-year-olds in Scotland, we analyse differences in turnout and non-electoral political engagement according to the age at which young people experienced their first election. To do so, 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 self-reported year and month of birth (Meredith, 2009). Cohorts were grouped to compare those who experienced their first election at age 16/17 to those who were aged 18 or older at the time of their first election. Due to the timing of elections and because UK general elections retain a voting age of 18, there are cohorts who experienced their first election at age 18 or older even after the lowering of the voting age in Scotland. This means that both groups include young people who were first eligible to vote in low-salience elections (for example, local elections) and in high-salience votes (for example, UK general elections or the 2014 Scottish independence referendum). While we recognise the difficulties of disentangling age—from cohort-related patterns in cross-sectional data (Bell, 2020; Serra & Smets, 2022), by exploiting the unique mixture of cohorts after the lowering of the voting age in Scotland and grouping the cohorts according to age at the time of their first election, we separate the effects of age from those of the age at which young people experienced their first election. Crucially, the arguably highest-salience vote, the 2014 independence referendum is contained for a substantial part of the sample in both groups, as some young people would have been 16/17 at the time of the referendum, while other first-time voters were already 18 or 19. Both groups also contain one low-salience election—a local election—and two Scottish parliament elections. While general elections only applied to those enfranchised at 18 or older, overall, both groups show similar salience splits (Table 1).

We compare levels of turnout and non-electoral political engagement for cohorts of young people who experienced their first election at age 16/17 to those who first voted aged 18 or older using logit regression analysis while controlling for other relevant factors of political socialisation: age, gender, geography, the social class of the household young people grew up in, the influence of peers, and access to civic education. Turnout is measured by asking respondents whether they had voted in the most recent election, the 2021 Scottish parliament election (all question wording is available in the Supplementary File). While we expect some social desirability bias and over-reporting of electoral participation, there is no reason to believe that this was greater in one group than another and should not impede our ability to compare respondents by enfranchisement age. For turnout, a logistic regression was estimated.

**Table 1.** First-time voter experience groups in the final weighted survey sample, $N = 863$.

| Age range (in years) in May 2021 | First election enfranchised at | Age at 1st election (groups) | Sample size (*N*) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 16–17 | Scottish parliament 2021 | 16–17 | 177 |
| 18–19 | Scottish parliament 2021 | 18+ | 97 |
| 19–20 | General election 2019 | 18+ | 31 |
| 20–21 | Local elections 2017 | 16–17 | 83 |
| 21–22 | Scottish parliament 2016 | 16–17 | 90 |
| 22–24 | Independence referendum 2014 | 16–17 | 103 |
| 24–26 | Independence referendum 2014 | 18+ | 85 |
| 27–28 | Local elections 2012 | 18+ | 32 |
| 28–29 | Scottish parliament 2011 | 18+ | 37 |
| 29–31 | General election 2010 | 18+ | 128 |

Non-electoral political engagement is measured in terms of the number of actions respondents have previously ever undertaken: signing petitions, buying/boycotting for political reasons, contacting a political/government official, and taking part in demonstrations. For non-electoral engagement we use an ordinal regression model and the logit link function to estimate the number of political activities aside from voting in elections (out of four) respondents participated in.

In models for both dependent variables, we control for gender, age, where in Scotland young people reside (Central, North, South, and Glasgow), and the socio-occupational class of the household the young people grew up in. We use an occupational measure of parental social class (the chief income earner), asking respondents to think back to their household's circumstances at age 16 and classify answers according to the National Readership Survey scale, where we distinguish young people who grew up in (a) upper and middle-class households (A and B, such as higher or intermediate managerial, administrative, or professional workers), from (b) lower middle-class households (C1, such as supervisory, clerical, junior managerial, and administrative workers), (c) skilled working-class households (C2, semi-skilled workers), and (d) working-class households or households of non-working parents (D/E). Knowing that young people's political behaviour varies along the lifecycle, we include controls for age in terms of six cohorts. This is to not make assumptions about the exact shape of the lifecycle effect, which we expect to neither be neatly linear nor curvilinear. To avoid endogeneity from modelling both the voting age at enfranchisement effect and the age, we ensured that age groups cut across enfranchisement ages and, crucially, we know that those enfranchised at 18 or older are present across nearly the entirety of the age range. We consider the Scottish region where young people currently live because, in Scotland, political engagement levels are contingent on where respondents reside (Sturge, 2021).

Additionally, we extend our models to account for the effects of socialisation experiences known to shape young people's political behaviour differently at different ages of enfranchisement: the effect of family and peers, civic education, and political discussions in school. We include controls for whether respondents had recently (within the last three months) discussed political issues with friends and family, whether they had ever taken modern studies, the main subject in the Scottish curriculum providing civic education, and whether they recalled ever taking a class in school in which political issues were discussed (in case this occurred outside of

modern studies). We ask the latter to account both for young people who might not have taken modern studies but had political discussions featured in other classes and to ensure that we capture respondents having had actual discussions of political issues rather than more technical introductions to the political system.

Finally, we conduct a robustness check for both sets of models. Research indicates that the youngest first-time voters are consistently more likely to vote than slightly older cohorts (Bhatti et al., 2012; Konzelmann et al., 2012; Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014). Since we are interested in assessing longer-term effects beyond such a first-time turnout boost, we replicate our models for 18-to 31-year-olds only to check whether differences between being enfranchised at 16 or 18 hold when the group of current 16-and 17-year-olds is excluded.

## 4. Results

Figure 1 shows the levels of reported electoral participation in the 2021 Scottish parliament elections for 16- to 31-year-olds, broken down according to the first election at which those young people were allowed to vote and distinguishing whether the voting age for those elections was 16 or 18. Based on the literature, we would have expected to find a curvilinear relationship between age and turnout—a rough U-shape, indicating an initial first-time voter boost and subsequent decline in turnout in the early years of adulthood, before going up again in the late 20s and early 30s (Bhatti et al., 2012). However, Figure 1 shows a different pattern for young people in Scotland.

First, we find that 16-and 17-year-olds tend to turn out in higher numbers than 18-to 20-year-olds, who were enfranchised in the same election, confirming theories of a first-time voter boost particularly among 16-and 17-year-olds (Rossteutscher et al., 2022; Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014). Second, and addressing our research question on the longer-term outcomes, we find that there is a second peak of turnout among young people aged 21 to 24. These are young people who were enfranchised at 16/17 in the 2016 Scottish parliament election or the 2014 independence referendum and they show relatively high levels of

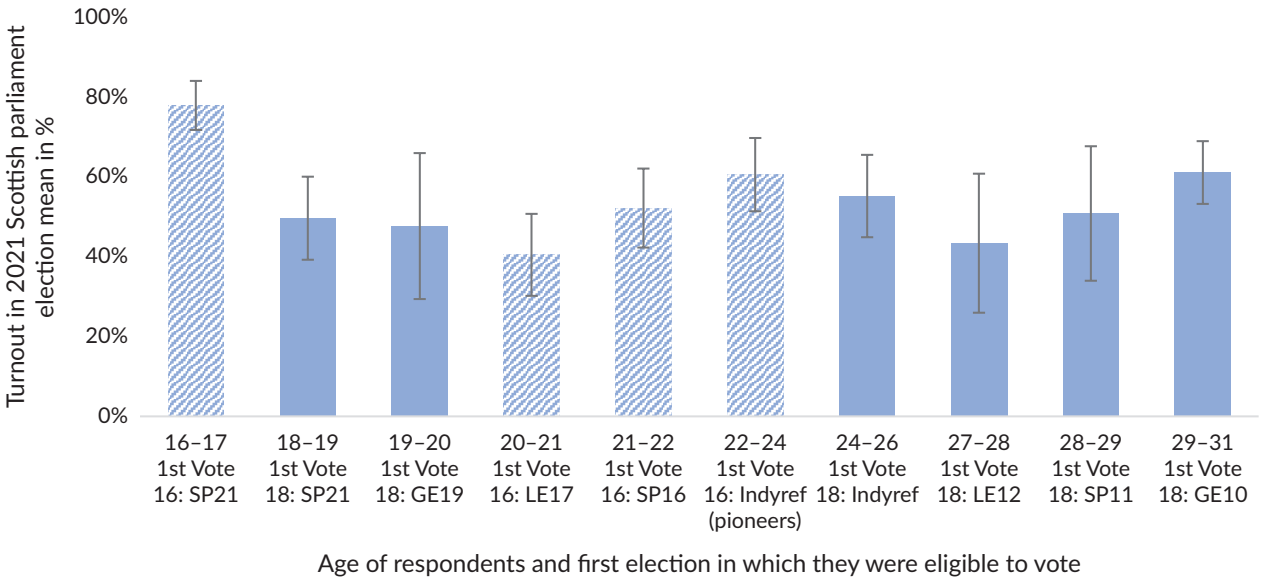


**Figure 1.** Voter turnout in the 2021 Scottish parliament election per cohort, self-reported. Notes: Mean in %, with 95%-confidence interval: 16-to 31-year-olds; *N* = 863.

participation, similar to the group aged 29 to 31, a cohort whose first election was a high-salience UK general election. The salience of the election in which young people were first eligible to vote appears to matter similarly for both enfranchisement age groups. For both those enfranchised at 16/17 or 18 and older respectively, local elections as first vote experience had the lowest turnout levels. Similarly, the independence referendum had higher turnout levels for both groups than most other elections (except for those at the end of the age distributions). Overall, the findings suggest that for electoral engagement the usual pattern of a decline in voter participation in early adulthood does not hold uniformly for young people in Scotland.

Our regression models (see Table 2) confirm this: controlling for relevant factors that can explain political behaviour such as age, gender, region, and social class (model 1), young people who were first eligible to vote in an election aged 16 or 17, regardless of the type or saliency of that first election, had significantly greater odds of turning out in the 2021 Scottish parliament elections than those who were 18 or older at their first election. When we additionally account for socialisation influences such as access to civic education and discussions with family members and peers (model 2), the odds for young people who were first eligible to vote in an election aged 16/17 were double those who were 18 or older at their first election. The finding also holds when we exclude those young people who were 16 or 17 at the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections to take away the effect of the first-time voter boost (model 3).

While age shows the expected lifecycle effect, being enfranchised at 16 or 17 works in the opposite direction, thus explaining the picture seen in Figure 1. Compared to 16-and 17-year-olds, current 18-to 23-year-olds were generally less likely to vote, unless they were members of a cohort that experienced their first election at age 16/17. Additionally, as expected, we see strong effects of social class and socialisation influences. Young people in higher social classes and respondents who talked about politics with friends and family were more likely to turn out. It is noteworthy, however, that there was no additional longer-term effect of having taken modern studies or remembering classes in which politics were discussed in our comprehensive models. However, in the long-term, civic education shows the expected positive effects when we exclude questions about whether respondents had been talking about politics with friends and family recently (not included in Table 2), indicating that discussions about politics today are associated with past educational experience but current peer-effects matter more.

For non-electoral engagement (Table 3) we do not find any significant differences between young people who were enfranchised at 16 or 18. We also see no significant differences in terms of age for non-electoral engagement: young people are equally likely to report having engaged in different forms of non-electoral political action regardless of their age. While, similar to our findings for turnout, social position and talking to friends and family about politics are related to greater non-electoral participation, we find an additional effect of remembering to take classes where politics was discussed. Young people who do, report a greater number of non-electoral forms of political engagement.

**Table 2.** Logistic regression models (including robustness check) for electoral participation, $N = 863$.

| Dependent variable: Having voted in the 2021 Scottish parliament election (logistic regression) | Social position model (16–31 years) (1) | | Socialisation model (16–31 years) (2) | | Socialisation model (18–31 years) (3) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | OR | s.e. | OR | s.e. | OR | s.e. |
| Age at first vote (Reference: 18 or above) | | | | | | |
| 16/17 | 1.62 | 0.23* | 2.01 | 0.25** | 1.96 | 0.27* |
| Age (Reference: 16/17) | | | | | | |
| 18–20 | 0.41 | 0.27*** | 0.48 | 0.29* | | |
| 21–23 | 0.30 | 0.24*** | 0.30 | 0.26*** | 0.69 | 0.28 |
| 24–26 | 0.63 | 0.30 | 0.94 | 0.32 | 1.98 | 0.26** |
| 27–29 | 0.59 | 0.35 | 0.76 | 0.37 | 1.58 | 2.8 |
| 30–31 | 0.85 | 0.36 | 1.15 | 0.39 | 2.43 | 0.30** |
| Gender (Reference: Male) | | | | | | |
| Female | 0.99 | 0.01 | 0.99 | 0.01 | 0.99 | 0.01 |
| Region (Reference: Tayside/Central) | | | | | | |
| North/Islands | 0.88 | 0.23 | 0.98 | 0.25 | 0.97 | 0.27 |
| Lothians/South | 1.11 | 0.22 | 1.08 | 0.23 | 1.04 | 0.26 |
| Glasgow/Strathclyde | 1.23 | 0.19 | 1.23 | 0.20 | 1.17 | 0.22 |
| Social class of chief household earner at age 16 (Reference: AB) | | | | | | |
| C1 | 0.55 | 0.21** | 0.55 | 0.22** | 0.47 | 0.24** |
| C2 | 0.52 | 0.21** | 0.56 | 0.23** | 0.41 | 0.25*** |
| DE | 0.31 | 0.21*** | 0.37 | 0.23*** | 0.30 | 0.24*** |
| Talked with family about Scottish governance (last 3 months) | | | 3.10 | 0.17*** | 2.47 | 0.18*** |
| Talked with friends about Scottish governance (last 3 months) | | | 2.54 | 0.15*** | 2.64 | 0.17*** |
| Has ever taken modern studies in school | | | 0.98 | 0.18 | 0.87 | 0.20 |
| Has ever taken a class in which political issues were discussed | | | 1.25 | 0.16 | 1.09 | 0.18 |
| Intercept | 3.46 | 0.34*** | 0.61 | 0.40 | 0.47 | 0.34* |
| −2 Log Likelihood | 1447.7 | | 1043.3 | | 874.2 | |
| Nagelkerke Pseudo $R^2$ | 0.117 | | 0.251 | | 0.208 | |
| N (unweighted) | 863 | | 863 | | 683 | |

Notes: Significance values: $^{+}$ $p \leq 0.10$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$; displayed are odds-ratios (OR) with standard errors (s.e.); results are weighted to match population parameters.

**Table 3.** Ordinal logistic regression models (including robustness check) for non-electoral participation, $N = 863$.

| Dependent variable: Number of non-electoral engagement forms participated in (ordinal regression with logit link function) | Social position model (16–31 years) (1) | | Socialisation model (16–31 years) (2) | | Socialisation model (18–31 years) (3) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | OR | s.e. | OR | s.e. | OR | s.e. |
| Age at first vote (Reference: 18 or above) | | | | | | |
| 16/17 | 0.98 | 0.20 | 1.08 | 0.20 | 1.08 | 0.22 |
| Age (Reference: 16/17) | | | | | | |
| 18–20 | 0.84 | 0.22 | 0.96 | 0.23 | | |
| 21–23 | 0.73 | 0.20 | 0.81 | 0.20 | 0.85 | 0.24 |
| 24–26 | 0.94 | 0.25 | 1.25 | 0.25 | 1.28 | 0.21 |
| 27–29 | 0.93 | 0.29 | 1.17 | 0.30 | 1.21 | 0.23 |
| 30–31 | 0.85 | 0.30 | 0.97 | 0.31 | 1.01 | 0.24 |
| Gender (Reference: Male) | | | | | | |
| Female | 1.01 | 0.01* | 1.01 | 0.01** | 1.01 | 0.01$^{+}$ |
| Region (Reference: Tayside/Central) | | | | | | |
| North/Islands | 0.67 | 0.20* | 0.74 | 0.20 | 0.61 | 0.22* |
| Lothians/South | 0.80 | 0.19 | 0.77 | 0.19 | 0.65 | 0.22* |
| Glasgow/Strathclyde | 0.81 | 0.16 | 0.79 | 0.16 | 0.64 | 0.18* |
| Social class of chief household earner at age 16 (Reference: AB) | | | | | | |
| C1 | 0.67 | 0.17* | 0.69 | 0.17* | 0.67 | 0.20* |
| C2 | 0.53 | 0.18*** | 0.55 | 0.18*** | 0.55 | 0.20** |
| DE | 0.59 | 0.18** | 0.70 | 0.18* | 0.70 | 0.20$^{+}$ |
| Talked with family about Scottish governance (last 3 months) | | | 1.48 | 0.14** | 1.66 | 0.16*** |
| Talked with friends about Scottish governance (last 3 months) | | | 2.76 | 0.13*** | 2.60 | 0.15*** |
| Has ever taken Modern Studies in school | | | 0.87 | 0.14 | 0.81 | 0.16 |
| Has ever taken a class in which political issues are discussed | | | 1.88 | 0.13*** | 1.77 | 0.15*** |
| −2 Log Likelihood | 1548.0 | | 2295.3 | | 1872.5 | |
| Nagelkerke Pseudo $R^2$ | 0.034 | | 0.154 | | 0.160 | |
| N (unweighted) | 863 | | 863 | | 683 | |

Notes: Significance values: $^{+}$ $p \leq 0.10$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$; displayed are odds-ratios (OR) with standard errors (s.e.); results are weighted to match population parameters.

## 5. Discussion

Our findings suggest that being eligible to vote at 16/17, instead of 18 or older, is associated with increased voting well into young people's early 20s. We find that young people who were eligible to vote at 16/17 in Scotland show higher levels of turnout, up to seven years after their first election, compared to peers who experienced their first election aged 18 or older, even when we control for social position and socialisation factors. This matches findings from other countries where longer-term outcomes associated with the lowering of the voting age to 16 have been observed (Aichholzer & Kritzinger, 2020; Franklin, 2020; Sanhueza Petrarca, 2020). It suggests that enfranchisement at age 16 can counter some of the difficulties that affect turnout among young people. To some extent, though limited to electoral engagement, it also supports prior research that linked the experience of voting at 16 to increased political engagement among young people in Scotland (Eichhorn, 2018).

For engagement with politics beyond voting in elections, however, we find no lasting difference between young people who were eligible to vote at 16 versus 18. The experience of voting at age 16/17 did not make a difference in young people's non-electoral engagement in early adulthood. This observation lends support to theories that reducing the voting age to 16 specifically addresses age and social network-related barriers to voting (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012; Franklin, 2004)—for example by affording young people more support with registering to vote, residential stability, and family or school to rely on to get mobilised to vote—while barriers to other forms of political engagement remain.

In line with this social class inequalities, remain a strong factor in determining political engagement—both electoral and non-electoral—among young people in Scotland regardless of their age of enfranchisement. We find considerable social class differences among all cohorts of young people for electoral and non-electoral participation. If voting at age 16/17 affords young people more support to form the habit of voting, e.g., from parents or peers, it is plausible to expect this support to not be equally distributed among young people (Rossteutscher et al., 2022; Schäfer et al., 2020). This highlights that, while positive in terms of electoral turnout for some, lowering the voting age to 16 is not a solution for all issues addressing inequalities in youth political engagement.

For governments contemplating a lowering of the voting age to 16, there are important implications. First, to maximise the civic payoff, the voting age should be extended for all elections (as in Austria or Argentina, for example). This increases the chances that young people get to vote in an election, and thus benefit from this experience, while they are aged 16 or 17. If, like in Scotland, voting at 16 is restricted to some elections, there will be young people who will miss out on the opportunity to vote at 16 or 17, simply because gaps between elections are bigger. Missing out on the opportunity to vote can also lead to frustrations among young people, especially when peers are eligible to vote at an earlier age (Huebner, 2021; Leininger et al., 2022). Second, regardless of age and voting age, strengthening discursive citizenship education is important. In line with previous research (Jennings et al., 2009; Quintelier, 2015a), we find that civic education has an additional effect on non-electoral participation, and discussing political issues with family and friends on both voting and non-electoral participation, with both factors likely related. Sixteen-to 31-year-olds who recall discussing political issues in the classroom are more likely to discuss political issues with family and friends and more likely to engage with political issues.

Our data and findings come with the usual limitations of cross-sectional research. While the specific Scottish context allows us to compare groups of young people with heterogeneous enfranchisement experiences, our analysis may include unmeasured differences that are associated with higher turnout. Therefore, it cannot replace studies using panel data that establish longer-term developments within individuals. To the best of our knowledge, no such panel data on young people's turnout since the lowering of the voting age in Scotland exists to date. It would be highly desirable to produce and analyse such longitudinal data to trace the impact of different first-time voter experiences over time. Similarly, although our data includes cohorts enfranchised over the course of several and sufficiently different elections in terms of saliency, relevance, and marginality, it does not allow us to fully disentangle effects specific to being enfranchised at 16 from cohort—and election-specific effects. It is known that the political context, in which newly eligible voters come of age, such as the overall turnout and degree of polarisation, matters for the formation of long-term voting habits and contributes to explanations of cohort-specific differences in turnout (Smets & Neundorf, 2014). Our results may reflect this to some extent as cohorts included in our sample of young people enfranchised at 16 came of age in the highly salient and polarised time around the 2014 independence referendum. Future research making use of alternative data sources covering a longer timespan may bring to light whether our results hold when excluding cohorts that came of age during this highly politicised time in Scotland. Nevertheless, since our analyses cover several cohorts of 16-and 17-year-old voters, including some enfranchised well after the time of the referendum and in the context of local or less polarised Scottish elections, our findings contribute to a growing body of literature on longer-term outcomes associated with voting from a younger age.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

The dataset used for the analyses has been deposited with the UK Data Service and is accessible here: Huebner, C., & Eichhorn, J. (2025). *Survey of young people's voting behaviour after the introduction of votes at 16 in Scotland, 2021* [Data set]. UK Data Service. https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/857551

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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## About the Authors

Jan Eichhorn is a senior lecturer in social policy at the University of Edinburgh and also partner and research director of the Berlin-based think tank d|part. He studies public understandings of and engagement in political and economic structures and processes using large-scale quantitative as well as qualitative methods. Jan mostly teaches classes on critical economic policy discussions and policy analysis and communication. Additionally, he works closely with civil society organisations and has advised various governments and international organisations.

Christine Huebner is a lecturer in quantitative social sciences at the University of Sheffield's Sheffield Methods Institute. Her research explores changes in young people's political attitudes and behaviour, employing longitudinal qualitative and quantitative research designs. Christine has accompanied and collected evidence on the outcomes of the lowering of the voting age to 16 in Scotland and Wales.