'Should We Lower the Voting Age to 16?'

EYST Swansea Focus Group Report (10th July 2019)

Dr Tom Loughran (Leverhulme Trust Lowering the Voting Age Project, University of Huddersfield)

Introduction

On 10th July 2019 the Leverhulme Trust funded project 'Lowering the Voting age in the UK' ran a focus group of 13 young people at EYST Swansea. 'Votes-at-16' has become an increasingly important and contentious issue in UK politics. Our research will provide the first comprehensive study of the voting age debate in the UK. It aims to inform policy across all 4 countries in the UK at a critical period in the 'votes-at-16' debate. We are particularly interested in current developments in Wales as the Assembly is in the process of bringing in 'Votes at 16' for all Welsh elections.

The project takes a mixed-methods approach that involves carrying out national surveys, interviewing politicians and activists with an interest in the voting age and historical analysis assessing how the debate has evolved over time. One of the most important parts of our research is running focus groups with young people across the UK to ensure their voices are heard in this debate. We have now run 35 of these discussions with a diverse range of young people.

We are therefore very grateful for all the participants at EYST for being willing to take part in this focus group. The views they expressed will be used to directly inform the implementation of 'Votes-at-16' in Wales through our work with the Department of Local Government in Wales, the Welsh Electoral Commission and the Welsh Assembly.

This report provides a summary of the key themes that emerged from the focus group. The executive summary highlights the most important findings that emerged from the discussion this is followed by a more detailed summary of the discussion and a brief conclusion.

Executive Summary

-The level of political interest among the participants was low. Overall they had a negative perception of politics.

-Very few participants felt they understood what the Welsh Assembly was and none knew the name of the First Minister.

-Despite this lack of specific interest all members of the focus group expressed opinions about politics overall even if was negative.

-There was an even split in the group between those who supported 'Votes-at-16', those who were against and those who were undecided.

-Those in favour of 'Votes-at-16' primarily argued that it was about young people having their voices heard on the issues that impact them, particularly in the long-term such as Brexit and Climate Change.

-Those opposed to 'Votes at 16' primarily argued that 16 year olds lacked the necessary knowledge, understanding and maturity to vote properly.

-Brexit emerged as an important political issue with the participants linking this to a discussion about generational fairness and voting with some even stating there should be a maximum voting age.

-Many participants expressed a desire to influence change on a more local and personal level related to their education and experiences of public transport.

-Very few of the participants had met or engaged with a politician but despite this they had quite a high opinion of them.

-Despite relatively high levels of trust and respect towards politicians the participants expressed the use of divisive and offensive language towards specific groups, with racist stereotypes a particular concern.

-The participants expressed a desire for politicians to engage with them more regularly and listen and respond to their views in a two way exchange.

-Only 2 of the participants felt they currently had enough knowledge to vote and none felt they had received sufficient education on voting in school.

-The participants wanted to receive more political education in school and felt that in order to feel prepared to vote they needed to be taught more about what political parties stood for.

-The participants saw adulthood as a process that was about internal feelings of maturity and independence not a specific age or set of milestones.

-The participants rejected the idea that voting was an adult act. They saw voting as something people do for society, not as an individual act of adulthood.

Analysis of Focus Group

The focus group contained a number of key themes related to the voting age that will be summarised here; overall interest in politics, attitudes to the voting age itself, the extent to which young people are ready to vote at 16, citizenship education, politicians and political parties engagement with young people and overall attitudes to adulthood.

Interest in Politics

The opening discussion was related to how much interest the participants had in politics overall and what they associated with the word 'politics'. Only 3 out of the 13 participants in the focus group stated that they were interested in politics. The overwhelming perception within the group was that politics is negative and disempowering. Politics was described as 'boring', 'dull', 'nasty', 'angry', 'pointless' and 'completely dishonest'. There were some contrary voices to this with several participants saying that it was about 'hearing your voice' and 'changing things' but most seemed sceptical of these claims. Only two members of the focus group felt they understood what the Welsh Assembly was and no one could name the First Minister or their local Assembly Member although several had met the local MP.

When asked what words the group associated with politics the most popular word was 'Brexit' with others opting for more generic terms such as 'politicians', 'political parties' and others mentioning additional negative associations such as 'fighting' and 'lying'. With notable exceptions it would be reasonable to describe the group as being generally sceptical and negative in their attitudes towards politics. However, it is important to note that all the participants felt they had something to say about politics even if it was negative. In fact many negative views were passionately expressed. So it would not be fair to categorise the group as disengaged – a more accurate description is that they felt alienated from politics.

Votes at 16

On a show of hands only 4 out of 13 participants supported lowering the voting age, with 5 being against and 4 undecided. This made for an interesting contrast with the previous EYST focus group held in Wrexham the week before in which all 12 participants had supported lowering the voting age. This produced an interesting contrast in the discussion with those in favour discussing 'Votes-at-16' in terms of an opportunity to have their voices heard, whereas those who were against discussed it in terms of whether 16 year olds could be considered mature enough. A common view among those in favour was 'young people need their voices to be heard and represented in the system' and 'things like Brexit impact our future more than the people who actually voted for it so it's wrong we don't get our voice heard', 'they'll have to listen cos we'll have the voice', 'when it's our future they'll have to listen to us then'.

On the other hand those who were opposed to 'Votes at 16' had doubts about whether 16 year olds really knew what they were voting for and concerns that they would be overly influenced by their parents and friends. There was some strong opposition from some participants – 'It's a ridiculous idea-16 year olds are just not

mature and don't know what they're doing', '16 year olds don't have a clue about anything they don't have the knowledge of what's going on', 'Even if they have an idea on it they are not thinking about what they are doing, they will vote for the pretty colour or a guy wearing a nice shirt', 'They will vote what their parents tell them or choose what their friends choose', 'let's be realistic they won't listen to us anyway. These are trusted people for years to do politics we're just kids. They're just gonna say never mind doesn't matter'. Those in favour consistently rejected the maturity argument by saying that it wasn't a question of whether 16 year olds were mature enough to vote or not but whether they deserved to be heard in the political process – 'This maturity argument doesn't even make sense anyway. There are 18 year olds who aren't mature, there are 30 year olds who aren't mature. No one says they shouldn't be heard', 'There are 16 year olds who are mature and you have to have a choice about what is going to happen to you in the future.'

The spread of opinion on 'Votes at 16' within the focus group was quite unusual: normally we find groups in which the vast majority are either in favour or against lowering the voting age. This diversity of views produced an interesting discussion highlighting important differences in the way advocates and opponents perceive the issue. For those against the measure, voting is clearly perceived as a significant choice which requires a minimum level of maturity. It is clear that many young people have doubts regarding whether 16 year olds have achieved those levels of maturity. However, for those young people who support lowering the voting the age the issue of maturity is not the important factor. Instead, what matters to those who want to vote at 16, is young people having their voices heard in the political system on their own terms. This represents an important difference in how young people in the focus group were thinking about voting with one group seeing it as an opportunity for their voice to be heard and another seeing it as an additional responsibility they felt 16 year olds were not ready for.

Political Issues and Votes at 16

The participants identified issues that matter to them at both the national and local level. Unsurprisingly, when asked about the political issues that mattered to them the most popular response was Brexit. Many felt that it was unfair that they had been denied the opportunity to have a say on an issue that was likely to have such a large impact on their lives – 'Everyone should have had the vote on that one because it effects all of us', 'It's going to affect us as we go into employment', 'there'll be new legislation that we'll be the ones who have to learn it first'. The Brexit issue wasn't enough to convince those who were against lowering the voting age to change their minds though – 'I understand 16 year olds wanting the vote cos obviously the Brexit issue affects us more than the elderly people who are voting because they're not going to be around. So I see why 16 year olds would want to vote but I still don't think it's a good idea.' However, many saw the Brexit vote as evidence that there should be some form of maximum voting age – 'Can't we have a thing where as soon as you retire you aren't allowed to vote', 'Old people don't care about us when they vote so they shouldn't be allowed to vote for our future'. It was clear that in discussing Brexit a lot of the participants were linking voting rights with a sense of inter-generational fairness.

At the other end of the scale, many participants said that the most important issues to them were local matters and those related directly to their experiences in education. 'School Education is something we should be asked more about – we actually know about that better than they do', 'The Transport System – its rubbish here. I'm always late when I take the bus for something'. Participants had a number of specific ideas related to education and transport that they felt politicians should be hearing. However, they didn't know who to contact about this or which level of government was responsible for the issue. Several young people said it needed to be made clearer who they had to contact about making change in their community. No one thought that bringing in 'Votes at 16' would make it more likely their voice would be heard on these local issues. Therefore the young people in the group generally had a much more positive view of their capacity to influence national level change than local level change.

Engagement with Politicians and Political Parties

Despite expressing fairly negative views of politics overall at the start of the focus groups, the participants had quite a positive view of politicians themselves. They expressed surprising levels of trust in politicians. Many of the participants seemed to respect politician's abilities and appreciated the nature of representation - 'If you want to be a politician then you must have some form of intelligence and work hard to get there. So you must be smart. You must have some kind of trust for that', 'Trusting politicians is like trusting a builder to build your house', 'if they take on my feedback then yes I would trust them'.

As the discussion evolved more specific concerns emerged about how politicians can deliberately target certain groups – 'In order to trust politicians you need to know they care about people and are altruistic. But with some politicians you get racist comments targeting people like me', 'If they are calling people this and that then discriminating people is not going to help and we will not trust any of them', 'most of the time it is like politicians do what they want not what we want.' One participant said that their dislike of politics and politicians was a result of the direct experience that bought them to the UK – 'I'm here because people trusted in a politician in my country and they destroyed it so in my short life every politician I met just lies to me and both parties both sides are the same. They pretend to fight but they are on the same side against people.'

Very few participants had any direct experience of engaging with politicians. Some mentioned the local MP coming into their school but this was largely for ceremonial reasons. It is highly relevant that the young people in the focus group seemed to have a fairly positive view of politicians when discussing their role and skills in an abstract way but most of their specific examples of politician behaviours were negative with little direct experience of engagement – 'they are not interested in a two way interaction with people like us', 'they need to speak in more informal language', 'they must make the effort to get closer to us and make more of an effort'. To the extent that the participants wanted to engage with politicians and political parties it was to be treated like any other constituent, with politicians responding to their needs.

Political Knowledge and Education

The main concern expressed by the participants was their relative lack of political knowledge. Only 2 out of the 13 participants felt that they had enough knowledge to vote currently. They did not feel confident that they knew enough about politics and the choices on offer to them in order to cast a meaningful vote. It is also clear that, whether for or against lowering the voting age, all the participants saw voting as a serious act that it was necessary to put significant thought into. There was concern that they might make the 'wrong' choice even if they knew how to vote in practical terms – 'If you tell us this is how you vote, well fine whatever but what are we voting for? That's what matters and that's what we need to know'.

This fit with a general desire from the participants for more knowledge about the content of political debate over the practicalities of voting – 'We need a general view of the political parties and what it is they stand up for', 'Need to know what's happening recently and what parties say about it', 'we need to be interested in politics in the first place in order to care what's going on so that we have enough knowledge to know we are making the right choice'. It is clear that the young people in the focus group felt they needed more knowledge about the political debate and choices that were facing them in the ballot box. They put great importance in voting being a meaningful act based on an understanding of party positions. However, an important point was made by one participant when asked what knowledge was needed in order to vote – 'right now you don't need any knowledge in order to vote – when you're 18 you just vote. Why should that be different for 16 year olds?'

The follow up to this discussion focused on who should be responsible for ensuring young people had sufficient to vote.   It was accept that this was mainly a responsibility of schools and education. Most felt that they had not received enough political education in schools and would have like to have had more information on voting, which they discussed in terms of an important life skill alongside managing finances. They highlighted how young people had tried to get their schools to teach more lessons like this – 'I know at my school there were some of my classmates who signed a petition where instead of having unnecessary lessons they would give us lessons where you learned basic skills like paying taxes and political stuff on parties and things but it didn't happen', 'Schools made a change when they ran a pilot on politics, finance, economics and that so hopefully they are testing and bringing that in now'.   However, even though most wanted more political education some participants were sceptical as to the nature of it suggesting that if it was compulsory then many would find it boring and switch off – 'I disagree cos it's not compulsory to vote so why should it be compulsory to learn about it? It would just be another boring subject', 'You might get sick of it, it might make you less interested and less likely to vote when you have the chance', 'You think everything is boring at that age anyway'.

Overall the participants nearly all wanted to know more about the political choices involved in voting and wanted to learn this at school but there was also a consensus that if it was taught as a standard subject this would not work. The participants wanted to receive political knowledge in a way that was relevant and interesting to them, not as an abstract topic.

Views on Adulthood

As part of the project we are interested in what young people think about transitions to adulthood and whether they see voting as part of that. The participants had a diverse range of views about when adulthood began and what it means to be an adult. No one in the group said that they felt they were currently an adult and there was no agreement on what the age of adulthood is. The young people in the focus group felt that adulthood was a process rather than a definitive end point and that it was mostly internal – 'You are an adult when you feel ready to be one', 'it's when you feel ready', 'it's about feeling mature not a specific age. Some people don't seem like adults when they're over 30', '18 year olds aren't adults any more than 16 year olds are unless they are mature'.

As with the discussion on 'Votes-at-16' quite a few of the respondents mentioned maturity but with adulthood this was more strictly defined as a type of autonomy and independence – 'It's when you experience maturity and do things by yourself', 'It's when you make your own choices', 'It's when you do things by yourself not relying on your mother'. There was also an acknowledgement that to some extent adulthood is about how you are perceived by others. The participants rejected any notion of there being an arbitrary age of adulthood – their notions of maturity were largely disconnected from age or specific 'adult' milestones.

Only one of the participants felt that voting was an adult act. Most reiterated the ideas that were bought up in the 'Votes-at-16' discussion: that voting was about having a voice and young people had a right to that voice. There was also an understanding that adulthood was about yourself as an individual whereas voting was about having a say in how the country and society worked – 'I mean it's a definitely a big responsibility and you are making decisions about the country and how it will be impacted but it isn't about you and whether you're an adult. That's something else', 'It's just your opinion isn't it – so why do you have to be an adult to give it?', 'Maybe it can be a step towards being an adult but it doesn't make you one to do it.' It is significant that the participants group put a great deal of importance to adulthood being defined by independence and autonomous choices but they did not see voting in this way. They consistently differentiated between choices that impacted on themselves as individuals and voting as a wider social activity with more of an ambiguous relationship to adulthood.

Would you vote?

The final question we asked was, regardless of their views on 'Votes at 16', whether any of the participants would vote if they were given the opportunity to. The group was split between those who felt that they would because it would incentivise them to find out more about the relevant issues and those who felt they would not have enough knowledge to be able to vote. Some felt it was just too much of an additional pressure to put on young people and perceived it as a burden rather than an opportunity – 'We're so young we have more stuff to worry about that vote we should do. We have other important little things to us to worry about than a vote that might effect us in 5 years time', 'We just don't have enough information on the parties or know what we are doing so more wouldn't vote than would'.

This contrasted with a much more positive narrative from those who said they would vote and saw voting as an opportunity not a burden – 'I would. I would like this opportunity. I would go out and learn more about it', 'If you had the opportunity then I'd probably do the research on it overnight', 'It would be like my chance to get my voice out and give my opinion', 'there are things you need to passionate about so if you have the opportunity to influence them then that's important.'

Summary and Conclusion

This was a really informative focus group because it contained young people who were both passionately in favour of 'Votes-at-16' and others who thought it was a really bad idea. The differences between those two perspectives are neatly captured in the final section. Those who were in favour of lowering the voting age saw voting and politics in a more positive light. For them voting is about having an opportunity to have their voice listened to and acted on. Those in favour did not see a connection between voting and adulthood or maturity, instead 'Votes-at-16' was about their right to have their voice heard as young people. This contrasts with those who opposed or were sceptical of lowering the voting age, who perceived voting to be much more of a burden. Those opposed saw voting as an issue of maturity (although not necessarily adulthood), knowledge and meaning and were concerned that 16 year olds lacked all three of these.

This focus group shows that for 'Votes-at-16' to be successfully implemented in Wales it is important that policy-makers acknowledge that young people perceive voting in multiple ways. For those that see voting an opportunity it is important that it is made clear to them that their voice is going to be heard in the political process and responded or they are likely to quickly become discouraged. Politicians and policy-makers must demonstrate how young people's preferences and votes are turned into concrete outcomes. However, the more important group to reach are those who see voting as a burden and an additional stress. These young people are likely to tune out of the political process completely unless the relevance of voting to their lives is made clear to them and that barrier of negativity is broken. This should be combined with a comprehensive programme of political education that focuses less on political structures than improving young people's understanding of the choices available to them at the ballot box and the relevance these have to their lives. This is a more challenging and contentious approach to political education but it is clearly what young people feel they need.