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'Should We Lower the Voting Age to 16?'

EYST Wrexham Focus Group Report (4th July 2019)

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Introduction

On 4th July 2019 the Leverhulme Trust funded project 'Lowering the Voting age in the UK' ran a focus group with 11 young people at EYST Wrexham. '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

-There was strong support for lowering the voting age among the participants with two different arguments in favour.

-The more common argument for 'Votes at 16' was that 16 year olds are seen as adults in other aspects of their lives so should be granted the right to vote.

-A second argument in favour was that young people should have the right to vote as themselves, not because they are seen as adults.

-Despite enthusiastic support for lowering the voting age in Wales the participants stated that they had little interest in the Welsh institutions they would be voting for – the Welsh Assembly and Local Councils.

-The participants felt that lowering the voting age might lead them to be more interested in the Welsh Assembly.

-The participants consistently expressed frustration at their voice is not being heard and their opinions not being taken seriously, particularly at school and within their local community.

-Participants desired to have more meaningful exchanges with politicians. They felt politicians and parties engaged with them in a superficial way and don't listen or respond to their concerns.

-The participants did not feel they had received sufficient levels of political education in order to vote.

-The participants wanted more relevant citizenship education that allowed them to assess the claims of political parties and politicians when deciding who to vote for.

-There was little agreement among the participants about when adulthood begins.

-There was a universal agreement that adulthood is defined by independence and a sense of self-reliance.

-The participants rejected the idea that voting was associated with adulthood or should be considered as an adult act.

Analysis of the Focus Group

The focus group included discussions on a number of issues related to the voting age that will be summarised here; Attitudes to 'Votes-at-16', 'Levels of Political Interest', 'Political Issues', 'Engagement with Politicians and Parties', 'Political Knowledge and Education' and 'Views on Adulthood'.

Votes at 16

All 11 participants thought that the voting age should be lowered to 16 – this made an interesting contrast with the EYST focus group in Swansea that we ran a week later in which most of the participants were against lowering the voting age. There were two main arguments in support. Some participants took the position of voting being a right that 16 year olds deserved to have because it was comparable with other rights and responsibilities – 'Age of 16 is counted as adult for many things – drive, job, sex so why shouldn't we vote?', 'We are seen as responsible in other areas at 16 so why shouldn't we be seen as responsible to vote'. The alternative line of argument was that voting gave 16 year olds the right to be heard as young people in their own right rather than because they were adult – 'We should be heard as young people not because we are adults', 'They need to hear what we think. Not only adults should vote because they're not the only people who exist in this world and we also have a voice that should be heard'. Several participants felt the voting age should be lower than 16 to ensure more young people had a voice, - 'Children should be given a voice and a chance. I think it should be lower. What are they so scared of?'

Despite the initial high level of support for lowering the voting age the discussion still highlighted some participant's doubts about the policy. During the discussion two participants switched their position – one became against lowering the voting age and the other undecided. Their arguments were based on concerns about the level of maturity of 16 year olds they observed in their area- 'People in Wrexham are not mature enough to care about that stuff so maybe it shouldn't be lower', '16 year olds round here smoke and drink so I wouldn't want them voting'. It was noticeable that as the discussion evolved the participants started identifying more challenges associated with lowering the voting age and modified their initial enthusiasm. Overall the participants were a lot more supportive of 'Votes at 16' when they were discussing it as a personal right they could express individually than when they were discussing it in terms of 16 year olds gaining the vote as a group overall.

Levels of Political Interest

The group expressed near universal support for lowering the voting age but they did not express any interest in the institutions they would be voting for in Wales. Not a single participant had heard that the Welsh Assembly was planning to lower the voting age in Wales. About half the group said they had some interest in the Welsh Assembly but there was also plenty of apathy expressed – 'the Assembly is not interesting', 'they never come and talk to us so why should we care', 'I don't know what they do'. None of the participants knew who the first minister of Wales or their local MP was. However, the mention of the first minister did lead to an interesting discussion on the nature of political leadership and voting. The participants had an acute awareness of the connection between voting and political leadership – 'When

you're voting you are also voting for how you want things done and who you want to lead the future. We can understand the future better than them', 'When we pick someone to lead us we shouldn't just think about ourselves, we should think about other people', 'We have our own mindset. Adults think differently about what they might want leaders to be like to us'.

It is significant that despite the relative lack of immediate interest and knowledge in the activities of the Welsh Assembly, it is clear that the participants put great importance in the idea of political leadership and the need for their voice to be heard by those leaders. This suggests that there are opportunities for the Welsh Assembly to reach out to some young people in demonstrating how political leadership is realised and held to account in Wales.

The participants were relatively confident that lowering the voting age to 16 would lead them to take more of an interest in the activities of the Assembly, 'If they lower the voting age it will make younger people get interested and care and then in schools they would teach us how to vote, what we're voting for and how to know what's right. Instead at 18 you see an election and go.....um.....', 'if they give us a reason to vote then we'll be interested obviously but it has to matter to us', 'you have to know what you are getting into – there must be a reason to be interested and vote'. This reinforces the point that lowering the voting age itself is unlikely to be sufficient for engaging young people in politics. It must act as a catalyst for a cultural shift in which young people's interests and perspectives are reflected in the party campaigns.

Political Issues

It was noticeable that all the political issues the participants cared about were related to a desire to have their voices heard and be respected. They were also localised issues that related to their direct experiences in day to day life and the community in Wrexham. A common theme was a frustration that Schools were not interested in their opinions and would not let them fully express themselves, - 'They say they'll consider us but they clearly don't care what we think', 'Our voices are not heard very much by anyone really. That needs to change', 'In schools now they claim to hear us but they just take what we say and throw it in the bin'.

Throughout the focus group the strongest theme was the need for young people to have their voices heard and responded to by authorities and a scepticism that their ideas and concerns are taken seriously, 'No one will listen to use because they'll think we're not mature and don't know about any important stuff but we do'. There was also personal frustration that their identities were not taken seriously by school authorities – 'In my school they don't let us be us. My hair always has to be up and before other black children came to my school we weren't even allowed our own hair style. So there was a lot of racism going towards me from the school because that's just how us African people are and they're weren't letting us be ourselves'.

Beyond the frustration at a general lack of voice, young people were also concerned about local issues in Wrexham – 'Do politicians really help homeless people? There's so many homeless people in Wrexham and they need to get houses to live in', 'Litter is a big issue here and drinking in the street – they need to do something

about this'. It is interesting that the frustration with a lack of voice was a very immediate and personalised issue that impacted the participant's everyday lives. It wasn't frustration at having their voice excluded from debates on climate change and Brexit that primarily concerned them but specific local and personalised issues over which they felt powerless and deliberately excluded.

Engagement with Politicians and Political Parties

The participants were universally unimpressed with politician's efforts to engage with young people. Most had experienced some interaction with politicians in schools or the community but made it sound like a superficial experience. The theme of a lack of voice and respect came to the fore again, with many participants stating that politicians were not interested in actually listening and engaging with them and their lives, - 'I mean they could just listen for 5 minutes that would help', 'No actual politician has ever come in and said to us 'How do you want me to change your community?', 'They just come in to school or community groups or whatever and talk about themselves, making themselves sound all big and that but they don't listen to us', 'We want politicians to respond to us to treat us normally', 'In all fairness they don't come out. Maybe if they come out here we'd know who they are but we don't'. The kind of engagement that the participants wanted from politicians was a two way exchange in which their concerns were listened to and acted on and this had not been their experience. There is an important lesson for politicians and political parties to engage with young people as they would any other citizen.

Political Knowledge and Education

With some exceptions the participants did not feel they had sufficient knowledge in order to vote. However, they were confident that if given the incentive of voting at 16 they would make sure they were ready, - 'No because you just told me this is happening and I'm not ready but I'd learn it', 'They need to explain more beforehand and maybe I'd be more ready', 'I think we don't know enough right now -need to explain what actually happens and then we'd feel ready'. Others did feel ready to vote and clearly wanted to have their voice heard in this way, but doubted whether others were, 'Some kids don't care enough. They are out drinking and smoking. I think I'm ready but I can and I'm interested. A lot of young people don't care and aren't interested', 'I'm ready cos I have opinions that need to be heard. Opinions government needs to hear about in the future'. This continues the theme of the participants being confident in their own capacity to vote but a lot more doubtful of motivations to engage with politics among their peers.

All participants felt they had not received the necessary levels of political education in schools to prepare them to vote. They were also clear that it was primarily the responsibility of schools to ensure they felt ready to vote. There was frustration at missed opportunities to discuss political issues that mattered to them, 'Why do we learn about putting on ties and tucking in shirts instead of stuff that actually matters like voting? Teach us how to vote properly but Schools are focused on pointless things', 'Each class has 30 kids and we all have different abilities and knowledge. If we were forced to actually look and discuss about issues in the world we'd get interesting opinions', 'Why don't we go to school and learn useful things about our human rights instead of other stuff', 'whether they say they do it and they actually do

it are different things sometimes they say they'll do things and they just don't', 'they need to tell the school to teach us this stuff or they just won't'. Overall the participants clearly felt that, thus far, their education had not prepared or encouraged them to take part in the political process as citizens.

To explore this further we asked what knowledge they felt they needed in order to be able to vote. The main theme that came out of the discussion on knowledge was a desire to have the skills to assess and judge politicians and to understand issues in modern politics more clearly – 'We need to know if politicians can do what they're saying they will do', 'whether they can or will actually do something because they'll say to do something they won't do a lot of the time', 'We need to know what the actual issues are and how to judge them or there's point in getting us to vote'. It was significant that all of the participants discussed political knowledge in terms of what they needed to know about the current political debate-there wasn't much interest in learning about the practicalities of voting or the political system.

Views on Adulthood

There was some disagreement among the focus group on when they considered adulthood to begin. Some felt that it was entirely about an internal sense of readiness and maturity that had nothing to do with age, - 'Whenever you feel ready for it then you are', 'Obviously whenever you feel ready for it', 'If you have the right mindset and the right friends and the people to lead you into what is good then you could an adult whenever'. However, unlike most groups we have discussed this with most of the participants felt that you could put a specific age on adulthood but they disagreed about when that was –'By rights its 16. You can feel like an adult under that but wouldn't be able to do that properly', '18 cos that's just the legal age isn't it', 'If you're 14 or 13 or 12 you can think you're an adult but you're not. You have to be at least 16', '16 should be the age. I think you should lower other things to 16 like the driving age and the age you want to live with your parents or not', 'I think 18 cos at 18 your parents can't tell you what to do anymore', 'At 18 you are independent', 'I think 18 because at 16 you can experience being a child still and when you're 15 you just don't have the same choices to make'.

When the discussion moved on to what made someone an adult participants who had been quite passionate about it starting at a specific age became less convinced, -'You can be 25 and still be 8 in mentality', 'You see them all the time round here. They're 25 but the way they think is like a 2 year old', 'it's about independence and responsibility some people are never proper adults really'. It was clear that the group had a unified view on what made someone an adult – independence, responsibilities and autonomy but they disagreed about when most young people achieved this.

The participants were not particularly convinced that voting was connected to adulthood or that it is an adult responsibility. Their desire to have the vote at 16 came from the belief that young people had a right to a political voice rather than the idea that 16 year olds were gaining an adult right, 'It's not about being an adult – it's about us', 'When you're 15 you can get a bike and that but no says that makes you an adult – voting can be like that', 'I don't think I'm an adult yet but I do think I have the right to vote. Voting at 18 they'll know more about some things but voting at 16

we'll know more about other things and we have to make important choices than as ourselves without people thinking we're adults'. This supports a consistent theme in our research that while the public debate on 'votes at 16' often revolves around whether 16 year olds should be considered sufficiently adult to vote, young people see the issue as about having the right to express themselves in their own right.

The participants did have some doubts about the possibility that they may be subject to undue influence from parents and peer pressure. There was doubt expressed as to whether they would be able to vote independently, 'Parent influence is an issue cos I know if I want to vote for something different to my parents they'd be disappointed in me', 'If you vote for something it can't just be for what your friends do it has to be personal to you. Some people will be peer pressured because they'll want to vote for a different thing and their friends will look at them weird like 'why would you vote for that person?', 'people will vote like their friends to fit in', 'my parents wouldn't give me a choice', 'It's about self-confidence and if you have it or not. You must know what you want and just because someone says something you go with it anyway.' There was little concern that they might be influenced by teachers to vote – some thought that if a teacher tried to influence a young person to vote a certain way it would backfire as being too obvious.

Maximum Voting Age

One interesting theme to emerge was support for the idea of a maximum voting age. While this is an idea that we have come across in our focus groups before, it was the first occasion in which the majority of participants supported an age cap for voting. The main arguments for this were based on the idea of generational fairness. 'What's the point of voting if you're 70? You are voting for what's going to happen to young people mainly but you don't know anything about their lives', 'If you're 70 or something is there really a point to you voting because you're not being fair to what young people want', 'I think there should be a maximum age because it's not their future, it's ours and if they're going to vote they'll vote for them and not us and that's selfish and unfair on us that they would do that', 'They're in the last stage of their life and they don't have the right to influence our future so much'.

Even among participants who did not support the idea of a maximum voting age there was a strong feeling that inter-generational fairness matters. 'I feel like if you are 70 or above then you should vote for the generation coming up and think about them. It doesn't matter how old you are – it matters that you vote the best for your society.

The idea of a maximum voting age is clearly controversial and extremely unlikely to ever be advocated as a policy by a political party. However, discussing this issue identifies inter-generational fairness as an important concern of young people and a source of their frustration with politics.

Summary and Conclusion

The most important finding from this focus group is the emphasis that young people put on the need to have their voice heard. While the participants showed substantial support for lowering the voting age their overall view of politics and politicians was less positive. Their support for 'Votes at 16' was based on the opportunity it gave them to have a voice and influence over the issues they were concerned about. It is also interesting that they largely rejected the idea that voting is an adult activity. The emphasis throughout was in young people needing to be heard in their own right by their community, by the institutions they spend their time in and by politicians. This suggests that lowering the voting age to 16 needs to be combined with a shift in the way politicians and government interact with young people. Young people's support for lowering the voting age is contingent on it allowing them a greater level of voice and influence over the issues that matter to them. It's not an end in itself. Therefore, it is important that 'Votes-at-16' is implemented in a meaningful way that allows all young people to feel that their voice is being heard and (most importantly) responded to in the political debate.