



# The lessons of 1969: policy learning, policy memory and voting age reform

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## Abstract

This article utilises the developing research literatures on policy learning and memory, with particular focus on the interconnections between institutional amnesia and policy myopia, to analyse the lowering of the age of enfranchisement to 18 for all elections in the UK in 1969 and its resonance, or otherwise, in contemporary debates concerning ‘Votes-at-16’. Political and public interest in voting age reform has intensified in recent years. There has, however, been a noticeable lack of interest from either advocates or those opposed to ‘Votes-at-16’ in the ground-breaking decision taken by the UK government in 1969 to lower the voting age to 18 and policy lessons resulting in this radical reform. The article provides an overview of the policy debates linked to the lowering of the voting age to 18 in the UK in 1969 and then explores its policy effects and potential policy learning available from the introduction of ‘Votes-at-18’. It concludes that a lack of memory of past policy interventions such as lowering the voting age to 18 can be a product of both ‘institutional amnesia’ combined with intentional and unintentional forms of ‘policy myopia’.

**Keywords** Institutional amnesia · Policy myopia · ‘Votes at 16’ · Policy learning · Voting age reform

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## Introduction

This article utilises the developing research literatures on policy learning and memory, with particular focus on the interconnections between institutional amnesia and policy myopia, to analyse the lowering of the age of enfranchisement to 18 for all elections in the UK in 1969 and its resonance, or otherwise, in contemporary debates concerning ‘Votes-at-16’. Policy learning enhances knowledge by assessing the extent to which past policies have been successful, so contemporary policy-makers can learn from the past and not repeat mistakes (Corbett et al., 2018a). Policy or institutional memory is understood in terms of how democratic institutions record, order and recall the design, delivery and impacts of past policy interventions. Some argue that the capacity of democratic institutions to recollect past policy interventions has declined in recent decades due to shifts in policy-making practice and changes of organisational policy cultures (Pollitt, 2000). This memory loss is typified as ‘institutional amnesia’, with a deleterious effect on policy learning. Policy learning can also be negatively impacted by ‘policy myopia’, whereby contemporary policy-makers intentionally or unintentionally limit the potential for democratic institutions to reflect on policies they design and implement as time passes (Nair and Howlett, 2017).

Lowering the voting age to 18 in 1969 provides an ideal case study to advance understanding of the intersectionality between institutional amnesia and policy myopia, as age-related reform of the franchise has been undertaken rarely and over periods of time which extend beyond a single generation. In 1969, the United Kingdom (UK) was the first democratic state to lower the age of enfranchisement to 18. At the same time, policy-makers lowered the age of majority to 18. Within a decade of this ground-breaking reform, nearly all democracies had followed the same policy pathway, lowering both the ages of enfranchisement and majority to 18. Those advocating a further lowering of the voting age to 16 have lauded the progressive nature of the UK’s franchise history, referencing and drawing parallels to the introduction of ‘Votes-at-18’ to support their cause. For example, the ‘Votes-at-16 Coalition’ (2008, p. 30) argues the following: ‘the UK has a pace-setting precedent for delivering democracy for its people. As one of the oldest and most respected Parliaments in the world, when the UK lowered the voting age to 18 in 1969 France, Italy, Canada, Australia and the USA quickly followed’.

It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the lowering of the voting age to 18 passed without significant acknowledgement by the UK parliament or supporters of ‘Votes-at-16’. Furthermore, given the policy parallels drawn between the debates about voting age reform in the 1960s and those of the contemporary period, parliamentarians and others debating the merits or otherwise of ‘Votes-at-16’, as well as a number of official commissions, have been unable or unwilling to reflect upon the decisions to lower the age of enfranchisement and majority. Moreover, the voting age has been lowered to 16 in Scotland and Wales for national and local elections without consideration of potential policy learning associated with ‘Votes-at-18’.



The apparent absence of policy memory suggests that contemporary analyses of the voting age question might suffer from widespread institutional amnesia which extends beyond the UK parliament to devolved legislatures and civil society. It is noteworthy that policy-makers enacting voting age reform in the late 1960s did not integrate into their policy design any adaptive modes of evaluation to assess the effects of lowering the age of enfranchisement to 18. Moreover, they failed to consider how variations in the age-related rights of young people and wider changes in public attitudes to transitions to adulthood might continue to impact on the age of majority and its relationship to enfranchisement. The absence of temporal analyses about the policy drivers and effects has stymied contemporary policy learning about the introduction of 'Votes-at-18', or evidentially inform a historical policy narrative of age-related franchise reform.

The article first seeks to consider the role of policy learning in policy-making, particularly the proposition that a lack of memory of past policy interventions can be a product of both institutional amnesia *and* intentional and unintentional policy myopia. The article then provides an overview of the policy debates linked to the lowering of the voting age to 18 in the UK in 1969. We then explore the policy effects and potential policy learning of 'Votes-at-18' since 1969, highlighting the combination of institutional and policy myopia in shaping contemporary approaches to voting age policy-making. We conclude by arguing that this proposition is of potential value for policy learning in other areas of social and public policy-making, contending that both advocates and opponents of 'Votes-at-16' should heed the policy lessons with regards to lowering the voting age to 18.

## **Learning from the past? Policy memory, Institutional amnesia and policy myopia**

Policy-making typically seeks to reform or alter contemporary aspects of public and governmental behaviour for an agreed purpose. Unless addressing a completely new policy area, contemporary policy-making builds on past policy interventions and occurs within the confines of existing governance norms and policy logic. Past experiences and memories are instrumental in shaping the development and implementation of policy (Pollitt, 2000). This raises the potential for the accommodation of the legacies of incoherent policy objectives or poor policy design (Benson and Jordan, 2011). In considering whether they should redesign or replace existing policy, policy-makers must seek to both focus on short-term policy challenges while also acknowledging the strategic but potentially unknowable nature of future issues or events.

Policy learning through analysis of past interventions can be instructive, helping policy-makers address contemporary challenges through the adoption of a holistic view of historical precedents to address anticipated future policy needs (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996). This is achieved through knowledge concerning the drivers, process, implementation and effects of existing policy. Policy learning requires institutional will, capacity and the appropriate mechanisms to assess the success or failure of past policy-making. Assessing policy through this binary is difficult due to



challenges in quantifying success and failure over time and problematic in assessing how evidence supporting such judgements can be captured and analysed (Begley et al., 2019). Moreover, the success or failure of a policy is not mutually exclusive (McConnell, 2010). The various stages of policy-making can be analysed independently, and also understood across multiple, interconnected policy contexts. Policy learning can also be skewed by the extent policy-makers adopt objective or subjective approaches to support contemporary policy agendas. Dunlop (2017, p. 6) notes how policy learning is not simply an analytical tool but also an ontology with which to observe individual and collective political behaviour. Crucial to this process is the desire or otherwise of policy-makers to understand the context and process of past policy interventions *and* to analyse if they met their planned objectives. Policy learning thus involves important questions as to the selective nature of who learns what and when, and how diverse approaches can shape current and future policy-making.

Corbett et al. (2018b, p. 556) differentiate between policy learning, primarily concerned with increasing or improving knowledge about policy, and institutional memory relating to how knowledge becomes embedded within official processes. Institutional memory is not merely the study of history to increase the reference points for analysis; it also allows institutions to understand the connectivity between the past, present and future of political behaviour and policy-making. As history is not a chain of independent events, contemporary policy-making happens within historical contexts which have direct consequences in relation to past decisions or events. History also matters because policy actors can learn from experience by seeking to understand past behaviour. Contemporary policy-making is therefore made within particular historical contexts, and expectations of policy are thus moulded by the past.

Traditional explanations view institutional memory as essentially stable, with the repositories of past policies established, maintained and updated through physical and online resources (Corbett et al., 2018a). Democratic institutions have been understood to be unique and authoritative in their knowledge of past policy-making. There is, however, a growing recognition that policy learning to inform contemporary policy-making can be affected by institutional memory loss about when, why and how past policies have been introduced. Pollitt (2000) asserts that institutional memory has significantly declined in democratic democracies due to a failure to record data and decisions, a loss of material once recorded, inadequate processes for retrieving data and a failure to sufficiently value and understand past policy experiences. Government or non-governmental agents and organisations thus ‘no longer remember or record policy-relevant lessons from the past’ (Stark and Head, 2019, p. 1526). Institutional amnesia is viewed as manifest in contemporary policy-making, meaning short-termism and cauterised memory prevails in the design and delivery of public policy (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

The inability of policy-makers to recollect or reference previous interventions due to circumstantial limitations highlights the effects of the passage of time, which can compromise both institutional and personal forms of policy recollection. Parliamentary approaches to pre- and post-legislative scrutiny can change over time, particularly in terms of the frequency and extent of knowledge collated, and depth of policy analysis (see Thompson, 2015). As time passes after



the implementation of a policy, the number of actors involved diminishes as they move on to new projects, retire and pass away. Institutional amnesia is thus somewhat inevitable, highlighting differences in the longevity of some policies when compared to human life.

Institutional amnesia thus impairs policy memory through erosion of the organisational mechanisms and cultures of policy learning *and* a lack of transfer of policy narratives (via storytelling) between policy actors (Stark, 2018, pp. 145–148). The role of elected representatives and civil servants in establishing and sustaining narratives of past policy interventions—including their perceived success or failure—is critical in the operationalisation of institutional memories through the selection of what policies are remembered, misremembered or forgotten, and how and in what ways files and records held by institutions of past policies are utilised (Corbett et al., 2018b, p. 558). Their role is both fluid, in that democratically elected representatives are regularly rotated through elections, and stable, as civil servants are traditionally seen as repositories of knowledge about past policies. Tingle (2015, pp. 22–25) argues, however, that the decline in the influence and expertise of the civil service due to continual reorganisation, uncertainty of tenure and the increasing power of ministerial special advisers has cauterised institutional memories. Policy actors within contemporary government and non-government policy networks are also increasingly transitory, often focussing on individual projects rather than strategic policy development. This trend has been exacerbated by the growing political presence of the private and third sectors in policy-making and its delivery.

According to Corbett et al. (2018b, p. 558), these changes highlight how democratic institutions are not the sole repositories and arbiters of policy memories. Instead, multiple ‘representations of the past’ concerning past policy exist in governmental systems which are multi-layered and amongst non-governmental organisations, particularly across civil society and the media. Policy memory and institutional amnesia thus incorporate multiple ‘sites of memory’ which draw on shared and/or different processes and cultures in their recording and recall of past interventions. Furthermore, new democratic institutions can suffer from institutional amnesia due to their inability or unwillingness to connect with policy memories of existing institutions. Judge (2006) describes this as ‘macular degeneration’, a condition whereby policy-makers and policy-making in an increasingly decentralised multi-national state suffer from policy ‘blindspots’ which can sometimes be politically strategic.

Judge’s thesis raises questions about the extent to which institutional amnesia may be intentional in terms of politicised agenda management, non-decision-making and mobilisation of bias. Tingle (2015) defines this as ‘political amnesia’, arguing it is a product of the increased pressures placed on politicians to produce attractive policies within the demands of electoral and media cycles, meaning examination of past policy interventions can be viewed as a barrier to speedy or popular policy-making. This suggests the selective recollection of memories of policy-making can be intentional and motivated by political gain or ideology, particularly when the legacies of past interventions challenge or compromise the intent of contemporary policy-making. Wilful or strategic memory loss can thus encourage the distortion, revision or negation of the motivations and objectives of past policies as policy actors seek to



encourage new policy thinking through the conscious ‘forgetting’ or ‘unlearning’ of past policy lessons.

This framing of political amnesia is noteworthy in that it intersects with what is described as ‘policy myopia’, whereby policy learning from past interventions is limited due to contemporary policy-making lacking appropriate robustness, agility and adaptability in its design, implementation and evaluation. According to Tingle (2015), political amnesia has led to a policy-making culture whereby the consequences of interventions are rarely longitudinally analysed and engagement with underpinning policy narratives are often peripheral or overlooked. Nair and Howlett (2017, p. 103) argue, however, that policy myopia is sometimes unintentional in that there is a fundamental challenge all policy-makers face in predicting an uncertain future. Intentional or unintentional forms of policy myopia can lead to the failure to build sufficient capacity to respond to uncertainty and change, particularly in terms of how and in what ways policy environments might change over time. Examples of policy myopia abound. To cite one short period alone, 1989 to 1993 saw the Dangerous Dogs Act, the Child Support Agency and Community Charge (‘poll tax’) all introduced. Each was soon subject to reform or repeal. Policy myopia can diminish the ability of policy actors and institutions to identify potential challenges and opportunities for contemporary and future policy-making. Limitations in both policy analysis *and* learning can lead to policy instability or failure, and can be realised at a personal level, within a particular institution, or across a wider system of networked institutions (Catino, 2013, p. 95). To avoid the introduction of myopic policy interventions, the temporal dynamics of effective policy design should be embraced to anticipate the evolution and potential change of policy environments (Mukherjee et al., 2021).

To summarise, the combined effects of institutional amnesia and policy myopia can encourage short-term and narrowly framed operational policy-making with little regard for ‘overspill’ or wider strategic implications. Hulme and Hulme (2012, p. 473) note that proponents support this ‘presentist’ approach to policy-making, arguing that analysis of the historical circumstances and implications of policy-making can over-complicate and warp the focus of the contemporary issues to be addressed. They argue, however, that ignoring the historical development of policy-making can over-simplify complex issues and fail to learn from past policy interventions. Moreover, presentism can encourage policy actors who are determined to initiate or stymie new policy to close down difficult or challenging debate of past policy-making which might compromise their cause. Memory and politics thus relate and interact in consistently dynamic and evolutionary ways which are non-linear and difficult to predict. This has meant that memory of past policy interventions, as in our case study of the lowering the voting age to 18 in 1969, can prove both influential *and* absent in shaping policy learning.



## The policy pathway to 'Votes-at-18'

While the lowering of the voting age in 1969 is typically framed in progressive terms, it is not understood as part of the *longue durée* of age-related electoral reform in the UK. Contemporary policy actors thus face an absence of a clear policy narrative, as voting age reform has been peripheral in the expansion of the British electoral franchise (see, for example, Garrard, 2001). From the 1832 Great Reform Act until 1969, the lowest age of enfranchisement was almost always 21. However, reform of the franchise in 1832 is understood principally within the context of the relationship between class, property ownership and voting rights. Similarly, the expansion of the vote in 1918 and 1928 is predominantly understood in terms of female enfranchisement (Loughran et al., 2021a).

The immediate post-war period saw young people's engagement with electoral politics differ little from older voters in terms of voter turnout (Uberoi, 2019), and many also joined youth organisations linked to the main political parties and the trade union movement. Concerns during the 1960s about young people instead focussed on their social alienation and potential they might embrace of either radical left-wing or nationalist causes (Bingham, 2019). Fears that counter-cultural youth political activism could mutate into revolutionary politics were not paramount though and the Labour Party's interest in voting age reform appeared more driven by growing difficulties in attracting young members (Fielding, 2003, pp. 183–184). 'Votes-at-18' was supported by a small number of youth political advocacy groups during the 1960s, but the issue of voting age reform did not witness a sustained organised campaign from young people. British political elites were thus not incentivised into supporting voting age reform through a direct exogenous shock via campaigning from young people or a youth-led challenge to the legitimacy of British democracy.

The policy pathway to lowering the voting age to 18 was instead elite-driven, primarily motivated by widely held perceptions that the post-war period had seen a substantial shift in the transitions of young people to adulthood (Fielding 2003). The origins of 'Votes-at-18' were party-political and were first proposed in 1959 in the report of the Labour Party's Youth Commission. But while Labour publicly committed to 'Votes-at-18', the policy was not included in its 1959 or 1964 general election manifestoes. Two Private Members' Bills introduced by Labour MPs in 1960 and 1965 both failed to capture significant parliamentary support, particularly as the Conservative party did not share concerns about youth electoral rights or radicalisation. Furthermore, the limited polling on the issue undertaken indicated a lack of support amongst the public or indeed young people (Bingham, 2019).

It was only after Labour won the 1966 general election that voting age reform emerged as a salient political issue. In their manifesto, Labour (1966: pt. 5, para 2.3) formally promised a Speaker's Conference on Electoral Law which would consider the introduction of 'Votes-at-18' to 'add a necessary political dimension to the increasingly important economic and social position of young people'. However, Labour first established a committee, chaired by Justice John Latey, to consider reform of the age of majority. Its 1967 report recommended the alignment of



various rights associated with adulthood, via the reduction of the ages of responsibility linked to marriage, property ownership, contract purchasing, welfare and civil law to 18.

There were political tensions in agreeing a new age of majority, which meant the Latey Committee failed to reach unanimity, with two Conservative members dissenting and producing a minority report. Moreover, Latey's recommendations appeared to contradict the views of young people themselves, with National Opinion Polls suggesting that two out of three 16–20 year-olds concurred with a minimum age of 21 for credit purchases, home ownership and marriage without parental consent. The impetus for voting age reform was, however, enhanced by Latey's recommendations. Labour ignored the subsequent 1968 Speaker's Conference on the age of enfranchisement, which the party had convened but which had overwhelmingly concluded the voting age should be lowered to 20. Instead, Labour sought to streamline ages of responsibility and enfranchisement at 18, thus underlining the party's 'modern' appeal to young voters (Fielding, 2003, p. 184).

Parliamentary debates over the final reports of the Latey Committee and Speaker's Conference saw disagreements expressed over the relationship between adulthood and enfranchisement (Loughran et al., 2021a). Supporters and opponents of 'Votes-at-18' frequently presented competing views as to what constituted the appropriate age of maturity and the extent young people were competent to vote (Norton, 1975, p. 306). There was also dissent on the issue within Harold Wilson's cabinet (Bingham, 2019) and disquiet among a minority of Labour MPs (Fielding 2003). For this reason, the Labour government whipped the parliamentary vote, having initially indicated that a free vote would be offered. Conservative resistance to a reduction of the voting age to 18 was, however, brief and lacking in resolution, with the party choosing to not whip its MPs in opposition. When offered the opportunity to vote in favour of an amendment to lower the voting age much more modestly, from 21 to 20, less than half of Conservative MPs voted in support.

In debating voting age reforms, parliamentarians made scant reference to institutional or personal memories of the 1918 and 1928 reforms of the electoral franchise. This was due in part to the absence of any formal parliamentary review of the universal lowering of the voting age to 21 but was also a consequence of the lack of interest in past policy-making by the Latey Committee or Speaker's Conference (Loughran et al., 2021a). There was also a limited policy memory or recollection due to no serving MPs from either the 1918 or 1924 parliaments. The few references in parliamentary debates to electoral franchise reforms adopted after the First World War overlooked age-related dimensions, instead comparing spurious arguments regarding female voter capacity made during the passage of the 1917 Representation of the People Bill to objections raised in the late 1960s regarding young people (Mycock et al., 2020, p. 48). Analysis of voting age reform in the late 1960s thus highlights both unintentional policy myopia and institutional amnesia.

The passage of the Representation of the People Act (1969) was an elite-led process driven by a desire to streamline the age of adulthood at 18, with little evidence of demand for reform from young people or the voting public. As such, divisions on the voting age question focussed principally on the relationship between enfranchisement and maturity, revealing profound differences in how youth transitions to





adulthood were understood which crossed party lines. The Labour government had to push through the policy in the face of challenges from a Speaker's Conference which it ordained, and against the wishes of a sizeable minority of its own and opposition MPs. This noted, ideology and party-political opportunism were influential factors driving support or opposition for franchise reform. Discussions about the extent of youth democratic participation, or the potential need to socialise young people to ensure they were sufficiently well-prepared to vote, were peripheral during the passage or implementation of 'Votes-at-18'.

## **Policy acceptance and impact of 'votes-at-18'**

Policy myopia in the late 1960s was in part driven by the singular desire to equalise the age of majority and voting rights and to coalesce adulthood around these key rights. There was no thought given that policy-makers or young people might seek to amend the ages these rights were realised in future, the impact of 'Votes-at-18' on participation in elections, or how the impact of policy change might be measured. Moreover, considering the national and international significance of lowering the voting age to 18, there has been a remarkable lack of interest in examining its impacts and effects since 1969. There have been no attempts to reverse the policy, and Westminster has never formally debated or scrutinised its decision to reduce the voting age or evaluated the effects of the policy via a departmental select committee or commission—or even identify what mechanisms or indicators might help facilitate policy learning. Furthermore, there has been no detailed non-governmental or academic analysis of the policy drivers of lowering the voting age to 18, or consideration of its impacts and legacies by advocates or opponents of 'Votes-at-16'. This collective oversight can be somewhat explained by the extent the synchronisation of the ages of enfranchisement and majority were accepted both by policy-makers and citizens in the UK and elsewhere. But the absence of interest in the policy lessons from 1969 is surprising as they offer important insights regarding the potential immediate and longer-term effects of voting age reform.

While voting age reform was widely accepted, the extent it was a policy success is less clear. The principal policy objective in 1969 to synchronise and reify 18 as the age of adulthood has proved largely successful over the past 50 years. The age of majority established in the late 1960s has remained static and public opinion concurs that 18 is the age mostly commonly associated with adulthood (Mycock et al., 2020). Indeed, policy-makers have continued to coalesce protective, civic and welfare rights around the age of 18. For example, the age of jury service was lowered to 18 in 1972 and the age of candidacy followed suit in 2006. The introduction of the Children Act 1989 appeared to confirm that policy-makers considered 18 the age of adulthood, as it compelled local authorities, courts, parents and other agencies to promote the safeguarding and welfare of all young people under 18. In England and Wales, legislation came into force between 2008 and 2015 which determined that young people must remain in some form of statutory education or volunteering until 18.



During the same period, the acquisition of age-related rights and responsibilities have also become increasingly stratified and extended, thus recalibrating youth transitions to adulthood as understood in the late 1960s. Socio-cultural change has seen maturity framed and understood in ways which have altered public perceptions of youthhood and adulthood (Furlong, 2017). For example, many of the established markers connected to adulthood, including leaving home, buying a house, getting married, or having children, are now increasingly deferred by young people (Gifford et al., 2014). Conversely, a range of economic and social rights and responsibilities are realised at 16 years of age or earlier, such as medical consent, paying tax, consensual sex and marriage and military service. Since the late 1990s, devolution across the UK has also seen ages of majority become increasingly differentiated in sub-state national or regional contexts.

It is noteworthy that this variable geometry of adulthood is a critical theme in debates concerning ‘Votes-at-16’, with both advocates *and* opponents reproducing age symmetry arguments which were influential in shaping debates in the late 1960s. Supporters of ‘Votes-at-16’ argue the significance of the rights acquired at that age mark the beginning of adulthood and should be complemented with the right to vote (e.g. Adonis and Tyndall, 2013). Those supporting the age of enfranchisement at 18 respond by noting that it remains the age where most significant rights coalesce and are realised, and that there has been a general upward trajectory in ages of responsibility over the past two decades or so (e.g. Russell, 2014). However, successive UK governments, and their devolved sub-state national counterparts, have not sought to undertake further review of the age of majority akin to that the Latey Commission, or consider its relationship to the voting age.

The impact of lowering the voting age to 18 was also far-reaching and unprecedented in terms of youth political participation, particularly voting in elections. Fielding (2003, p. 185) notes lowering the voting age in 1969 was unquestionably an ‘electoral leap in the dark’ for political parties. Hopes that support for ‘Votes-at-18’ might prove electorally advantageous for Labour were quickly dashed as the party lost the first contest under the new franchise—the Bridgwater by-election of March 1970—and the subsequent UK general election in June 1970. ‘Votes-at-18’ was seen as a strategic statement of political recognition though, and Labour has increasingly attracted the support of younger voters since then.

Two important long-term trends also emerged with regards to the electoral participation of the newly enfranchised voters. First, turnout of the 18–24-year-old cohort has proved to be consistently lower than the average turnout, with higher levels of non-participation than all other cohorts at every UK general election since 1969 (Uberoi, 2019). Second, the overall turnout of 18–24 year-olds in UK general elections has been considerably more variable than all other age cohorts, ranging from a high of 70.2 per cent in February 1974 to a low of 38.2 per cent in 2005. These trends correlate with reductions in turnouts for elections experienced by other states who lowered their age of enfranchisement from 21 to 18 in the 1970s (Franklin, 2004).

The dramatic fall in the turnout of 18–24 year-olds in the 1997 UK general election stimulated widespread concerns regarding youth democratic participation, energising policy debates regarding the need for citizenship or political education



to instil young people with the requisite political knowledge and skills to vote. This policy ‘overspill’ was not considered by policy-makers in the late 1960s. Indeed, attempts in the 1970s by a new generation of politicised, radicalised and motivated teachers and academics to promote political education failed, due to a lack of significant political party support underpinned by concerns about the possibility that young people were susceptible to indoctrination (Crick and Porter 1978). However, the sharp fall in election turnout among young people by 1997 facilitated the introduction of citizenship education as a statutory subject in the English National Curriculum and across the rest of the UK in differing formats. Citizenship education has suffered from a lack of concerted political support across the UK, with its quality and quantity proving variable due to a lack of non-specialist teachers, resources and curriculum space and status (Kisby and Sloam, 2012). Many young people still receive little or no political education before they vote, despite the strong evidence regarding its positive effect on youth political knowledge, interest, activism and potential to vote (Tonge et al., 2012).

Initial calls to lower the voting age to 16 originated in the decline of the electoral participation of 18–24 year-olds in the late 1990s, but were largely disconnected from the policy debate about citizenship education across the UK or the shifting contours of youth and adult citizenship. This initial oversight can be explained by the extent of acceptance of ‘Votes-at-18’ as a policy success, and a failure to consider its wider impacts. As we discuss in the next section, the lack of evidence-based analysis of lowering the voting age to 18 has ensured that debates about ‘Votes-at-16’ have proven similar to those outlined in the late 1960s. It has also limited severely potential policy learning from that period, particularly as the passing of time has meant that the policy memory of reform of the ages of enfranchisement and majority has declined.

### **‘Votes at 16’, institutional amnesia and policy myopia**

When the UK Parliament first debated the issue of lowering the voting age to 16 in the late 1990s, institutional memories were evident, as some policy actors made anecdotal references to the introduction of ‘Votes-at-18’. For example, during a parliamentary debate on what would become the Representation of the People Act (2000), Labour MP David Winnick argued against lowering the voting age to 16, noting ‘I was a Member of the House when the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 in 1969, and I did not receive a single letter on the subject’. His recollections appeared somewhat uncertain nonetheless, as he mused: ‘I must be quite honest—not having checked *Hansard*, I am not sure whether the Conservatives opposed it’ (HC Deb, 15 December 1999: c.293. In arguing in support of ‘Votes-at-16’, Liberal Democrat MP, Bob Maclennan reflected on his own memories of the passage of the 1969 Act, noting that (as a Labour MP at the time) he served on the Latey Committee but also supported the Speaker’s Commission recommendation that the voting age should be lowered to 20 and not 18. He highlighted the segregation of the question of the voting age and the age of majority in the late 1960s and encouraged its adoption for considering ‘Votes-at-16’, concluding ‘the lessons of 1969 are that we are



right to raise the issue here in the context of the reform of our franchise and our voting systems, and of making the vote more accessible' (HC Deb, 15 December 1999: c.294).

Subsequent parliamentary debates witnessed a growing institutional amnesia regarding voting age reform in the late 1960s. The MP who led the initial call to lower the voting age to 16, Liberal Democrat Simon Hughes, did not have direct parliamentary experience of 'Votes-at-18'. Instead, his support stemmed from when he 'became entitled to vote on 1 January 1970, and it was lucky that a general election took place in that year, when I could exercise my right to vote' (HC Deb, 15 December 1999: c.305). Policy actors who were not directly involved in the decision to lower the ages of enfranchisement and majority to 18 did make occasional but evidentially unsupported references in support or opposition to 'Votes-at-16'. For example, Liberal Democrat MP, Stephen Williams, introduced his Private Members' Bill on 'Votes-at-16' by asserting 'that today's teenagers have the same social interests as their counterparts in the 1960s, but this decade's 16-year-olds are better informed and of a similar maturity to 18-year-olds of nearly 40 years ago' (HC Deb 29 November 2005: c138-9). Labour Peer, Baroness Hayter, drew attention to similarities between contemporary debates and those in the 1960s, noting 'exactly the same arguments were used in 1968 against lowering the age from 21'. (HL Deb, 27 February 2013: c186). Conversely, Conservative peer, Lord Norton of Louth, noted that 'lowering the voting age is not likely to have a positive impact on turnout any more than it did when it was lowered to 18 in 1969. It did not promote participation in democracy, but rather served to demonstrate what we already knew: young people are among the groups least likely to vote.' (HL Deb, 27 February 2013: c178). Following the 2019 UK general election, there are no serving MPs in the House of Commons elected prior to 1975 or civil servants associated with introducing 'Votes-at-18' still of working age.

Increasingly, debates about 'Votes-at-16' have highlighted how this institutional amnesia interconnects with policy myopia. Parliamentary committees engaging with the voting age question have not been able to call on the memories of policy actors or draw on parliamentary or academic analyses of the drivers, implementation or effects of 'Votes-at-18' to support policy learning (see, as examples, House of Commons, 2014; House of Lords, 2018). Other opportunities to reflect on the experiences and legacies of 'Votes-at-18' suggest institutional amnesia and unintentional policy myopia are not solely the preserve of Westminster or Whitehall. Two government-sponsored but independent commissions—the Electoral Commission (2002–2004) and the Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC) (2008–2009)—were convened to consider the potential reform of the voting age to 16. Both commissions acknowledged the importance of the Representation of the People Act (1969) and the Latey Commission in their final reports. Two non-government commissioned reviews—the Power Commission (2004–2006) and the British Youth Council (BYC) (2014) have also considered the voting age question. Each of these four Commissions adopted similar approaches—if not depth—to evidence gathering, evaluating arguments for and against voting age reform via a mix of focus groups, interviews, public opinion data and literature reviews. However, no policy actors who contributed to either the Latey Commission or the Speaker's Commission in the late



1960s sat on any of the Commissions or gave evidence. The Electoral Commission and YCC both concluded that they had not received sufficient evidence to support lowering the voting age. Conversely, the Power Commission and BYC claimed they had not received sufficient evidence to defer implementing 'Votes-at-16'. It is noteworthy that no parliamentary committee or any of the commissions sought to undertake a review the impact of 'Votes-at-18' themselves to inform contemporary policy learning.

Government and non-governmental considerations of the voting age question over recent decades have also acknowledged its wider policy implications and overspill, particularly the relationship between ages of majority and enfranchisement, and the socialising of democratically engaged and participative citizens. Those opposed to 'Votes-at-16' have argued a review of the ages of majority should be undertaken and improved universal provision of citizenship education should be introduced *before* any further reform of the voting age. Advocates of voting age reform have alternatively argued that these initiatives should be undertaken but only after lowering the franchise age to 16 (Mycock et al., 2020). The Electoral Commission also reviewed whether the age of candidacy should also be lowered from 21 to 18. Interestingly, on this issue they noted (incorrectly) that 'there does not seem to be any record of either Cabinet or Parliament giving consideration to lowering the candidacy age when they lowered the voting age in 1969' (Electoral Commission 2003, p. 12). The Power Inquiry subsequently proposed the age of candidacy should be reduced to 16, but without considering the significant complexities this would entail in terms of child protection and statutory education conventions that would apply to elected representatives under the age of 18. The YCC was principally tasked with addressing why young people were increasingly disengaged from politics, raising concerns that 'Votes-at-16' was 'bolted on' and somewhat overshadowed its other work (Tonge and Mycock, 2010).

An absence of policy learning with regards to 'Votes-at-18' has also been a feature of recent voting age reforms in Scotland and Wales, where the age of enfranchisement has been lowered to 16 for local and sub-state national elections. In some ways this can be understood as institutional amnesia through 'macular degeneration', as the creation of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly both post-date 'Votes-at-18' and their policy actors lack a direct connection with Westminster's historical policy narratives and recollections. This noted, intentional policy myopia may also be a factor. In both Scotland and Wales, the introduction of 'Votes-at-16' has been primarily driven by devolved political elites who consciously framed voting age reform in terms of the 'modernisation' of devolved national institutions compared to what is framed as an increasingly archaic Westminster (Loughran et al., 2021b). Pre-legislative scrutiny in Scotland and Wales was also compromised as it was undertaken only after the passing of confirmatory legislative votes in support of voting age reform. There was thus little incentive to undertake a critical review of previous voting age reforms in the UK.

Policy myopia has also been evident in Scotland as policy-makers did not design any significant evaluation of the introduction of the policy in 2014, and have not subsequently sought to evaluate its success or otherwise. This oversight may well be intentional. The Scottish National Party-led Scottish Government



lowered the voting age to 16 for the 2014 Scottish independence referendum hoping that it would enfranchise young people who were thought more likely to support their cause (Mycock, 2015). Policy learning in Scotland has thus been constrained and has seen a replication of some of the policy effects associated with ‘Votes-at-18’. Voting age reform in Scotland has not—as yet—redressed disparities in voter turnout between younger and older citizens which first emerged after the voting age was lowered to 18. Although post-referendum evaluations undertaken by the Scottish Government lauded the exceptional turnout of 75 per cent of under-18s (when compared with the 54 per cent of 18–24 year-olds who voted), they overlooked—possibly due to intentional policy myopia—the 10 per cent deficit when compared to the overall electorate turnout of 85 per cent. Subsequent increases in voter turnout in both the 2016 Scottish Parliament and 2017 Scottish local government elections have been attributed to the ongoing resonance of the independence question amongst older voters rather than the impact of voting age reform. Indeed, 16 and 17 year-olds voters in Scotland are—so far—voting at lower levels than all other age cohorts, with the exception of 18–24 year-olds (Electoral Commission, 2017).

The failure of the Scottish Government to undertake evaluation of the introduction of ‘Votes-at-16’ has had cross-national implications, particularly in countries that have sought to follow the example of Scotland and lower the age of enfranchisement in some or all elections (Mycock et al., 2020). For example, evidence gathering in Wales undertaken in 2018 signposted the turnout of three-quarters of 16–17 year-olds in Scotland in 2014 but chose to highlight their increased turnout in subsequent Scottish elections when compared with 18–24 year-olds rather than the continued deficit with older cohorts or the overall electorate. Neither Scotland nor Wales introduced enhanced, universal political education provision to accompany voting age reform. In the case of Scotland, research highlighted that the two-year campaign period prior to the 2014 independence referendum saw discussions of politics in some schools and colleges have a positive impact on youth political engagement and the turnout of newly enfranchised voters (Eichhorn, 2018). However, the Scottish Government did not create a universal political literacy programme for first voters aged 16 and 17, meaning many young people did not have opportunities to learn about or discuss the referendum. Although subsequent research has raised significant questions about disparities in the political socialisation and literacy of Scottish first-time voters (Scottish Youth Parliament and Mycock, 2019), there is still no statutory provision of political education in Scotland. Moreover, while the Expert Panel appointed by the Welsh Assembly recommended that a universal programme of political education should accompany voting age reform in Wales (McAllister et al., 2017, p. 204), this has not as yet been enacted.

There has also been no formal review of the age of majority, or its relationship with enfranchisement, in introducing ‘Votes-at-16’ or after its implementation in Scotland or Wales. Indeed, in both cases there has been an identifiable pattern whereby the minimum age of various—particularly protective—rights have been raised to 18 in both the period prior to and after lowering the voting age to 16. This may seem contradictory in terms of correlating adulthood with enfranchisement but mirrors dissonance in opinion in debates about ‘Votes-at-18’ and the



age of majority in the late 1960s. In contrast to the debates of 1969, policy-makers have acknowledged the cumulative aggregation of citizenship rights informing youth transition to adulthood. As the Welsh Assembly Expert Panel (McAlister et al., 2017, p. 187) concluded:

While comparisons between the ages at which young people acquire rights and responsibilities, or start to exercise those rights and responsibilities, may be relevant, we do not find them compelling in making the case for or against a reduction in the voting age’.

This noted, the wider implications of 16–17 year-olds being ‘adults in the making’ with fewer rights than ‘adult’ voters, and thus being seen as ‘second-class citizens’, in terms of the cohesion of the electorate as a whole has yet to be considered (Mycock et al., 2020).

In Scotland, significant—if not universal—public support for ‘Votes-at-16’ and backing from all the main Scottish political parties, mean it is highly unlikely that there will be any attempts at repeal. The picture elsewhere is more complicated. Recent research suggests that while there is a slight overall majority in support for change, opinion divides on a number of significant partisan political, age and educational fault lines (Loughran et al., 2021b). Moreover, support or opposition at Westminster is founded on an ideological divide between the so-called ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’ parties whereby differences of opinion on adulthood, maturity and enfranchisement are key (Mycock et al., 2020). Research indicates that lowering the voting age might have significant implications for Westminster election outcomes (National Audit Office, 2017), meaning attitudes to the issue have strengthened and polarised. The failure to adopt a comprehensive review of how and in what ways youth and adult citizenship relate and intersect could mean that, unlike in 1969, voting age reform is not universally implemented or accepted for some time across the UK.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to enhance understanding of how policy learning can be impacted and impaired by policy memory through the interconnected lens of institutional amnesia and policy myopia. Our case study of the lowering of the voting age to 18 in 1969 has highlighted that the ability of institutions and policy actors to reflect and learn from past policies, particularly those which span more than one generation, can be significantly impaired by memory loss associated with the passage of time and changes in how and why policy is made. Diminishing institutional and personal memories, and the revision of mechanisms to promote recollection, can significantly degrade the capacity to analyse past policy interventions. We have argued, however, that institutional amnesia is compounded by policy myopia, whereby policy actors fail to examine the lessons of the past and do not build into policy methods of evaluation of benefit to future policy-makers. The intersectionality of institutional amnesia and policy myopia has not as yet been recognised, but is



evident in policy-making focussed on reform of the age of enfranchisement over the past sixty years. By acknowledging the interconnections between institutional amnesia and policy myopia, our article reveals that policy memory and policy learning are strongly shaped by the processes of remembering and forgetting.

The case of ‘Votes-at-18’ highlights that institutional amnesia and policy myopia can co-exist in supporting policy-making narratives whereby a policy is accepted and viewed as a success, even though some policy impacts are more commonly associated with policy failure. Policy actors and institutions, and the public, have often lauded the significance of lowering the voting age to 18 as an exemplar of the progressive development of British democracy. In this sense, we can judge ‘Votes-at-18’ a policy success. We argue, however, that the decision to lower the voting age to 18 passed from memory to history without any attempts to systematically undertake policy learning from that decision in a systemic, transparent, critical and cognitive manner. The failure to establish formal policy feedback ‘loops’ after 1969 has meant that early indications that voting age reform had had diverse impacts on youth electoral turnout and political engagement were not identified. Only when the steady decline in youth political participation reached crisis point by the late 1990s did policy actors respond with a patchwork of policy interventions, particularly the introduction of citizenship education.

It appears somewhat counter-intuitive that an increasing number of governmental and non-governmental policy actors have sought to address mass youth electoral abstention by campaigning for further voting age reform without considering the effects of previous policy interventions. There are several ‘lessons from 1969’ which are of value to supporters and opponents of lowering the voting age to 16, even if circumstances informing the deliberations in the late 1960s are not entirely replicated. Proponents must acknowledge that there are two significant ‘lessons of 1969’ which must be addressed to enhance policy success and establish widespread political and public support for ‘Votes-at-16’. First, it is vital that voting age reform is matched by adequate, appropriate and universal provision of democratic education for newly enfranchised voters. The democratic socialisation of young people is proven to enhance the potential for lifelong voting and civic engagement, but has been overlooked thus far where ‘Votes-at-16’ has been introduced.

Second, franchise reform needs to be undertaken in a manner which engages with and is sympathetic to the wider ecology of young people’s transitions to adulthood. Debates about ‘Votes-at-16’ have focussed on the relationship between the ages of enfranchisement and majority—often via the lens of voter maturity—without reference to the uncertainties which informed their synchronisation in 1969. As in the late 1960s, citizenship rights are accumulated, and adulthood is not realised at one specific age. However, there is a lesson for opponents too who need to acknowledge that when voting age reform is undertaken, it is unlikely to be repealed. At present, incremental reform of the voting age to 16 means young people across the UK have asymmetric political rights due to the devolution of electoral franchise powers by Conservative governments who are formally opposed to ‘Votes-at-16’ as a policy. Opponents should accept the need to ‘level-up’ voting rights for young people in England and Northern Ireland while continuing to debate its appropriateness for Westminster elections.





That contemporary approaches to voting age reform overlook learning from ‘Votes-at-18’ confirms that institutional amnesia and policy myopia are intimately linked with the political present and can encourage policy-making without a deeper referent of policy learning. We believe our thesis has value for those seeking to understand policy-making in areas where significant policy change takes place rarely and over period of time often extending beyond generational memory, such as local property taxation (see, for example, Butler et al., 1994). Moreover, it can help in developing more connected approaches to policy-making in an increasingly devolved pluri-national UK state where institutional amnesia and policy myopia can intersect in differing but significant ways to fracture or undermine completely memories and lessons of past policy interventions.

## Declarations

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