

Voting Age Reform, Political Partisanship and Multi-Level Governance in the UK: The Party Politics of ‘Votes-at-16’

Jonathan Tonge ^{1*}, Thomas Loughran¹, and Andrew Mycock²

¹Department of Politics, University of Liverpool, UK;

²Department of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Huddersfield, UK

*Correspondence: j.tonge@liverpool.ac.uk

The UK is now a multi-level polity with asymmetrical minimum ages of enfranchisement. The franchise was first extended to 16- and 17-year-olds in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. The Scottish and Welsh governments now permit 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in elections to their devolved parliaments and local councils. The Northern Ireland Executive and the devolved authorities in England do not, however, have the power to change the voting age, and across all four nations of the UK, the age of franchise remains 18 for elections to the Westminster Parliament. The previous extension of the age of franchise, from 21 to 18 in 1969, attracted little controversy or political partisanship. But while there has been considerable political consensus regarding voting age reform in Scotland and Wales, debate over ‘Votes-at-16’ for Westminster elections has witnessed growing party-based partisanship. This article draws upon elite interviews with politicians across the political spectrum elected to Westminster and the devolved institutions on their attitudes to voting age reform, conducted as part of a 2-year Leverhulme Trust ‘Lowering the Voting Age in the UK’ project. The article argues that the multi-level party politics of the ‘Votes-at-16’ debate has consolidated rival party opinions on voting age reform at Westminster but not beyond.

Keywords: Voting Age, Partisanship, Devolution, Multi-level Government, Adulthood

1. Introduction: from consensus to controversy over the voting age

Recent years have seen the first reforms of the age of enfranchisement since the 1969 Representation of the People Act lowered the voting age to 18 for all elections in the UK. The introduction of ‘Votes-at-16’ for non-Westminster elections in Scotland and Wales has heightened the debate over whether a similar lowering

of the age of franchise should be introduced for contests to the Westminster Parliament. The changes in Scotland and Wales were marked by varying degrees of consensus. In Scotland, the Scottish National Party (SNP) was the dominant DRIVER of change with support from Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens, while the Scottish Conservatives shifted their position to support the policy after its implementation. In Wales, change was driven by a coalition of Labour, Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats, all of whom had long-standing manifesto commitments on the issue, while the Conservatives were split. In contrast, the debate over the voting age for Westminster election has been marked by entrenched political partisanship. Only the Conservative Party and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) oppose lowering the voting age; all other parties are supportive of change.

As with current debates about 'Votes-at-16', the case for change in the 1960s often pivoted on perceptions of maturity and markers of adulthood (Bingham, 2019; Loughran et al., 2021). There was considerable political and public agreement in the 1960s that 18 had become the age of majority and as such the accrual of voting rights was appropriate. For some politicians today, similar rules apply to the age of 16 years and as such the minimum voting age should be revised. But consensus over the symmetry between voting age and adulthood in the late 1960s has not been replicated in debates about 'Votes-at-16'. As such, demands for change have often been framed in terms of the extent of 'youth rights' accrued at the age of 16 years rather than the onset of adulthood (e.g. Folkes, 2004). Opponents of voting age reform have responded by noting the age of majority is still 18, and that the minimum age for some rights has been pushed upwards to 18. Moreover, opponents cite the extent of public opposition to voting age reform, the perceived social and political immaturity of many 16- and 17-year-olds, and potential negative impacts upon election turnout (e.g. Cowley and Denver, 2004). Unlike in the 1960s, contemporary voting age debates also focus on concerns about youth electoral turnout, particularly poor levels of political literacy and participation.

Contemporary UK voting age reform, like that which occurred in 1969, has—thus far—proved a largely elite driven policy process. The article thus provides the first analysis of the competing rationale for change or continuity articulated by politicians on both sides of the voting age debate. Drawing upon elite interviews with politicians at Westminster, Holyrood, Stormont and the Senedd, it assesses the debates which have marked the politics of enfranchisement at the elite level. It begins by highlighting the historical flexibility of the UK franchise and how this plays a role in facilitating contemporary arguments in voting age reform. The article highlights the increasingly partisan nature of these arguments, both as an ideological division between political parties at Westminster and in terms of differentiated multi-level policy-making across the UK, particularly in terms of

crucial arguments around adulthood and maturity. It concludes that a diminution of the political partisanship which has emerged on the voting age question at the UK level is currently an unlikely prospect.

2. Franchise flexibility

Reform of the franchise for elections in the UK has proven piecemeal; historically, a consequence of universal or women's emancipation struggles in the 19th and 20th centuries. This noted, the lowering of the voting age in the 1960s owed little to pressure from below. The Labour Government of that era established a Speaker's Conference to review the voting age but rejected its recommendation to lower to 20, aligning voting to the new age of adulthood, at 18. Thirty-four years after the voting age was lowered in 1969, the [Electoral Commission \(2003\)](#) concluded that 18 remained the appropriate minimum voting age that commanded popular consent. It noted, however, that the issue should be kept under review, keeping open the possibility of change. Birch et al. (2015) found only modest public backing for change.

The parameters of the franchise have thus remained a live issue; an extension permissible if a clear case was made. Labour MP Jim McMahon, who unsuccessfully attempted to steer a Bill introducing 'Votes-at-16' through the 2019-19 Parliament, argues against the idea of a fixed franchise, impervious to reform, contending that 'the franchise has got to continue to modernise and reform to reflect the widest possible number of people to involve them in how the country is run and, in whose benefit' (interview, 9 March 2018). For McMahon, a reconsideration of the voting age appropriately reflects that:

the world has changed and my sons are more knowledgeable about everyday issues than I ever was at their age because they're exposed to it. They seek out information that I never would've thought to seek out when I was their age either and their view of the world is far wider, far more international, far more connected than mine was at their age. Society's changing and democracy, for it to be relevant, has got to keep up with that change in society (interview, 9 March 2018).

There has been a typical pattern whereby change to the franchise has traditionally been resisted by some conservative political forces, yet acquiescence to reform invariably soon followed. This has been true of female enfranchisement and of the lowering of the voting age to 18 years and its subsequent reform to 16 in Scotland and Wales. No democratic expansion has ever been reversed. This is acknowledged by some within the Conservative Party who disassociate themselves from social conservatism in franchise extension and back further reform. The longest-serving Conservative MP and now Father of the House of Commons, Peter Bottomley,

contends that ‘most arguments against lowering the vote to sixteen are the same arguments against lowering the vote to eighteen’ (interview, 21 June 2018).

Supporters of voting age reform suggest that enfranchisement conventions need to constantly adapt to contemporary circumstances. But while Labour MP Cat Smith argues of the voting age that ‘it’s important that it’s constantly reviewed’ (interview, 23 January 2019), such considerations have proven very rare. For some, such as SNP MSP Mike Russell, franchise flexibility is important, even though they believe the voting age is ‘arbitrary’ (interview, 22 November 2018). The most recent governmental review of the voting age took place during the Labour Government under Gordon Brown, which established the [Youth Citizenship Commission \(2009a\)](#) to look at the possibility of ‘Votes-at-16’, although the Commission’s primary remit was a wider review of youth political engagement ([Youth Citizenship Commission, 2009b](#)).

3. ‘Votes-at-16’: the partisan parameters of debate

Interest from political parties in ‘Votes-at-16’ emerged in the late 1990s in response to concerns over youth political disengagement from electoral politics. The ‘Votes-at-16’ Coalition was formed in 2003 and led by the British Youth Council, with support from a range of political parties, youth democracy organisations and other reform groups. Initially, a niche concern of youth advocacy groups, politically engaged young people and some smaller political parties, lowering the voting age to 16 was a policy promise from eight of the ten parties elected to Westminster in the 2019 UK general election. Moreover, devolved governments of different political hues in Scotland and Wales have lowered their voting age when empowered to do so. The devolved legislature in Northern Ireland does not possess the power to alter the franchise, elections remaining an excepted power remaining at Westminster under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 ([Government, 1998](#)). Similarly, no powers in terms of the parameters of the franchise have been awarded to combined or local authorities in England.

Partiality and asymmetries in voting rights across the UK mean a ‘postcode lottery’ has emerged whereby all 16- and 17-year-olds are not permitted to vote Westminster Parliament and UK-wide referendums, but those in Scotland and Wales can vote in local and national elections. This situation has both increased the party-political momentum for universal ‘Votes-at-16’ and hardened attitudes of those opposed to future voting age reform. It has also highlighted the multi-level nature of party-political partisanship shaping UK voting age debates. At the UK-wide level, partisan divisions have largely focussed on ideological disagreements between Labour and Conservative MPs, encouraging parliamentary stalemate. Party divisions at Westminster concern how the rights and responsibilities that young people accrue as they transition to adulthood coalesce and correlate with traditional

and progressive interpretations of adult citizenship. At the devolved national level, party political partisanship has typically evolved into a cross-party progressive consensus committed to ‘doing politics differently’ from Westminster. Opponents of ‘Votes-at-16’ have often become supporters through a mix of party-political electoral pragmatism and post-reform acquiescence, due to the significant engagement and participation of newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds.

At Westminster, party advocacy of ‘Votes-at-16’ has strengthened. The [Youth Citizenship Commission \(2009a\)](#) concluded that voting age reform was a political decision and as such subject to party advocacy and competition rather than an issue to be determined by an inquiry. The Commission also acknowledged the possibilities of internal UK asymmetries in suggesting the devolved institutions could have autonomy to decide the voting age for elections to those bodies—an option duly exercised in Scotland and then Wales. Since then, successive Conservative-led or overall majority governments have rejected change to the voting age for Westminster elections. Frequent attempts to introduce ‘Votes-at-16’ via Private Members’ bills in the House of Commons have failed; blocked by Conservative opponents. This has encouraged a polarised political context that has both further stimulated momentum for policy change among opposition parties at Westminster *and* strengthened the resolve of the Conservative UK government to oppose reform.

For Conservative opponents of change, ‘Votes-at-16’ is viewed with concern as potentially enfranchising over 1.5 million young people likely to vote mostly for political opponents. Following the 2017 UK general election, the National Audit Office reported that the outcome in up to 88 constituency results could have changed if 16- and 17-year-olds had been enfranchised, mostly to the benefit of Labour. This noted, a small cluster of predominantly Scottish Conservative MPs have offered support for change, some joining the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on ‘Votes-at-16’. This indicates that partisan political divisions are not absolute or static, with several Conservative MPs being influenced by the perceived success of voting age reform at the devolved level.

The possible electoral gains for parties from lowering the voting age are naturally downplayed by advocates of change. Yet if one assumes that 16- and 17-year-olds vote in similar ways to their 18–24 counterparts, there are obvious party winners and losers. Only 21 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds voted Conservative at the 2019 Westminster general election, with 56 per cent voting Labour ([YouGov, 2019](#)). The all-age election vote shares in Britain were 45 per cent Conservative and 33 per cent Labour. Party and political advantage are not advanced as appropriate reasons for franchise adjustment by advocates or opponents of voting age reform. There is, however, tacit recognition of voting age differentials as important to understanding party stances. For example, former Scottish Labour MP, Danielle Rowley, who lost her parliamentary seat in 2019, insisted that electoral calculation was the main reason ‘why the Government haven’t allowed a vote.

That's why they've talked out the Private Members' bills because I think they are scared of the 16- and 17-year-olds having the vote and it not going their way' (interview, 16 July 2018).

Some Conservatives have acknowledged that electoral fears help underpin opposition. Former Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan, accepted that 'the main opposition is the fact that there's a suspicion that 16- and 17-year-olds aren't going to vote Conservative so why would we want to do a franchise with a group of people who aren't going to support our party?' (interview, 21 January 2019). For Morgan, acceptance of change could produce a different electoral calculation from the prevailing orthodoxy of an increased anti-Conservative vote, as it would help shift a perception of the Conservative Party as a party for older voters. Beyond this aspiration, Morgan argues that lowering the voting age accords with her Party's values, contending 'If you're a Conservative and you believe in freedom and you believe in liberty then actually you would want people to be engaging in politics and the political process as much as possible' (interview, 21 January 2019). As a Chair of the APPG advocating 'Votes-at-16', Peter Bottomley takes a similar line and suggests that change is inevitable, arguing it could 'easily be brought about by a Conservative government' (interview, 21 June 2018). Labour MP Vicky Foxcroft, Co-Chair of the APPG, sees the grouping as 'a place that they [Conservatives] can come outside of their own political parties, say the Tory party are anti- it but actually there can be Conservatives that can come and join in and be involved'. She went on to note 'I think there's a lot more Tories that are secretly really are in favour of this' (interview, 21 June 2018).

Westminster partisanship is thus not absolute, given the presence of these Conservative sympathisers for reform. It nonetheless prevails, evident in the filibustering Conservative MPs have regularly used to thwart efforts to introduce 'Votes-at-16' (e.g. [Honeycombe-Foster, 2018](#)). For Westminster to effect change, it would however require a significant thawing of Conservative hostility. Conservative MP, Ben Bradley acknowledges, 'how terrible we were at engaging with young people' but is adamant lowering the voting age is not the answer. In his role as Vice Chair of the Conservative Party for Youth, Bradley argues that many teenagers are unconcerned about reform of the franchise, with 'lots of young people under eighteen ... actively involved in charities, policy-making, campaigning and holding all those discussions without being able to vote' (interview, 22 January 2019). Bradley went on to question the salience of the issue itself, arguing that change is pushed by an unrepresentative political class:

I never had a single e-mail from anybody in my constituency asking for the voting age to be lowered. Ever. You know, if I was getting regular correspondence from young people in colleges and sixth-forms across my constituency saying I'm desperate for this to happen it might be

different but I don't and for that reason I don't really see it as a priority' (interview, 22 January 2019).

In contrast, in the devolved institutions which have pioneered contemporary voting age reform in the UK, it is an issue around which there has developed a progressive consensus with an initially weak and divided opposition becoming acquiescent. However, there are two distinct frames to the policy debate around lowering the voting age in Scotland and Wales. The first relates to party-political contestation that reflects the balance of power and ideological divisions between the parties in the respective parliaments. In Scotland, the introduction of 'Votes-at-16' was driven by the SNP government and is an issue the party has attempted to 'own' as an example of progressive nationalist policy. In Wales, in contrast, the introduction of 'Votes-at-16' was founded on a coalition of progressive parties in the Senedd. The second frame relates to a multi-level dynamic with an emphasis on the capacity of the devolved institutions to 'do politics differently' from Westminster. In Scotland, this ranges from SNP claims of 'Votes-at-16' as an example of uniquely progressive Scottish values, to Scottish Conservatives emphasising support for the policy as emblematic of differentiating from national Conservative policy at Westminster. In Wales, this second dynamic manifested itself through an expressed desire to use the 2017 Wales Act to create a distinctly Welsh constitutional settlement.

Beneficiaries of a strong youth vote, the SNP has always claimed altruistic rather than partisan reasons for lowering the age of franchise in Scotland. In the 2014 independence referendum, the majority (54.3 per cent) of 16- to 19-year-old voters opposed separation, almost identical to the figure (54.1 per cent) among 20- to 24-year-olds (BBC, 2015). Two-thirds of voters aged 70 years or over rejected independence, SNP MSP Mike Russell wryly noting how 'a colleague of mine said that the lesson that we had . . . was to have a maximum voting age' (interview, 22 November 2018). In making the lowering of the voting age permanent, the SNP faced little opposition and avoided the charge of brazen partisanship while still taking distinct ownership of the policy. Liberal Democrat MSP Alex Cole-Hamilton conceded of the lowering of the voting age for elections that 'yes, it was an SNP policy or bill but it had widespread support across political parties. I really don't think people think about that when they're casting their vote' (interview, 22 November 2018).

In Wales, this dynamic was even more in evidence as the policy to lower the voting age was a clear result of a progressive coalition around the issue. As Labour Senedd member Alun Davies Davies, speaking prior to the passing of the Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act 2020 (Senedd, 2020), highlighted:

I see this as a very progressive measure, as those of us who believe in progressive politics have to argue our case and win our arguments and

then win the votes on the floor. In Cardiff there is a majority in favour of this and there's a majority certainly in the Labour party, Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru are supportive of this. I think there are enough members of the Conservatives as well, in order to give us a very clear majority (interview, 16 August 2019).

The Senedd Llwydd (Presiding Officer), Plaid Cymru AM Elin Jones, drew attention to the long-standing latent progressive consensus for electoral reform that was realised once enfranchisement powers had been devolved by Westminster, lamenting that it 'took us 18 years to get those powers' (interview, 21 October 2019). This noted, while some members of the Conservative group in the Senedd expressed their support for lowering the voting age when the Senedd and Elections Act was passed, there was no vote on the final reading of the bill and some Conservatives remained strident in their opposition.

Notwithstanding the existence of a small Scottish sympathetic grouping at Westminster, most Conservatives supportive of 'Votes-at-16' tend to be found within the devolved institutions. This was most clearly exemplified by the Scottish Conservatives, under the leadership of Ruth Davidson, becoming supporters of lowering the UK voting age (Davidson, 2015). Reversing the lowering of the voting age in Scotland and Wales would in any case be difficult, potentially seen as a rescinding of rights recently awarded, but most Conservatives in both nations have—somewhat begrudgingly—accepted and embraced change, even if it comes at an electoral cost. As Conservative Senedd member David Melding acknowledged:

I think the Scottish Conservatives see how well it's worked in Scotland and how, I think the Scottish Conservatives talk in a very different way and they have a different feel, a different style, they're kind of branded in a different way and that appeals to younger people, so I think they're probably saying to their colleagues, you know, sixteen, seventeen-year-old voting isn't the end of the world, we just need to then reach out to them and that's a positive thing (interview, 25 June 2019).

Thus, there are two distinct dynamics within the party politics of Votes-at-16 in the UK. At the UK level, there is a clear and entrenched partisan political division. This is cross-cut by the more consensual approach to reform at the devolved level which has added a strong additional centre-periphery dimension to the voting age debate.

4. Adulthood, capability and maturity

Much of the underpinning of how 'Votes-at-16' has opened up party competition at Westminster relates to arguments over whether 16- and 17-year-olds possess

sufficient maturity to be entitled to vote. A new age of adulthood dominated the rationale for the UK's pioneering shift to Votes-at-18 in 1969. However, the case for 'Votes-at-16' cannot be comfortably articulated on the same basis, as the concept of adulthood at 16 is rejected by many. The United Nations' definition of adulthood is that it is reached at 18 years. As the Conservative MP Ben Bradley puts it, 'you should be able to vote when you're an adult and currently the consensus around that is kind of that that is eighteen' (interview, 22 January 2019). Welsh Conservative Senedd member Darren Millar argues 'there are all sorts of markers for a physiological point of view which demonstrate very clearly that eighteen rather than sixteen is a better age to point to as being the age at which adulthood begins' (interview, 24 July 2019).

Arguments in favour of 'Votes-at-16' therefore need to be justified as helping assist youth transitions to adulthood, or alternatively articulated on a basis of youth rights, necessary as a democratic balance in an ageing society. Welsh Labour Senedd member Alun Davies argues against fixed point adulthood:

I've never taken a dogmatic view that everything happens at sixteen or everything happens at eighteen. I think adulthood is a process rather than an event, that well-used phrase now, but it's the process of growing up from being a child into a young person and to the responsibilities of citizenship and adulthood and I think one of the key areas of that maturing, if you like, for younger people is participation in allied democratic structures (interview, 16 August 2019).

Elin Jones argues that adulthood is a flexible concept and as such needs to be decoupled from voting rights:

When does somebody become an adult? I'm wondering when I became an adult. I've no idea. It doesn't happen as a result of reaching your birthday at eighteen or your birthday at sixteen. It can vary very much according to the individual I'm sure and the influences on that person (interview, 21 October 2019).

This perspective extends the concept of the parameters of adulthood beyond its formal legal definition to offer an elasticity in which reaching adulthood is self-determined, a product of self-perception more than one constrained by societal rules. The same could be argued of political party definitions of youth and adulthood. Youth wings of political parties tend to offer membership between the ages of 15 up to 26, although the ceiling used to be 30 for the Conservatives (Mycock and Tonge 2012). Sinn Féin MLA Catherine Kelly argues that it is 'anomalous' that 'you can join a political party but not vote for it' (interview 27 February 2019).

Assuming a lower voting age limit needs to be set—seemingly a public policy article of faith but one that has been contested on philosophical grounds (Cook 2013)—the question begged is why 16 is the appropriate age of entry to the franchise? For critics, the extension of the franchise to help 16- and 17-year-olds means that a new problem is created. The Conservative Welsh Senedd member, Darren Millar, suggests ‘you could then argue that we don’t really care about children below sixteen’ (interview, 24 July 2019).

Many advocates of ‘Votes-at-16’ concentrate on the accretion of ‘adult’ rights and responsibilities below the age of 18 years, ranging from leaving school, being in paid employment, paying tax and having sex. For example, Danielle Rowley, previously a chair of the APPG for ‘Votes-at-16’, argues that the extent of existing rights and responsibilities entitles lowering the voting age to 16 because it is ‘an age of maturity’ (interview, 16 July 2018).

The counter argument is that, excepting the age of consent, there has been an upward trajectory in the age at which such rights are acquired. Marriage is only permitted with parental permission at 16 in England, Northern Ireland and Wales but is allowed without in Scotland. The 16- and 17-year-olds are often prohibited from engaging in ‘adult’ activities, such as the purchase of alcohol or nicotine. Societal norms deem that they need health protections beyond those afforded to citizens aged 18 and above. Darren Millar asks: ‘How can you have 16-year-olds taking decisions about things like alcohol and other things to which they’re not entitled at the moment and prevented from participating in?’ (interview 24 July 2019).

Lee Reynolds, DUP councillor and special advisor to the First Minister of Northern Ireland, asserts that the argument for ‘Votes-at-16’ ‘seems primarily to be driven from a liberal perspective but there seems to be a contradiction within liberalism between wanting to protect children and making them more like adults’ (interview, 28 February 2019). He argues that there are age-related preventive health measures which, whilst entirely laudable, indicate a lack of belief in the ability of young people to make their own health decisions. Should franchise enrolment be similarly protected?

Protections for 16- and 17-year-olds extend beyond issues of health. Safeguarding of children via local social services extends up to the age of 18 years and no group is advocating its lowering. Even as an advocate of franchise reform, David Melding concedes ‘the strongest argument against lowering the age I think is safeguarding and whether, you know, it’s appropriate for people to have access to information about young people or even direct contact’ (interview, 25 June 2019).

Against these arguments, Tom Brake, a Liberal Democrat MP for 22 years until 2019, insisted he was ‘not wedded to the idea that you have to coalesce everything around one age group. I don’t have a problem with some things being at 16 and some at 17 and some at 18’ (interview, 21 May 2019). Brake argues for the non-linkage of democratic and health concerns while acknowledging that

implementing special health protections for youth, rather than conceding their capacity of reasoning to avoid health damage, is a little awkward.

Cigarettes are clearly highly damaging from a health perspective and therefore I think it was right for Parliament to deal with that. Voting at sixteen is not bad for your health and you would argue, well aren't people mature enough to decide at sixteen whether they want to buy cigarettes. The health aspect of that trumped people's individual rights so even if they had a level of maturity maybe, you know, sixteen was too young. But I agree, it's hard to define a consistent argument that says that's why it should be sixteen for votes (interview, 21 May 2019).

For Danielle Rowley, the conflation of democratic rights and preventative health measures adds little to the debate:

I think that a lot of the things that you can't do at sixteen have, I suppose, safety, health risks and stresses so, you can't drink alcohol but actually there's a health risk with it, and I think as well it confuses private rights and public rights, so being able to smoke and drink is a private right whereas voting is a public right, so I think that's quite an important distinction as well (interview, 16 July 2018).

Labour MP Jim McMahon similarly calls for disaggregation:

it's important to separate out the matters of which there are restrictions for public health, the age of maturity and the fact that actually what we want is a dynamic and engaged civic engagement. That's completely different than what age somebody should be buying fireworks at. Because, actually, there's plenty of examples of where there are restrictions on adults, I mean you walk into *Boots* down the road now and try and buy a tray supply of paracetamol you wouldn't be allowed to. Why? Because it's not in your personal and public health interest for you to do that (interview, 9 March 2018).

The adulthood and maturity arguments are based upon legality, capability and reason. Some Conservative opponents of 'Votes-at-16' accept difficulties in defining a franchise via the perceived wisdom of the elector but use this argument to reinforce the need for a cut-off point symmetrical with the legal definition of adulthood. According to Ben Bradley:

You can make the argument there are some 16-year-olds who are very intelligent, engaged, knowledgeable, perfectly capable of making an informed choice. There are some 60-year-olds who are not . . . but unless

you're talking about bringing in IQ tests you've got to draw a line somewhere (interview, 22 January 2019).

Other opponents of 'Votes-at-16' suggest that young people below the age of 18 years have insufficiently devolved cognitive capacity, reason or knowledge to comprehend complex political arguments and as such it is unwise to entitle them to vote (see, e.g. [Chan and Clayton, 2006](#)). Such arguments extend beyond voting, with, for example, 16- and 17-year-olds considered insufficiently mature to serve on a jury. For Tom Brake, the principle of universal entitlement to voting means that 'if the implication is there should be a requirement that 16- and 17-year-olds have a certain level of understanding well then you'd have to argue that should apply to everyone else as well and clearly at the moment it doesn't'. Brake also makes the point the age of criminal responsibility is as low as ten in parts of the UK, a low age bar for 'people's understanding of right and wrong, an understanding of the impact of the things that they're saying or doing' (interview, 21 May 2019).

Danielle Rowley is equally critical of the knowledge argument for debarment, arguing that the lack of information about political parties and how to make political choices is universal, not concentrated within the under-18s:

I was at a High School recently and I said, 'you know, who believes in votes at sixteen?' There was this one young guy who said 'I just don't know, I've not been given enough information, I've not accessed enough information yet, I don't really know if I feel ready to vote' . . . So, we had a bit of a chat about it and I said, 'I'll let you into a secret. When you turn eighteen no-one comes up to you and gives you all this information and tells you how to vote'. And he said, 'do you not get a pack through the door that tells you all about the different parties and tells you all about what kind of manifestoes they have?' and I said, 'no. no, no. You just have to find it out for yourself, you know' (interview, 16 July 2018).

In terms of the level of information acquisition required to vote, Nicky Morgan asserted:

the honest truth is I have as many uninformed conversations with older voters as I do with those who are sixteen, seventeen and preparing to vote for the first time at eighteen'. . . I think actually levels of engagement because of 2016 [the Brexit referendum] are much, much, higher than they were (interview, 21 January 2019).

These contentions distinguish between a capability for reason and the capacity for such. Liberal Democrat MSP Alex Cole-Hamilton offers a similar view to Morgan:

I love the idea that age is somehow a guarantor of wisdom and I point to you many voters that I have met at polling stations who are voting for political parties on entirely false premises and false prospectuses because they like the look of the leader of that party or they believe that the party's going to do something for their street, which is entirely wrong, or they just haven't engaged and it's their favourite colour (interview, 22 November 2018).

Labour MP Cat Smith concurs, arguing 'there are many people in their thirties and forties who don't know enough about politics to vote, that's a problem, but we don't deny them the vote because of it' (interview, 23 January 2019).

This continuing debate on the parameters of adulthood and citizenship largely breakdown along predictable ideologically infused partisan party lines. This makes it unlikely that the current asymmetry in the UK voting age is likely to be addressed through the establishment of a broad elite consensus on the new age of adulthood, as occurred when the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1969.

5. Potential impacts of 'Votes-at-16'

Despite the significant party-political partisan divide between opponents and supporters of voting age reform, there is a clear consensus among advocates of all parties regarding its primary benefits. When the UK led the world in reducing the voting age to 18, no consideration of democratic impacts was built into the reform (Loughran *et al.*, 2021). Advocates of 'Votes-at-16' argue that benefits will include a more politically engaged and participative society. A clear definition of 'success' to be measured from the change is hard to produce. For Labour's Cat Smith, election turnout would be marginally bolstered:

Young people participating in democracy at something that would be roughly the same sort of rate as some other groups compared to the 18–24 age group—that would be a success . . . I suspect it [turnout] would be slightly higher than the 18–24 age bracket (interview, 23 January 2019).

The question begged is what happens if most 16- and 17-year-olds do not vote, in common with 18- to 24-year-olds at the last six general elections? Does this matter? Should it be a consideration in the durability of the lowering of the franchise to 16, which has not been reversed in any country where it has taken place? There is academic evidence that 16- and 17-year-olds, home-based, less mobile and without the transience on the electoral register associated with the large student body of 18- to 24-year-olds, are more settled in their lives and likelier to vote, which may increase their chances of continuing to do so in later years (Franklin, 2020). This noted, 18- to 24-year-old turnout represents a low bar

above which to leap. According to Tom Brake, there ought not, in any case, to be a turnout test for ‘Votes-at-16’ and policy reversibility should not be an option:

It’s a principle. It’s a right. If people choose not to exercise that then fine, it’s a right that they’ve got. Obviously, I would hope that the impact would be to secure a higher turnout but if that were not the case, I wouldn’t then be advocating reverting back to the original age qualification (interview, 21 May 2019).

Former MP Danielle Rowley argues the youngest voters will have interest stimulated by the changed nature of party campaigning as parties accommodate new voters:

I think that the reason why young people don’t vote as much, or in as big numbers for Westminster elections isn’t because they’re young, it’s because the system is off-putting to them and it’s not engaging with younger demographics and they don’t feel very included by the system . . . the campaign from the Independence Referendum [was] a lot more inclusive (interview, 16 July 2018).

Having helped pilot change in Wales, Alun Davies argues the UK could ‘appear to be a somewhat foolish state . . . a bit behind the times’ in resisting change, given the growing perception of ‘Votes-at-16’ as a ‘progressive measure’. His criteria for success lay in how lowering the voting age created ‘a more participatory and representative democracy’, although that begs the question of how low turnout would indicate a ‘more participatory’ system. Davies suggests issues directly affecting young people will merit greater consideration:

We could persuade more people who are sixteen, seventeen, eighteen to have a debate, what would be the role of student grants for example, tuition fees, apprenticeships, access to public transport, issues there about the youth services, the role of policing, all sorts of different things, if you had equal participation in the process by a younger age group, a younger cohort. I think you’d have a very, very, different political debate (interview 16 August 2019).

From a Conservative perspective, David Melding concurs, arguing that an increase in young people voting offers greater balance and redress:

you’ve got middle-age and older people usually are pretty effective at expressing their views and putting pressure on the political system whereas as it is more difficult, I think, when you look at the younger people . . . the voicelessness of children is a huge issue (interview, 25 June 2019)

Cat Smith stresses that voting age reform should be accompanied by a wider package of reform: ‘I wouldn’t support just ‘Votes-at-16’. It has to go hand-in-hand with the citizenship education’ (interview, 23 January 2019). Research indicates that dedicated citizenship or political education in schools and colleges would benefit ‘Votes-at-16’, with content aimed more at understanding the political system and party politics shown to improve voter turnout among young people (Tonge et al., 2012; Whiteley, 2014). Citizenship has been a statutory subject in the English National Curriculum since 2002 and alternative provisions have been introduced in Scotland and Wales. However, the subject has, in its various formats across the UK, faced similar significant challenges in terms of limited curriculum space, few specialist teachers, and a lack of comparable status with other, more ‘academic’ subjects (Weinberg and Flinders, 2018).

In Scotland, citizenship education has a longer, more credible lineage as part of the curriculum through Modern Studies. According to Labour MSP Jackie Baillie, devolution and ‘Votes-at-16’ may have further strengthened political education:

I think schools, certainly the ones I engaged with in my area, are well-informed. You see, from primary level kids doing projects on the Scottish parliament, running mock elections, producing manifestos so they understand the process. They engage with it, and the teachers are very good at bringing politicians in, whether it’s local councillors or indeed whether it’s MSPs and MPs to be part of that, so they get it from an early age and I think they get it through teachers as they go through school (interview, 21 February 2019).

SNP MSP Mike Russell concurred, noting ‘the basic knowledge appears to be there and pupils do learn about democracy including the operation of the Scottish Parliament’ (interview, 22 November 2018). Research indicates that these analyses may be overly optimistic though, with many young people in Scotland citing poor quality, ineffective and sporadic political education in school and local communities as widespread (Scottish Youth Parliament and Mycock, 2019). Hill et al. (2017) found that Scottish teachers were sceptical over the political knowledge of their pupils but did not see the inculcation of political literacy as a core mission of citizenship education (Huebner and Eichhorn, 2020), a reluctance extended within the profession beyond Scottish borders (Hahn, 2015). One solution might be the expansion of Politics as a curriculum subject. According to Sinn Féin MLA Catherine Kelly, ‘because of Brexit, because of the marriage equality referendum in the South [of Ireland], young people have become even more [politically] aware’. For Kelly, the logical move in response is that that ‘there should be a politics GCSE’, offering a dedicated recognised subject (interview, 27 February 2019).

It is noteworthy, however, that party political support and enthusiasm from advocates of ‘Votes-at-16’ for political education has also proven variable and modest. Evidence from the previous example of voting age reform from 1969 also saw advocates overlook the need for complementary policy changes, such as the introduction of political education. This noted, the optimistic and largely uncritical consensus among advocates in different parties and devolved institutions regarding the positive impact lowering the voting age brings is striking, particularly when set against the increasingly partisan nature of the voting age debate at Westminster. However, this consensus could be considered somewhat Panglossian, as there appears little appetite at present for policy learning from past iterations of voting age reform.

One question that reveals some dissonance amongst advocates of voting age reform is whether young people should be able to stand for election as a party candidate at 16. The SNP’s Mike Russell contended ‘it’s inconceivable if young people have the right to vote they should not be able to stand for election’ (interview, 22 November 2018). Cat Smith disagrees, noting ‘there isn’t the demand for it, there’s not the clamour for it. ... I don’t see 16, 17-year-olds saying I want the right to be a councillor or I want voting in as an MP. I do hear them saying I want the right to vote (interview, 23 January 2019). Her party colleague, Jim McMahon, concurs, ‘I think there is a world of difference between you casting the vote and participating in democracy and being the decision-maker in a complex legal system’ (interview 9 March 2018). Thus far, the Green Party and Liberals Democrats are the only parties to support lowering the age of candidature to 16. Notwithstanding these reservations, a possible denouement is that, just as with ‘Votes-at-18’, a lowering of the age of candidature follows ‘Votes-at-16’, although the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales have not (yet) moved in this direction.

6. Conclusion

With age now one of the most important demographic variables in party choice, there is a little prospect of ‘Votes-at-16’ as a political issue disappearing, particularly as its salience among voters is growing (Loughran et al. 2019). The current advocacy of positions on the UK voting age has become increasingly partisan and linked to party politics; a feature which makes the ‘Votes-at-16’ debate distinct from the more consensual approach to ‘Votes-at-18’ which led to the last UK-wide franchise reform in the 1960s. This has ensured that debates (including the interviews above) on expanding youth enfranchisement have often been normative and based upon assertions to a greater extent than objective considerations of political participation, democratic socialisation and transitions to adulthood.

That parties take a stance on such an important issue as the age of franchise is entirely understandable. We suggest, however, that political parties might usefully examine the potential impacts of the policy they proselytise and carry out a detailed examination of the impacts of lowering the voting age to 16 in national elections in other countries. While ‘Votes-at-18’ remains the norm, there are enough countries to study, including Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Malta and Nicaragua, among others (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2020). This noted, the lowering of the age of franchise in Scotland and Wales is the settled, irreversible will of the political parties in those countries. Advocates of ‘Votes-at-16’ point to the ready acquiescence of most Conservative opponents in those countries to franchise reform. Thus, partisanship, although increasingly acute, seems largely confined to argument over the conferment of Westminster election voting rights. ‘Votes-at-16’ in Scotland is generally seen as having had a positive impact on youth political interest and impacted upon the decision of the Welsh Government to follow. There is considerable faith in the ‘good habit-forming’ impacts of ‘Votes-at-16’, in which early voting will lead to later electoral participation.

The more consensual approach to change in Scotland and Wales may yet provide a model for consideration of whether to proceed with similar reform for Westminster contests. As we have demonstrated it also generates ‘pressure from below’ as progressive advocates can highlight voting age reform in the devolved nations as an example of a more consensual and responsive approach to constitutional change, creating an additional centre-periphery dynamic to the partisan debate. However, a more substantive consideration of the potential impact of voting age reform on how youth and adult citizenship are understood and realised is required. The reasons for change need to be articulated beyond the boundaries of political partisanship, otherwise a lowering of the voting age may be more associated with narrow political advantage rather than the advancement of democratic reform. Objective considerations require a more holistic analysis of ages of responsibility, assessment of the capabilities of 16- and 17-year-olds, clearer definitions of what constitutes adulthood and whether it should be a criterion for voting. A Speaker’s Conference and a dedicated commission on the Age of Majority shaped the previous lowering of the voting age to 18. There is now sufficient domestic and international evidence for objective analysis of the appropriateness of ‘Votes-at-16’ to proceed.

7. Interviewees

Jackie Baillie MSP (Lab) 21 February 2019.

Ben Bradley MP (Con) 22 January 2019.

Tom Brake MP (Lib Dem) 21 May 2019.

Sir Peter Bottomley MP (Con) 21 June 2018.
Alexander Cole-Hamilton MSP (Lib Dem) 22 November 2018.
Alun Davies AM/MS (Lab) 16 August 2019.
Vicky Foxcroft MP (Lab) 21 June 2018.
Elin Jones AM/MS (Plaid Cymru) 21 October 2019.
Catherine Kelly MLA (Sinn Féin) 27 February 2019.
David Melding AM/MS (Con) 25 June 2019.
Darran Millar, AM/MS (Con) 24 July 2019.
Jim McMahon MP (Lab) 9 March 2018.
Nicky Morgan MP (Con) 21 January 2019
Cllr Lee Reynolds (DUP) 28 February 2019.
Danielle Rowley MP (Lab) 16 July 2018.
Mike Russell MSP (SNP) 22 November 2018.
Cat Smith MP (Lab) 23 January 2019.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge with grateful thanks the support of the Leverhulme Trust for the research project, RPG-2017-332, 'An Evaluation of Historical and Contemporary Debates on Lowering the Voting Age', (2017–2019).

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

REFERENCES

- BBC (2015) 'Study Examines Referendum Demographics', accessed at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-34283948> on 27 January 2021.
- Birch, S., Clarke, H. and Whiteley, P. (2015) 'Should 16-Year-Olds Be Allowed to Vote in Westminster Elections? Public Opinion and Franchise Reform', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **68**, 291–313.
- Bingham, A. (2019) "The last milestone" on the journey to full adult suffrage? 50 years of debates about the voting age', *History and Policy*, 25 June, accessed at <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/the-last-milestone-on-the-journey-to-full-adult-suffrage> on 11 February 2021.
- Chan, T. and Clayton, M. (2006) 'Should the Voting Age Be Lowered to Sixteen? Normative and Empirical Considerations', *Political Studies*, **54**, 533–558.
- Cook, P. (2013) 'Against a Minimum Voting Age', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, **16**, 439–458.

- Cowley, P. and Denver, D. (2004) 'Votes at 16? The Case Against', *Representation*, **41**, 57–62.
- Eichhorn, J. and Bergh, J. (eds) (2020) *Lowering the Voting Age to 16*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Davidson, R. (2015) 'Why Ruth Davidson supports Votes at 16'. Electoral Reform Society, accessed at <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/why-ruth-davidson-supports-votes-at-16/> on 10 February 2021.
- Electoral Commission (2003) *Age of Electoral Majority*, London, Electoral Commission.
- Folkes, A. (2004) 'The Case for Votes at 16', *Representation*, **41**, 52–56.
- Franklin, M. (2020) 'Consequences of Lowering the Voting to 16: Lessons from Comparative Research'. In Eichhorn, J. and Bergh, J. (eds) *Lowering the Voting Age to 16*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 13–41.
- Government, H. M. (1998) *Northern Ireland Act 1998*, HMSO, Cmnd. 3883, London.
- Hahn, C. (2015) 'Teachers' Perceptions of Education for Democratic Participation in Schools with Transnational Youth: A Comparative Study in the UK and Denmark', *Research in Comparative and International Education*, **10**, 95–119.
- Hill, M., Lockyer, A., Head, G. and MacDonald, C. (2017) 'Voting at 16. Lessons for the Future from the Scottish Referendum', *Scottish Affairs*, **26**, 48–68.
- Honeycombe-Foster, M. (2018) 'Tories Accused of "Talking Out" Fresh Bid to let 16-Year-Olds Vote', *PoliticsHome*, 11 May, accessed at <https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/tories-accused-of-talking-out-fresh-bid-to-let-16yearolds-vote> on 11 February 2021.
- Huebner, C. and Eichhorn, J. (2020) 'Votes at 16 in Scotland: Political Experiences beyond the Vote Itself'. In Eichhorn, J. and Bergh, J. (eds) *Lowering the Voting Age to 16*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 121–142.
- Loughran, T., Mycock, A. and Tonge, J. (2019) 'Votes at 16' and Lessons from 1969', *Political Insight*, **10**, 32–35. September
- Loughran, T., Mycock, A. and Tonge, J. (2021) 'A Coming of Age: How and Why the UK Became the First Democracy to Allow Votes for 18-Year-Olds', *Contemporary British History*, advance access online.
- Mycock, A., and Tonge, J. (2012) 'The Party Politics of Youth Citizenship and Democratic Engagement', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **65**, 138–161.
- Scottish Youth Parliament and Mycock, A. (2019) 'Learning from Scotland: Your Experiences of 'Votes-at-16'', November, accessed at <https://syp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Learning-From-Scotland-Votes-at-16-Workshop-report.pdf> on 27 January 2021.
- Senedd, C. (2020) *Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act*, Cardiff: Welsh Parliament.
- Tonge, J., Mycock, A. and Jeffery, B. (2012) 'Does Citizenship Education Make Young People Better-Engaged Citizens?', *Political Studies*, **60**, 578–602.

- Weinberg, J. and Flinders, M. (2018) 'Learning for Democracy: The Politics and Practice of Citizenship Education', *British Educational Research Journal*, **44**, 573–592.
- Whiteley, P. (2014) 'Does Citizenship Education Work? Evidence from a Decade of Citizenship Education in Secondary Schools in England', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **67**, 513–535.
- Youth Citizenship Commission (2009a) *Old Enough to Make a Mark? Should the Voting Age Be Lowered to 16?*, London, Youth Citizenship Commission.
- Youth Citizenship Commission (2009b) *Making the Connection. Building Youth Citizenship in the UK*, London, Youth Citizenship Commission.
- YouGov (2019) 'How Britain Voted 2019', accessed at <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/12/17/how-britain-voted-2019-general-election> on 27 January 2021.