



How lowering the voting age to 16 can be an opportunity to improve youth political engagement

Lessons learned from the Scottish Independence Referendum

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d|part - Think Tank for political participation

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This research is based on data from a survey project conducted by a team of the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science led by Dr Jan Eichhorn and including Prof Lindsay Paterson, Prof John MacInnes and Dr Michael Rosie as well as input from several d|part researchers. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through its Future of the UK and Scotland programme and administered under the umbrella of the Applied Quantitative Methods Network (AQMeN). All views presented in this briefing are solely those of the author. Some of the analyses in this briefing have previously been presented by the author at the ECPR conference in Glasgow in September 2014.

Summary

There is a range of common concerns about why the voting age should not be lowered to 16. This briefing engages with some of the most dominant concerns in public debate empirically. It uses data from two representative surveys of under 18-year olds in Scotland conducted in 2013 and 2014 in the context of the independence referendum and updates previous research on this matter based on the first survey only. The findings provide an optimistic conclusion: Not only do we find little evidence to support arguments against lowering the voting on the basis that this may have adverse effects. In addition we find that lowering the voting age may have positive impacts on political engagement, if certain structural provisions, mainly through schools, can be established.

Concern #1: Young people are not interested or engaged in politics and therefore lowering the voting age is a bad idea.

We do not find any evidence for this statement. Levels of political interest amongst young people are equivalent to those of adults on average. They are not less political, but less attracted to traditional institutions such as political parties. However, they are willing to engage in representative politics when a clear issue is at stake as the strong reduction in the traditional gap between their voting likelihood and that of older adult groups in the referendum has demonstrated. This suggests that young people are not averse to taking part in classic forms of political engagement, but that parties may have to think how to better engage them through issue-based politics. We see the engagement also exemplified by the fact that nearly all young people surveyed had discussed the referendum with at least one, but mostly multiple groups of people.

Concern #2: Young people will simply follow what their parents do, therefore lowering the voting age is pointless.

Over 40% of young people had different voting intentions than a parent interviewed. There was no strong association between parental and young person voting intention. Furthermore, while parents can influence their children's likelihood to vote, they do not manage to increase the political understanding and confidence of young people when they talk with them about political issues. Young people seem to distinguish between normative behaviour that parents suggest as important (such as voting), but do not see their parents as sources of authoritative political insight. This applies to children from many different backgrounds: There is only a very small relationship between parental education and young people's interest in and understanding of politics.

Insight #1: Young people are as interested in politics as adults.

Insight #2: Young people engage with politics in conversations and through voting when actual issues are concerned.

Insight #3: Parents do not strongly influence young people's political perceptions and confidence (apart from normative views on the importance to vote).

Insight #4: Political perceptions of young people are not substantially related to parental educational background.

Insight #5: Discussing political issues in schools increases students' political confidence in ways nothing else does.

Insight #6: After the engaged referendum process more young people feel close to a political party.

Insight #7: Teaching classes dealing with political structures itself is not sufficient to enhance political understanding and engagement. Schools need to allow for informed political discussions in the classroom.

Concern #3: Even if there are no negative consequences of lowering the voting age, why can young people not simply wait another two years to vote?

There is a distinct effect political discussion in class can have on young people that no other institution could replicate for all young people after the age of 18. Young people who actively discussed the referendum in class felt more confident in their political understanding – an effect that conversations with no other group of people (such as parents) could replicate. School appears to act as a neutral ground to discuss politics and learn about it in an informed way. Through this engagement it may even be possible to increase the relevance of political parties for young people: We observed a reduction in those who did not feel close to any political party from 2013 to 2014 as more had engaged in discussions about the referendum. Early engagement with politics, in which young people have a vote that is supported through schools as a neutral space for discussion, may improve the starting point into their political lives.

Concern #4: Schools should not engage with political debate, at most they should teach students about the political system to avoid inappropriate politicisation.

Taking a “civics” type class in itself does not increase political understanding in young people or their likelihood to participate in voting. The decisive factor was not whether young people had taken Modern Studies, but whether they had actively discussed the referendum in class (though in many instances Modern Studies classes could provide this space). Schools therefore need to provide the space for young people to actively discuss politics in an informed way, if we want to activate young people's political interest not only in relation to issue-based, but also representative politics.

Background and rationale

In most European countries voting in national elections is reserved for people who are at least 18 years old. Few exceptions exist however: in 2007 Austria changed its laws and now allows 16 year olds to take part in all elections. Apart from this however, most countries tend to limit extensions of the voting franchise to local and regional elections or small-scale trials.

Because of this situation data on political attitudes of 16 and 17 year olds is relatively rare. Many of the studies that have engaged with arguments for and against lowering the voting age to 16 have therefore relied on studying young adults (often 18 to 24 or 30 year olds). That however comes with a range of problems as it assumes that these young adults are similar to their slightly younger counterparts. However, the vast majority of 16 and 17 year olds are still in school (in traditional full time education or vocational arrangements) – and being in school could have strong distinguishing effects in relation to young people's experience of political discussions and engagement.

Furthermore, even when data is available for 16 and 17 year olds, an important problem remains: Political attitudes and engagement may change substantially when young people are close to the prospect of being able to actually exercise a voting right. If being in school then had a discernible impact, differences to first time voters in slightly older age ranges may exist.

A range of studies from Austria has been able to advance our understanding of 16- and 17-year old voters in a real context of voting in national elections.ⁱ In addition, there is now a new instance allowing us to investigate political behaviour of this age group directly. The voting age for the referendum on Scottish independence in September 2014 had been lowered to 16. It provided the first example of a national vote of this age range in Scotland. As the plans for this change were announced in 2012 already and there had been a long campaign leading up to the referendum, we have been able to investigate the young age group's political attitudes in the real context of an imminent national vote in which they could take part.

This briefing engages with data from two representative surveys of under-18 year olds living in Scotland who were interviewed in the context of the referendum on independence. Using this data the paper explores how the arguments for and against lowering the voting age to 16 relate to the empirical evidence in this context. The analyses provide an optimistic picture about young people and the potential benefits from lowering the voting age to 16. The results mirror some experiences from research conducted in Austria, suggesting that an earlier voting age is found to relate to positive effects on political engagement with a distinct role for schools.

Methodological concerns

Data used

The data for this analysis stems from two surveys conducted as part of the "Future of the UK and Scotland" programme and was developed by a team of researchers from the University of Edinburgh with contributions from several d|part researchers. For the survey, 14 to 17 year olds living in Scotland were contacted. When the survey was conducted first (April and May 2013) a substantial proportion of 14 year olds would have become 16 by the time of the referendum and therefore 14

year olds were the youngest group of people included in the survey. The survey was repeated in April and May 2014 following the same approach. While all questions were answered by all participants, analyses focussing on decisions around the actual voting process are only analysed for those who would be 16 for the referendum in this paper.

The survey was carried out as a telephone survey using random digit dialling techniques. Scotland still has nearly an 80% landline penetration rate which makes telephone surveys viable as a tool for genuine probability sampling when face-to-face interviews are too resource-demanding. When a household with a 14-17 year old was identified, initially one parent of the young person was interviewed and asked for permission to interview their child, as we were dealing with minors, but also about their own referendum voting intention and their educational attainment (and the attainment of their partner if applicable).

The survey was stratified by the eight regions distinguished in the Scottish Parliament elections representing equal proportions of the electorate. As people with lower socio-economic status tend to be less likely to possess a landline and are less likely to participate in surveys, we expected an over-representation of respondents whose parents had higher educational attainment. We therefore weighted the results for expected parental educational attainment. All results presented in this briefing are based on weighted data.ⁱⁱ

The majority of questions used in the survey was taken from the Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) to utilise the high quality of the question design process for the SSA, and to allow for the comparison of results to the general population. The initial questionnaire was piloted with 110 14-17 year olds in focus groups for two reasons: The SSA is a face-to-face survey, while this survey was carried out over the telephone. Some questions that may work well with showcards may not work adequately when read out over the phone. Furthermore, SSA questions have been tested for adults, but there may be differences in how this specific target age group would engage with some of the questions. The samples contained just over 1000 participants each time.

Approach to the analyses

The analysis begins by presenting an overview of key variables relating to young persons' engagement with politics and the referendum, specifically looking at their levels of political interest (in comparison to adults), the extent to which they discussed the referendum with others and the issue of voting turnout in comparison to the adults. After establishing this descriptive overview the paper engages in more depth to investigate which factors affect young people's political attitudes. For this purpose regression models are used.

A set of logistic regressions is computed to understand what differences exist between young people in relation to their interest in politics. At first socio-demographic characteristics are used as independent variables (sex, age and the highest educational attainment of the parentsⁱⁱⁱ). Subsequently variables are added that capture whether the respondent had discussed the referendum with their parents or in their class at school. This variable is key to examine whether there are distinct effects of engaging with the issue under consideration in school – which would suggest that voting for the first time at 16 or 17 may be distinct from voting for the first time after leaving school settings. Finally, a variable is added expressing whether the respondent had ever taken Modern Studies in school at all, and if they have, whether they took it as a mandatory or an optional course. Modern Studies is a course that not all, but an increasing number of schools offer in Scot-

land. It combines elements from several social sciences, such as Sociology, Politics and Media Studies. Using this variable we can identify whether such a class that we may characterise as “civics” education has a discernible effect in itself, that could be distinct to discussing the issue under consideration actively in class, regardless of the subject context.

To measure political interest, respondents were asked “How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics.”^{iv}

The same sets of predictors were used in three steps for the others sets of regressions. First the effects on self-perceived understanding of politics were examined using ordinal regressions. To measure the self-perceived understanding of politics respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagree with the statement “Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that young people find it difficult to understand what is going on.”^v Finally, to examine factors related to the likelihood of voting another set of ordinal regressions was computed. The question was: In autumn next/this year there will be a referendum to decide whether or not Scotland becomes an independent country. Assuming you will have the vote, on a one to five scale, where one is very unlikely and 5 is very likely, how likely would you be to vote?”^{vi}

Findings

Descriptive analyses

Assessing levels of political engagement of young people only makes sense in comparison to adults. Considering 14-17 year olds living in Scotland, assertions that young people have lower levels of interest than adults cannot be supported (table 1). The results from the young persons’ survey 2014 and the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSA) 2014 cannot be compared perfectly, as the SSA contains a middle option (some interest), while the young persons’ one does not. While we do not know how many young people on either side would have chosen a mid-point option, generally the results suggest that levels of interest for young people would be very similar to adults. Nearly the same proportions are found in the extreme categories (just above or below 10% respectively), saying they have a great deal of interest or no interest at all. For the adults “some” is the modal option with about equal proportions on either side. For the young people, more chose the positive option (“to some extent”) than the negative one. Overall, the data suggests that young people are probably at least as interested in politics as their adult counterparts.

Table 1: Interest in politics “How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics” – comparison between 14-17 year olds and adults (2014 SSA)

	14-17 year olds 2014 (%)	Adults - 2014 SSA (%)
A great deal	13	13
To some extent	46	23
Some	n/a	34
Not very much	32	20
None at all	8	11
Don’t know	1	0
Total (100%)	1006	1339

A range of commentators has claimed that young people do not engage in discussions about political issues however. Such suggestions cannot be supported at all in relation to the referendum. Only seven per cent said in April and May 2014 that they had not discussed the referendum with anyone so far (table 2) About two thirds had talked to their parents or their friends respectively and a similar proportion had discussed the referendum in class. All of these increased substantially from 2013 levels. Most respondents had discussed it with more than one of these groups.

Table 2: Discussing the referendum: “Who have you talked about Scottish independence with so far, if anyone at all?” – multiple options possible (14-17 year olds)

	2013 (%)	2014 (%)
Parents	53	69
In class	45	68
Friends	53	65
Other	20	19
Nobody	12	7

However, some may claim that talking is one thing and taking part in a vote another. Indeed, empirically young voters have been very reluctant to take part in Scottish elections. At the last Scottish parliament elections in 2011 only about 30% of the voters in the youngest age group (18-24 years) took part compared to an average of just over 50% participation overall and over 80% in the oldest age group (based on SSA data). It is difficult to ascertain the exact details of voting participation by age for the referendum as there were no proper exit polls undertaken. However, a YouGov poll conducted on the referendum day may give us some insights.^{vii} In the youngest age group (16-24: a more detailed breakdown is not possible due to sample size restrictions) the proportion saying don't know or not voting was at 8% only slightly higher than the actual mean for all age groups at 5%. With an actual turnout of just below 85%, obviously all age groups reported a higher turnout than actually observed, which is a common feature in polling. However, the crucial insight is that the youngest age group, albeit slightly less likely to vote, appears to have been very close to the average turnout figures and by no means as disengaged from voting as in normal elections.

Investigating this in some more detail using the available data from the pre-referendum surveys, and in particular the one of under 18-year olds, helps us to understand this issue further. The youngest voters indicated a great intention to vote already in April and May 2014 (table 3). 72% of those eligible to vote said in 2014 that they were very or rather likely to vote, a further increase from 2013 (66%).

Table 3: Referendum voting likelihood (under 18-year old voters): change from 2013 to 2014

	2013 (%)	2014 (%) (eligible voters only)
Very unlikely	7	6
Rather unlikely	6	6
Neither likely nor unlikely	19	15
Rather likely	26	21
Very likely	40	51
Don't know	2	2
Total (100%)	1018	725

Table 4: Referendum voting likelihood adults (11-point scale): change from 2013 to 2014

Voting likelihood	Adults - 2013 SSA (%)	Adults - 2014 SSA (%)
6-10	81	87
0-5	19	13
Total (100%)	1497	1339

These young people still seemed to be slightly less likely than adults on average to take part, however, the differences appear to be rather small (table 4). While there is no exact comparison to adult data as the SSA uses an 11-point scale to measure likelihood to vote, we can look at it indicatively. 87% of adults then gave a score of 6-10 on the positive side of voting likelihood. This is somewhat higher than the score for the young age group, however, the under-18 year old eligible voters also had an explicitly neutral middle option that is not provided on the SSA scale and which may have prompted some adult respondents to pick a comparatively 'lower' option. Crucially, expected levels of turnout are much higher in all age groups, including the youngest voters and the gap between younger and older voters seemed to be reduced substantially. In summary, while both the pre- and post-polling and survey data suggest that a small gap in voting likelihood remained for younger people, that difference was dramatically reduced compared to previous elections. As we have shown in previous analyses, young people were less likely to associate themselves with any political party compared to adults.^{viii} The referendum being about a specific issue and campaigns cutting across some traditional party lines helped young people (but adults, too) to see the worth and importance in participating. We could even see a reduction in the proportion of young people who said that they did not feel close to any political party (from 57% in 2013 to 51% in 2014), suggesting that engaging even with issue-based politics may help some to reconsider political parties as a source of orientation.

Statistical modelling

While we have seen that the newly enfranchised voters cannot be described as disinterested or unwilling to engage, some might argue however that this suggests that lowering the voting age may bring no harm, but it does not show yet that there are any potential benefits either. It is therefore crucial to engage in more depth with the question whether there is something distinct that could influence the political socialisation surrounding the first vote of these young people characterising them as different to those voting for the first time at a later stage. Indeed, the vast majority of those under the age of 18 are in some form of school education. It is therefore crucial to examine whether school can play a distinct role in this process that enhances political confidence and political engagement. If it does, it would provide an argument in favour of lowering the voting age as after the completion of school there is no other setting that effectively includes every person of a given age group and could provide the same function. If however, the impact of school was the same as the effect of the other key influences on the socialisation of children, the parents, there may not be a strong argument to support a reduced voting age – at least not beyond the finding that it appears to not be negative considering the results above.

When assessing the influence on political interest, those young people who discussed the referendum actively in class indeed have significantly greater levels of political interest (table 5). However, the same is true for those who have talked with their parents about the referendum. As this is cross-sectional data we of course cannot establish causality directly. It may be that we capture

young people talking more about the referendum, because they are more interested in the first place. While we cannot discern between the two possible directions of this relationship statistically, at least for discussions in class it is clear however, that they will usually not be based on the initiative of individuals themselves, as the topics discussed in the classroom most commonly are of course based on the agenda set by the teacher. A positive role for school can be found here, however, it is not distinct from the effect we find for discussions with parents.

Table 5: Factors affecting political interest – Logistic regression (14-17 year olds 2014)

Dependent: Political interest	1		2		3	
	Odds-Ratio	Wald	Odds-Ratio	Wald	Odds-Ratio	Wald
Age base: 14						
(non-eligible) 15	1.00	0.00	0.96	0.29	1.03	0.01
(eligible) 15	0.69	2.14	0.74	1.42	0.77	1.02
16	1.34	1.88	1.22	0.84	1.30	1.35
17	1.54*	4.00	1.45	2.68	1.60*	4.09
Male	1.06	0.12	1.11	0.59	1.18	1.32
Parental education base: None						
Higher education degree	1.49	2.04	1.08	0.07	0.99	0.00
Tertiary below degree	1.65	2.80	1.41	1.21	1.23	0.43
Upper Secondary	1.03	0.01	0.78	0.66	0.67	1.63
Lower Secondary	0.79	0.74	0.63	2.49	0.50*	5.14
Discussed ref. with parents			2.39***	33.3	2.42***	32.6
Discussed ref. in class			2.01***	22.1	1.90***	18.1
Not taken Modern Studies						
Taken , as mandatory					1.19	0.87
Taken, as choice					2.40***	26.7
*** p< 0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05 Odds ratios > 1 indicate a positive relationship, Odds ratios < 1 indicate a negative relationship Wald Statistics can be used to compare the relative strength of the indicators						

Beyond the discussions with parents, socio-demographic background variables appear to only play a small role. Those aged 17 are slightly more likely to be interested than the younger ones (though the difference is rather small). There is no significant difference between male and female respondents and also parental education does not appear to relate strongly to political interest. The actual practice of engagement seems to be what matters: While parental education does not relate significantly to interest, actually talking to parents does. We do find that talking about the referendum is more common in households with higher education, but the educational status itself does not affect political interest further. Similarly, simply the fact of taking a class in “civics” education does not necessarily relate to greater political interest, while talking about the referendum in class does. Those who took Modern Studies simply because they had to were not more likely to have a greater political interest – a positive relationship was only found for those who chose to take it themselves.

This difference between merely taking a class and discussing the referendum actively is also visible in relation to the self-perceived understanding of politics young people have. Taking Modern Studies, regardless of whether it is by choice or not, is not associated with reduced perceptions of politics as being too complicated. However, those young people who had discussed the referen-

dum in class (which could have been Modern Studies or a different class) indeed were significantly more likely to say that politics was not difficult to understand for young people. Here the effect of school is distinct from parents. Those who had talked to their parents about the referendum did not feel any more confident in evaluating politics as understandable. So engagement with a political issue in class can have positive effects on building the understanding of politics in a way that parents cannot. There is some influence based on parents however. Those young people who have at least one parent with a university degree were less likely to agree that politics was too complicated to understand in comparison to those who had no parent with any level of formal educational attainment. Interestingly however, the differences in understanding between those with parents without any formal education and the other levels of higher educational levels were not significant. The effect is therefore not that encompassing. It is interesting to note that male respondents expressed greater levels of understanding than female respondents – although there was no difference in levels of political interest. We find similar results for adults generally in the SSA with women more likely to say that politics is complicated than men. Seeing this manifested already in such a young age group may suggest that we are dealing with certain gender socialising effects here.

Table 6: Factors affecting the self-perceived understanding of politics – Ordinal regression, using a complimentary log-log link function (14-17 year olds 2014)

Dependent: Finding politics difficult	1		2		3	
	Odds-Ratio	Wald	Odds-Ratio	Wald	Odds-Ratio	Wald
Age base: 14						
(non-eligible) 15	0.95	0.12	0.97	0.06	0.97	0.07
(eligible) 15	1.33*	4.16	1.34*	4.35	1.32*	3.86
16	1.25	3.61	1.26*	3.89	1.27*	3.94
17	1.32*	5.60	1.34*	6.23	1.36*	6.45
Male	0.73***	17.1	0.73***	17.6	0.73***	17.4
Parental education base: None						
Higher education degree	0.59**	9.85	0.61**	8.59	0.64**	6.86
Tertiary below degree	0.70*	4.00	0.74	3.00	0.77	2.18
Upper Secondary	0.77	2.09	0.80	1.60	0.85	0.77
Lower Secondary	0.80	1.70	0.83	1.13	0.87	0.62
Discussed ref. with parents			1.05	0.36	1.04	0.19
Discussed ref. in class			0.81**	6.53	0.82*	5.77
Not taken Modern Studies						
Taken , as mandatory					1.11	1.06
Taken, as choice					0.90	1.35
Nagelkerke Pseudo R²	0.051		0.058		0.061	
Test of parallel lines (Chi²)	36.6 (df=27), p=0.10		36.6 (df=33), p=0.10		49.7 (df=42), p=0.20	
*** p< 0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05 Odds ratios > 1 indicate a positive relationship, Odds ratios < 1 indicate a negative relationship Wald Statistics can be used to compare the relative strength of the indicators						

Discussions in school seemed to positively affect the understanding of politics, while talking to parents did not. The opposite holds for voting likelihood (table 7). Those young people who had discussed the referendum with their parents were significantly more likely to say that they would vote. No such effect could be observed for discussions in class. Education of parents mattered again only in the contrast between those with higher education degrees and those with no formal attainment

at all. Having said all this, we should pause to consider one assumption made: so far we have been treating discussions with parents and in class as independent from one another. However, the two are related (table 8). Those who talked about the referendum with their parents were more likely to have also talked about it in class and vice versa. We do not know of course whether in discussions with parents, the topic was brought up by the young person or the parent. However, while there may be some room for initiative for students to suggest topics for class discussion, in most instances the topic for a class will be determined by the agenda set by teachers. We may therefore expect that for discussions in class the majority were not initiated by the young person. Consequently it is plausible that some of the discussions with parents could be consequences of young people having engaged with the topic in class first and then continuing to talk about it with their parents. It is impossible to assess this perfectly with cross-sectional data. However, we can check whether there is an effect of talking about the referendum in class when not including discussions with parents in the regression (model 4 of table 7). Indeed, when discussions with parents are excluded there is a significant positive relationship between discussions in class and voting likelihood. It is smaller than the effect of talking to parents, so there clearly is a distinct effect of parents on young people's likelihood to vote. However, considering the authority of the teacher to set classroom agendas, it is likely that there is a partial indirect effect of talking about the referendum in class, that may enhance the effect of talking to parents on voting likelihood for those young people who do both.

Table 7: Factors affecting voting likelihood in the referendum – Ordinal regression results, using a complimentary log-log link function (eligible 15-17 year olds 2014)

Dependent: Voting likelihood	1		2		3		4	
	Odds-Ratio	Wald	Odds-Ratio	Wald	Odds-Ratio	Wald	Odds-Ratio	Wald
Age base: (eligible) 15								
16	1.75***	15.3	1.52**	8.55	1.51**	7.91	1.70***	13.5
17	1.80***	16.3	1.67***	12.0	1.66***	11.4	1.75***	14.2
Male	1.04	0.13	1.08	0.54	1.12	0.97	1.08	0.48
Parental education base: None								
Higher education degree	1.81**	8.30	1.68*	5.69	1.67*	5.39	1.72*	5.90
Tertiary below degree	1.07	0.10	1.09	0.14	1.07	0.09	1.01	0.00
Upper Secondary	1.00	0.00	0.97	0.02	0.94	0.08	0.93	0.11
Lower Secondary	1.19	0.63	1.20	0.72	1.15	0.40	1.11	0.23
Discussed ref. with parents			2.02***	36.4	2.06***	38.5		
Discussed ref. in class			1.18	1.87	1.18	2.00	1.37**	7.31
Not taken Modern Studies								
Taken , as mandatory					0.87	0.88	0.88	0.73
Taken, as choice					1.17	1.50	1.16	1.29
Nagelkerke Pseudo R²	0.057		0.116		0.125		0.073	
Test of parallel lines (Chi²)	49.9 (df=21), p<0.01		59.2 (df=27), p<0.01		48.5 (df=36), p=0.08		59.1 (df=33), p<0.01	
*** p< 0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05 Odds ratios > 1 indicate a positive relationship, Odds ratios < 1 indicate a negative relationship Wald Statistics can be used to compare the relative strength of the indicators								

Table 8: Relationship between discussing referendum with parents and in class (2014 – eligible 15-17 year olds)

		Has discussed in class	
		Yes	No
Has discussed with parents	Yes	75.9%	54.7%
	No	24.1%	45.3%
Total (100%)		223	503

Conclusions

The newly enfranchised voters in the Scottish independence referendum were not simply following the lead of their parents or appeared to be easily influenced in an inappropriate way. Parents play important roles: They still fulfil an important function in socialising young people to participate in voting normatively. Furthermore, they have an influence on young people’s levels of political interest. However, that does not mean that the youngest voters in this referendum decided the same way as their parents. Just over half (58%) reported the same position on the referendum question as the parent interviewed. When over 40% hold a different view to a parent we can hardly speak of a group that was simply taking on perspectives from others.

Indeed, parents were not influential in the same way in all domains. Those young people who discussed the referendum with them did not feel significantly more confident about their understanding of politics compared to those who had not talked to their parents. It does not appear that parental insights were considered as factual or educational in that sense. However, discussions in class precisely took that role. Where young people discussed the referendum in the classroom, their political confidence increased.

Schools can perform an important function that is distinct to the position of parents and other actors. Some of the effects (such as on political interest and understanding of politics) are direct. Crucially, they require the active engagement of young people in the classroom however. A simple taking of a civics-oriented class in itself is not enough. Furthermore, in addition to the direct links found, there also indications of indirect links: Young people who discussed the referendum in school were more likely to have discussed it with their parents, too. So even influences on voting turnout may exist, but they are strongly contextualised within the parent-young person relationship.

In the Scottish context we do not find evidence to suggest that young people are less politically interested than adults and neither could we substantiate claims that young people were disengaged in the referendum and uncritically mimicking their parents’ decisions. As we have shown previously the vast majority of young people had sought out information through a variety of news sources showing a willingness to engage actively with political issues.^{ix} Through the special role schools can play for this age group, there is a chance to positively affect young people’s political confidence and knowledge. Lowering the voting age to 16 in combination with a detailed rethinking of the role schools play in political education may therefore be a positive development worth exploring beyond this referendum. Crucially, we need to be confident to make the classroom a place where politics can be discussed, rather than assuming that young people will be inappropriately ideologised in an easy way.^x While many schools in the referendum process engaged strongly with stu-

dents in discussions about the process, some decided not to do so (sometimes because of decisions taken by local authorities). Our research suggests that young people who do not get the chance to discuss politics in an informed manner in the classroom miss out. There is no other institution that seems to be able to create the same positive effect on political confidence. Fears that young people could not cope with such discussions are unwarranted. Their political attitudes formation is complex and based on interactions with multiple actors in which they listen and also influence others, including their parents. Teachers should be given appropriate space and support to do such highly valuable forms of work in class. School does not fulfil all functions, but it is essential in developing young people's political competence. In combination with a real vote engagement there is a genuine chance that lowering the voting age can provide opportunities to see a new generation of young people that may become more engaged with all forms of political activities, including representative ones.

Notes

ⁱ See for example: Zeglovits, E. & Aichholzer, J. (2014). Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18? Evidence for the First-Time Voting Boost Amongst 16- to 25-Year-Olds in Austria. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 24(3): 351-361 and Zeglovits, E. & Zandonella, M. (2013). Political Interest of Adolescents Before and After Lowering the Voting Age: The Case of Austria. *Journal of Youth Studies* 16(8): 1084-1104.

ⁱⁱ For details on the weighting approach please see the briefing for the study available from AQMeN here: <http://www.aqmen.ac.uk/youngscotsurvey2results>

ⁱⁱⁱ For this the highest educational attainment of either parent is used. If for example one parent has a higher education degree and one only has lower secondary education, the highest educational attainment of either parent is coded as higher education degree.

^{iv} The dependent variable distinguished those who said a *great deal of interest*, or were interested to *some extent* from those who said they had *not very much* interest or *none at all*.

^v The answer options were *disagree strongly*, *disagree*, *neither agree nor disagree*, *agree*, *agree strongly*. Based on its five-point scale an ordinal regression was applied with a complimentary log-log link function, as a greater number of responses was found for higher values (those agreeing with the statement that politics could be difficult to understand).

^{vi} The answer options were *very unlikely*, *rather unlikely*, *neither likely nor unlikely*, *rather likely*, *very likely*. A complimentary log-log link function was applied as higher values (greater turnout likelihood) were significantly more common.

^{vii} For the details of the results from the YouGov poll on the referendum date, please see: <http://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/09/19/scottish-independence-final-prediction/>

^{viii} For the detailed briefing "Who influences the formation of political attitudes and decisions in young people published by d|part in March 2014 based on the 2013 survey data, please visit: http://www.politischepartizipation.de/images/downloads/2014.03.04_ScottishReferendum_Key%20Insights_vf.pdf

^{ix} Please see the summary of the survey results from the 2014 young persons' survey briefing available here: <http://www.aqmen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/YoungScotsBriefing060614.pdf>, p.6

^x As we have shown previously the evidence does not suggest that engagement in schools results in any inappropriate form of biasing. Please see the d|part briefing mentioned under viii.



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About dlpart

dlpart is a non-profit, independent and non-partisan Think Tank. Our aim is to research and support different forms of political participation. Our research projects build a foundation for empirically sound statements about the state of political participation in Germany and Europe. We want to contribute creatively to the public discussion of this topic as an important component of a democratic civic society.
