

## Evidence: Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill

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### 1. Background to evidence base for this submission

1.1. Political attitudes of young people, in particular those aged below 18 are rarely investigated in a representative way. While some surveys include 16-year olds in general polling efforts, the sample of young people is then usually too small to conduct meaningful analyses. This submission largely draws on data from two survey projects that have been unique in providing a comprehensive, and representative sample of under-18 year olds respondents for surveys of political attitudes in the Scottish and UK context.

1.2. The first project took place in advance of the Scottish independence referendum and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under its Future of the UK and Scotland programme. Researchers from the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science carried out two surveys (with over 1000 respondents each) of 14-17 year olds' political attitudes in Scotland in the referendum context (first in April/May 2013, and again in the same period in 2014). The project provides the only source of this type of data in relation to the referendum.<sup>1</sup>

1.3. In the aftermath of the referendum a substantial process of change in the constitutional setup of Scotland, but also other parts of the UK has been taking place. A team from the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science has been conducting a major research project to investigate both elite and mass attitudes in this process, in Scotland, as well as England, Wales and Northern Ireland. A key instrument was a survey of over 7,400 adults (carried out in February 2015), however in addition, a representative survey of about 800 16-17 year olds was carried out with half in Scotland and half in the rest of the UK to allow for an examination of whether we can see long-run changes in Scotland following the reduction of the voting age in the referendum. The data uniquely allows for a comparison of young people in these age groups in Scotland and the rest of the UK (in a quasi- natural experiment).<sup>2</sup>

1.4. While based on this evidence, the content of this submission is the sole interpretation and expression of views of the author.

### 2. Lowering the voting age to 16 is the right thing to do

2.1. The author welcomes this bill and the reduction of the voting age as well as the efforts made to enable young people to take part in elections from an early stage. As argued in previous research<sup>3</sup>, worries about lowering the voting age could not be verified in the context of the Scottish independence referendum. Under-18 year olds showed similar average levels of political interest as adults, were not simply following their parents' lead (over 40% held a different view on the referendum question than

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<sup>1</sup> The project team consisted of Dr Jan Eichhorn, Prof Lindsay Paterson (both Social Policy), Prof John MacInnes and Dr Michael Rosie (both Sociology). Details about the methodology and a summary of key results can be found here: <https://www.aqmen.ac.uk/referendum/youngpeople>

<sup>2</sup> The project team consisted of Dr Jan Eichhorn, Dr Daniel Kenealy, Prof Lindsay Paterson, Richard Parry (all Social Policy) and Alexandra Remond (Politics). Details about the project can be found here: [http://www.aog.ed.ac.uk/news/last\\_3\\_months6/presentations\\_and\\_briefings\\_from\\_new\\_research](http://www.aog.ed.ac.uk/news/last_3_months6/presentations_and_briefings_from_new_research). A detailed briefing about young people will be published in early June. Details on the figures used in this briefing can be obtained from the author in the meantime upon request.

<sup>3</sup> For details see: [http://politischepartizipation.de/images/downloads/dpart\\_Eichhorn\\_16VotingAge\\_Briefing.pdf](http://politischepartizipation.de/images/downloads/dpart_Eichhorn_16VotingAge_Briefing.pdf)

a parent who was also interviewed) and were engaging with a wide range of diverse media and information sources, not simply social media.<sup>4</sup>

2.2. However, arguing that lowering the voting age would not do harm, is not sufficient. We also need to be able to demonstrate positive effects on political attitudes and practice, which indeed was the case. Although the referendum was arguably less party-political than normal elections, after the referendum the number of under-18 year olds who did not feel close to any political party declined, suggesting that the relevance of political actors increased after the early enfranchisement experience.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, we were able to observe more confident attitudes in the understanding of and engagement with politics and crucially, saw the likelihood to vote increase amongst youngest voters (who traditionally were the least likely to take part in any elections). The referendum actually saw 16-17 year olds turning out to vote in greater numbers than 18-24 year olds.<sup>6</sup>

2.3. As details about all these analyses can be found in the cited publications they will not be replicated here in full to allow for space to focus on the post-referendum context. In summary, the findings have led to the conclusion that earlier voter enfranchisement can have positive effects, when certain conditions are met (in particular through the role of schools, as will be discussed in section 4).

### **3. Applicability to the post-referendum and General Election context: A lasting effect**

3.1. The research from the pre-referendum projects obviously had to be read with some caution. The referendum was a special occasion and several commentators have voiced doubts whether the positive effects would last much beyond the vote on 18 September and in particular would hold for the context of a general election. Our research now shows that indeed, we find a continuation of the positive effects – and particularly strongly pronounced for the youngest age groups.

3.2. Voting likelihood proves to be higher in all age groups in Scotland, with 76% saying they were certain to vote in February, compared to other parts of the UK (on average 65%). However, the difference is distinctively most pronounced for younger age groups. While 63% of 18-19 year olds in Scotland say they were certain to vote in the General Election, only 27% of their English peers say the same.<sup>7</sup> In no other age group is the gap as substantial, suggesting that in particular the youngest age group (who were 16-17 at some point during the two-year referendum campaign) saw a substantial change, implying that there may be more than a general referendum effect, which we would have seen across all age groups with the same magnitude.

3.3. Most crucially, all measures of increased political engagement have outlasted the referendum itself and apply to the general election context, even for the 16-17 year olds in Scotland. Comparing them with their English counterparts we found that 61% say they had talked about “how the UK is governed” with members of their family in the last three months (roughly mid-November to mid-February at the time of the survey), while only 37% of their English peers report the same. The higher level of engagement with political issues applies not just to concerns about Scottish independence, but UK politics more widely. The gap is even more pronounced when asked whether the 16-17 year old respondents had talked with their friends about this in the same time period, with 62% of Scottish respondents answering positively compared to only 35% in England.

3.4. These findings are consistent with research from one of the few countries that has implemented voting at 16 at all elections in 2007 – Austria. Studies have shown an initial boost amongst the newly enfranchised voters in terms of positive political and civic attitudes and voting participation, but also, most crucially, a sustained nature of this effect in the longer run. This lasting effect, however, is strongly attributed to a successful combination of early enfranchisement (which has to be genuine, as young people do not react well to tokenistic, small scale approaches, as demonstrated by a trial study in

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<sup>4</sup> For details see: <https://www.aqmen.ac.uk/node/1706>

<sup>5</sup> For details see: <https://www.aqmen.ac.uk/node/1707>

<sup>6</sup> For details see: [http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/179807/Scottish-referendum-Public-Opinion-survey-ICM-Report-WEBSITE.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/179807/Scottish-referendum-Public-Opinion-survey-ICM-Report-WEBSITE.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> For details see: [http://www.aog.ed.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/172010/UPDATED\\_Briefing\\_-\\_Democratic\\_engagement\\_and\\_the\\_process\\_of\\_constitutional\\_change.pdf](http://www.aog.ed.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/172010/UPDATED_Briefing_-_Democratic_engagement_and_the_process_of_constitutional_change.pdf)

Norway<sup>8</sup>) together with substantial changes in the school curriculum that created an explicit space in the classroom for political education and the discussion of politics.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. The crucial role of schools and concerns about political inequality

4.1. Whether politics should and can be discussed in classrooms is a highly contentious issue. Fears about undue politicisation and students being inappropriately influenced by teachers are widespread. However, using our data we were able to show that there was no biasing effect of discussions in the classroom in the context with the referendum leading to school students being more likely to vote yes or no respectively.<sup>10</sup>

4.2. Beyond our survey, we engaged with teachers in many different schools through public events we organised as outreach activities for students as well as in a range of schools that invited us to talk to their students. What we found was that teachers discussing the referendum and political issues were incredible cautious and responsible. The vast majority of teachers felt a strong sense of scrutiny and were looking for external support, for example from our team (amongst many other civic society groups and academics). In addition to our direct engagement we developed a set of teaching materials to support classroom activities which were downloaded by several hundreds of schools.<sup>11</sup>

4.3. We have demonstrated that young people do not treat information in school uncritically – the function discussions in class have is different to, for example, talking about politics with parents. Classroom political engagement, for example leads to higher levels of political confidence and understanding, discussions with parents do not.<sup>12</sup> School can fulfil certain functions that parents or friends cannot.

4.4. The role of political engagement in the classroom is essential and, given our findings, should be extended in conjunction with the lowered voting age. Importantly, the positive effects we are able to observe are most pronounced for actual discussions of political issues in the classroom. It is not enough to teach a so-called “civics class” in which the electoral system is explained. That has certain benefits, however, the positive effects on young people’s political attitudes are most strongly pronounced when they actively discuss political issues (which again, as pointed out above does not result in inappropriate biasing effects).

4.5. Our research in the context of the 2015 General Election shows that those 16 and 17 year olds who had recently (in the last three months) discussed political issues in the classroom were significantly more likely to

- Say they would vote, if they were allowed to vote in the election
- Say that it made a difference which party got elected
- That how the UK is governed made a difference to their own lives
- That 16-year olds should be allowed to vote in all elections
- Have taken part in a form of non-electoral political participation<sup>13</sup>
- Have used a greater number of information sources

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<sup>8</sup> Bergh, J. 2013. Does voting rights affect the political maturity of 16- and 17-year olds? Findings from the 2011 Norwegian voting-age trial. *Electoral Studies* 32(1): 90-100.

<sup>9</sup> Zeglovits, E. and A. Aichholzer. 2014. Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18? Evidence for the First-Time Voting Boost Among 16- to 25-Year-Olds in Austria. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 24(3): 351-361.

Zeglovits, E. and M. Zandonella. 2013. Political interests of adolescents before and after lowering the voting age: the case of Austria. *Journal of Youth Studies* 16(8): 1084-1104.

<sup>10</sup> For details see:

[http://politischepartizipation.de/images/downloads/2014.03.04\\_ScottishReferendum\\_Key%20Insights\\_vf.pdf](http://politischepartizipation.de/images/downloads/2014.03.04_ScottishReferendum_Key%20Insights_vf.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> For details see: <https://www.aqmen.ac.uk/Resources/IndyRef/TeachingMaterials>

<sup>12</sup> For details see: [http://politischepartizipation.de/images/downloads/dpart\\_Eichhorn\\_16VotingAge\\_Briefing.pdf](http://politischepartizipation.de/images/downloads/dpart_Eichhorn_16VotingAge_Briefing.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Either writing to an MP, participating in a demonstration, signing a petition or taking part in a boycott

Note: These results originate from regression modelling and include controls for social class and gender, whether they took a civics-style class and whether they had talked about political issues with friends and family.

4.6. No other independent variables were associated with as many positive outcomes. There was a positive effect of students who had taken a civics-style class (such as Modern Studies) irrespective of whether they discussed political issues in class, but it affected fewer outcomes. One was distinct to the discussion in class issue: Those who had taken a civics-style class (mandatorily or by choice) were more likely to say that they did not find politics too complicated to understand. Those who had to take the class also were more likely to have participated in non-electoral forms, but there was no association with any of the other positive outcomes that we observed in 4.5. for active discussions in the classroom. For those who chose to take the class there also were positive associations for the number of information sources used and whether they thought who got elected mattered. But there was no distinguishable positive effect on voting likelihood, whether they thought how the UK was governed mattered to their life and whether 16-year olds should be allowed to vote.

4.7. Talking to members in the family had a positive effect on voting likelihood (if they were allowed to vote), the question on whether they thought it made a difference who got elected, non-electoral participation and information source usage. But there were no associations with the other positive factors outlined in 4.5. and 4.6.

4.8. There are multiple pathways through which positive attitudes towards political participation and engagement more widely are achieved in young people. The family for example, still is a strong provider of the notion that voting is the right thing to do, establishing voting as a positive norm. Having a civics-style class (even if it is mandatory) helps to increase factual knowledge and the self-confidence of young people in politics. But neither has as extensive and comprehensive an effect as actively discussing politics in the classroom. When we cannot observe the negative effects feared, but do observe the many positive effects outlined, we need to conclude that discussing politics in the classroom setting should become part of every school student's experience.

4.9. These findings have an important implication: If the voting age is lowered in Scotland, people will engage at an earlier stage in their life with the political process. The evidence cited above suggests that this earlier political socialisation may have positive long term effects on political engagement in these new generations and the positive effects described are amplified substantially by certain mechanisms in schools. If a school student then does not get the chance to experience i. civics-style education and, more importantly, ii. a qualified space to discuss politics (the classroom), they are at a disadvantage to other students in terms of political socialisation and knowledge.

4.10. Interestingly, our findings show that differences by social class in political and civic attitudes/practices of interest, cited above, are small. Existing stratification patterns we can observe for adults are not fully replicated for young people at this age. However, differential access to i. political education and ii. the safe and meaningful space for political discussions that the classroom can provide in a qualified way, may result in new inequalities.

4.11. This is worrying in the Scottish context considering the referendum experience. The approach schools were allowed to take varied greatly by local authority. While some prohibited any engagement with the referendum in the classroom at all, in particular in the final phase of the campaigns, others permitted discussions, but only about the system itself, not the actual issues. Some authorities allowed for external guests to be invited, but only if they were non-partisan, while others allowed guests to be invited, even if they were partisan, as long as a balance of views was presented. Young people were exposed to a postcode lottery of access to political education.

4.12. Based on our findings, those who did not get to discuss political issues in the classroom lost out. They have a lag compared to peers whose political socialisation, knowledge, confidence and engagement have increased more speedily. If this is allowed to continue, the lowering of the voting age to 16 will ultimately result in an increased stratification in politically better educated and equipped young voters in some places compared to others who do not get the same experience.

4.13. If higher political participation and stronger civic attitudes in young people are deemed desirable, an equity principle for Scotland has to imply that all young people should get the same level of support in reaching these goals to avoid new forms of stratification. If this goal applies to Scotland a decision has to be made that schools should not only be allowed to discuss political issues in the classroom, but have to create space for students to do so. Crucially, this cannot be constrained to only Modern Studies, as not all schools offer it, and it cannot be taken as equivalent to saying that young people need to simply learn about the functioning of politics. In order for this lowering of the voting age to have the desired effects, it requires a policy change that would see all young people in schools being given the chance to have discussions about political issues in the classroom with the moderation of a teacher.

4.14. Obviously, there should be support for teachers in providing materials for this purpose. A lot is already available, from a variety of organisations, such as universities (including our own materials), bodies like Education Scotland, and professional networks, such as the Modern Studies Teachers Association or the Five Nations Network.

## **5. More than a referendum effect: Validity beyond Scotland**

5.1. Some critical observers may argue that the conclusions drawn above do not have general validity as all we are observing are still particular post-referendum effects that will soon disappear. That is not true however. As mentioned above, when we asked about discussions in school, with family or friends or the use of information sources in the project focussed on the General Election, we asked about the period from mid-November to mid-February (with some variation depending on the exact interview date of course). Thus, first of all, the questions are asking about a post-referendum context.

5.2. However, more crucially, the modelling of which factors influence 16-17 year olds positively applies not just for a Scottish context, but across the UK. If we were seeing a referendum-only pattern, we would not be finding the relationships described in section 4 for respondents in the UK-wide sample (in which we of course control for whether a respondent is Scottish or from elsewhere). So crucially, our findings are applicable across the UK – and then conversely imply that the essence of the findings for Scotland is generalizable beyond the referendum context.

5.3. If the patterns of what can influence young people's political and civic attitudes and behaviour positively apply across the UK, one might ask why we then find greater levels of expressed hypothetical likelihood to vote amongst young Scots with 67% of 16-17 year old Scots saying they would be very or fairly certain<sup>14</sup> to vote in the General Election if allowed to, compared to only 39% of their counterparts in the rest of the UK. The reason of course is that the level of positive influences, such as discussions with parents and friends (see 3.3.) are substantially higher in Scotland. This includes the likelihood to have discussed politics in class with 67% of 16-17 year old Scots saying they did that in the last three months, compared to 57% in the rest of the UK.

5.4. So we can observe a referendum effect in Scotland in terms of heightened levels of influencing factors being prevalent at the moment. But the mechanisms that actually lead to greater civic engagement and more positive civic attitudes in young people are generalizable and transferrable beyond the referendum. This means they require attention and a strong role of schools (amongst other avenues of course) in order to avoid the otherwise likely development of substantial inequalities in political knowledge, confidence and ability described in section 4.

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<sup>14</sup> Ranking their hypothetical likelihood to vote as 9 or 10 on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 to 10.