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### Votes at 16 in Scotland

Political experiences beyond the vote itself

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## **Chapter 7 - Votes at 16 in Scotland: Political experiences beyond the vote itself**

By Christine Hübner & Jan Eichhorn

### **Abstract**

This chapter analyses the evidence about youth political engagement since the lowering of the voting age in Scotland. The process that led to 16- and 17-year olds being allowed to take part in all local and Scotland-wide, but not UK general elections itself is insightful. Tracing the development of the legal changes, we discuss how public perceptions changed between enfranchising younger voters for the 2014 independence referendum initially and then extending the lowered voting age for all Scottish elections in 2015.

In addition to engaging with the process of constitutional change, we also review the empirical evidence that has been collected in Scotland during and after the referendum. Using both quantitative data from representative surveys and qualitative data from interviews with young people, we are able to gain insights into why young Scots showed significantly higher levels of political engagement ahead of the 2015 general election than their peers elsewhere in the UK – across all social classes. Examining the factors influencing young people's political socialization, we discuss the implications, especially for the role of civic education in schools across the UK and research into enfranchisement more widely.

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### *7.1. Introduction*

Scotland offers a unique case study of young people's engagement in elections. The lowering of the voting age to include 16- and 17-year olds in the franchise coincided with the referendum on Scottish independence in September 2014. This provided an environment that mobilized young people and allowed them to connect to a political issue as never before. In the first instance, the lowering of the voting age in Scotland was a one-off decision that did not apply to other elections. Only after evaluating the experience of young people actually voting in the referendum, the general franchise was reformed to include 16- and 17-year olds in all Scottish elections. This two-step change provides us with interesting insights into the dynamics that led to the lowering of the voting age and with an opportunity to research why the inclusion of 16- and 17-year olds was considered a success in Scotland. It came with broader changes in public and political opinion regarding the inclusion of young people and, with these changes, young Scots themselves started to look differently at their role in politics. Because young people elsewhere in the UK are not enfranchised at 16, we can compare the experiences of young people in Scotland to those of their peers in the rest of the UK to gauge their attitudes to politics and engagement with UK-wide elections and political issues.

This chapter presents and discusses what happened in Scotland in the period from the initial lowering of the voting age for the Scottish independence referendum until today. It describes the process of constitutional changes that were necessary to allow 16- and 17-year olds to vote and looks at the impact this had on young people and Scottish society as a whole. We use quantitative and qualitative evidence to evaluate the outcomes of the lowering of the voting age in Scotland and discuss the experiences of those young Scots who are newly enfranchised. There is a lot that can be learnt from the Scottish case about the impact of votes at 16 on young people, the circumstances in which young people can benefit from a lower voting age, and what early enfranchisement may mean for their future political engagement. At the same time, the experiences from Scotland highlight a number of issues that remain unresolved to date and warrant further research.

### *7.2. The road to the lowering of the voting age in Scotland*

The Scottish National Party has been in government in Scotland since 2007. However, they did not hold a parliamentary majority initially and so were not able to legislate for a Scottish independence referendum when they first came into power. This changed in 2011 when they won the majority of seats. With that the party was able to fulfil its manifesto pledge of holding a vote on the constitutional future of Scotland. An agreement with the UK government, the Edinburgh Agreement, was signed in October 2012. It outlined the parameters of how the vote on Scottish independence would take place and stated that both sides would accept the outcome as binding.

Already before the crucial Edinburgh Agreement there were signs that the Scottish Government intended to allow 16- and 17-year olds to vote in a referendum on Scottish independence. As early as October 2011, a year before the Edinburgh agreement, Scottish politicians in support of independence raised the idea of the lowering of the voting age. They argued that a lower voting age would be more inclusive of the next generation. Critics however suggested this was merely an opportunistic step, one that was based on the assumption that young people would be more likely to back Scotland's independence from the United Kingdom (Mycock & Tonge, 2012).

When the rules of the franchise for the referendum on independence were finally outlined, they included a voting age of 16 instead of the usual 18 years. The Scottish Parliament had

voted to lower the voting age for the referendum in June 2013. While in other aspects the franchise for the referendum was very similar to that of elections for the Scottish Parliament, the lowering of the voting age represented a significant deviation. In Parliament, the positions on the proposed change were not divided along pro- and anti-independence lines. Both nationalist and several unionist parties (such as the Scottish Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats) voted in favor of the voting age reduction. The Scottish Conservatives were the exception and continued their UK-wide position of opposing earlier enfranchisement. In accordance with the Edinburgh Agreement, this change in the franchise only applied to the referendum as a one-off event. Because the voting franchise generally is a reserved power of the UK Parliament at Westminster, the Scottish Parliament was only allowed to make this change in relation to the referendum vote.

The ballot on whether or not the Scottish wanted Scotland to become an independent country was held on Thursday 18 September 2014 and it included more than 100,000 registered 16- and 17-year old voters (McInnes, Ayres & Hawkins, 2014). It saw Scotland remain a part of the United Kingdom, but the debate about the voting age continued. A commission was set up to discuss the devolution of further powers to Scotland, the Smith Commission. This was a promise made by the leading unionist politicians in Westminster during the referendum campaign. The Smith Commission recommended that the power over the right to enfranchise 16- and 17-year olds should be transferred from the UK's parliament at Westminster to the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood in November 2014 (Smith Commission, 2014). Things moved quickly afterwards. A draft order for the necessary modifications to the Scotland Act was proposed in the UK Parliament in January 2015 (McGrath, 2015, p. 8) and approved and accepted by March 2015. The Scottish Parliament then held hearings for evidence on the issue of lowering the voting age in its Devolution (Further Powers) Committee, which suggested that the voting age should be lowered for all future elections in Scotland in May (Scottish Parliament, 2015). One month later, in June 2015, the Parliament in Edinburgh adopted the changes allowing Scottish 16- and 17-year olds to take part in both local and Scotland-wide elections. However, the Scottish politicians could not legislate to let them take part in UK-wide elections. Those powers remained reserved for Westminster.

What made for this rather quick procession towards an extension of the franchise after the referendum? A major difference to the 2013 decision was that even the members of the Conservative Party in the Scottish Parliament now voted in favor of a lower voting age. The vote was unanimous, a sign that a significant change had occurred with regard to perceptions

about young people's engagement. Ruth Davidson, the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, said that she changed her mind after experiencing how 16- and 17-year olds participated in the referendum. She saw the change as very positive and the lowering of the voting age as an opportunity to increase political engagement (Davidson, 2015). Not only had the Scottish Conservatives changed their attitude towards young people. Other institutions also started to think differently about 16- and 17-year olds. The BBC, for example, created a panel of 16- and 17-year olds from across Scotland to increase the presence of young people in their programming on general political (and not only so-called youth) issues (BBC, 2014). In addition to the creation of this "Generation 2014" panel, the BBC showed their determination to include young people when they set up the final television debate, one week before the referendum, with an audience comprised only of young Scots.

It was not only politicians and media institutions that changed their perception of and engagement with young people. There was also a major shift in public opinion from before to after the referendum. In 2011 the over two thirds of Scots opposed the lowering of the voting age to 16 – in line with attitudes in the rest of the UK (Nelson, 2012; Electoral Commission, 2003). After the referendum over 50 percent supported earlier enfranchisement (Electoral Commission, 2014, p. 65; Kenealy et al., 2017, p. 52), while attitudes on this issue did not shift elsewhere in the UK. Since then this figure has risen further. Now around 60 percent of Scots agree with allowing 16- and 17-year olds to vote (Scottish Parliament, 2015, p. 65). What is more, the experience of votes at 16 in Scotland has inspired debates elsewhere. Politicians advocating for UK-wide changes to the age of enfranchisement have repeatedly referred to what has taken place in Scotland and an All Party Parliamentary Group on Votes at 16 has been formed in the UK Parliament (UK Parliament, 2018), including several Conservative members. What then were the experiences with 16- and 17-year olds voting in Scotland that had such an impact on the opinions of politicians and the public?

### *7.3. How 16- and 17-year olds in Scotland make use of their right to vote*

More than 100,000 16- and 17-year olds were on the electoral roll for the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence – about 2.6 per cent of the electorate (McInnes, Ayres & Hawkins, 2014). Some of them campaigned passionately for either independence or for Scotland to remain a part of the UK. The Electoral Commission (2014) estimates that on referendum day 75 per cent of registered 16- and 17-year olds turned out to vote. That is a higher estimated

turnout than among those aged 18 to 24 years (estimated at 54 per cent), but lower than the overall turnout (just under 85 per cent). It is somewhat difficult to make exact statements about the election turnout of particular groups of the population, such as 16- and 17- year olds, as they are based on extrapolations of post-election surveys. This means there is always a margin of error remaining. However, the Electoral Commission's assessment matches with estimates from a survey of 16- and 17-year olds from just a few months before the referendum, where 72 per cent of the same age group said to be rather or very likely to vote in the referendum (Eichhorn, 2018). Taken together, these estimates refute the argument commonly presented by critics of the earlier enfranchisement that 16- and 17-year olds would show an equally low or even lower turnout than 18- to 24-year olds. On the contrary, in the case of the Scottish referendum, newly enfranchised young people turned out in quite substantial numbers.

However, the figures on turnout alone were probably not what convinced Ruth Davidson and others to change their minds on the extension of the franchise to 16- and 17-year olds. In addition to young people's higher-than-expected turnout, there was a remarkable amount of youth engagement in the long campaign leading up to the referendum. Over the course of the two years from when the vote was called, Scotland witnessed a substantial increase in political discussions among young people, within families, with friends and in school. Young people could be seen out campaigning in the street and engagement with the referendum in schools increased especially in this period.

We can evaluate the engagement of young people with the referendum on the basis of qualitative as well as quantitative evidence: firstly, drawing on two surveys, which were conducted just before the referendum in April-May 2013 and May 2014 among those who would be aged 16 or 17 and eligible to vote in the referendum, (Eichhorn, 2014); and secondly, drawing on qualitative interviews among young yes-voters, aged 16 to 20, conducted in early 2015, just after the referendum (Breeze et al., 2015; 2017). While in early 2013 less than half of those under-18s eligible to vote said they had discussed the referendum in class, this figure rose to just under 70 per cent by May 2014. Overall, a remarkable 93 per cent of young people said they had discussed the referendum issue with others, whether with friends and family or in class (Eichhorn, 2018). Russell (16), a participant in Breeze et al.'s study (2017, p. 756), said about the referendum: "*Everyone was talking about politics for the first time that I can really remember... it was good to be able to speak about politics, completely freely.*"

The research also proves those critics wrong who argued that young people would not be mature enough for a decision as far-reaching as that on Scottish independence. The under-18s who were eligible to vote revealed similar levels of interest in the referendum to adults and, in contrast to commonly held beliefs, they did not only rely on social media or what their parents said to make up their mind about the vote. Instead, young people used a variety of information sources (Eichhorn, 2014). Breeze and colleagues (2015; 2017) find that 16- and 17-year old voters held nuanced and well-founded views on Scottish independence. Even though they acknowledge the influence of family or friends, many had carefully considered different arguments throughout the campaign, ranging from questions of democratic legitimacy to the economy (Breeze et al., 2015). Instead of just being influenced by their parents, more than 40 per cent of young people held a view that was different to that of a parent (Eichhorn, 2014). Mike (18), who joined the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) against his parents' recommendation, says: "*When I first started campaigning I went my own way, made my own mind up, found out my own things, and done it for myself*" (in Breeze et al., 2017, p. 767). What is more, a fair amount of young people seemed to influence their parents on the referendum question instead of only the other way around (Breeze et al., 2017; Eichhorn, 2014).

After the referendum many of these young Scots remained interested and engaged in politics. It seemed that, through the referendum experience, they had grown to like politics. While before young people in Scotland were not any more or less involved in politics than young people elsewhere in the UK, after the referendum they were more likely to turn out to vote, to engage in elite-challenging forms of political participation and to seek out information about politics. A survey conducted ahead of the 2015 General Election – about five months after the referendum – allows us to compare young people from Scotland to those in other parts of the UK (Eichhorn, 2017). It shows stark differences in actual and intended engagement with politics between young Scots and their peers in the rest of the UK. Had they been allowed to vote in the 2015 General Election, 67 per cent of young people in Scotland said they would have been very likely to vote (9 or 10 on a 10-point scale), while in the rest of the UK less than 40 per cent were prepared to say the same.

And young people's political engagement did not only involve voting: 57 per cent of Scottish 16- and 17-year olds said they had taken part in some form of political expression other than voting in the referendum. For example, they participated in demonstrations, boycotts or wrote to a member of parliament. And more than half of Scottish respondents said they had signed

a petition in the past compared to only just under a third of young people elsewhere in the UK. Breeze et al. report on young people who, through their experience of the referendum, joined political parties and became involved “in a range of issues, including anti-Trident activism, homelessness, anti-austerity and support for local businesses” (2017, p. 763). In the months after the referendum young people in Scotland also engaged with more sources of political information than their peers. To find information on political issues they were more likely to have read newspapers, searched online news websites, watched TV, listened to the radio, or used information available on social media. 60 per cent of Scottish young people said they had consulted at least three different news sources regarding political issues compared to only 43 per cent of their peers in the rest of the UK, who said the same.

*Table 1. Comparison of 16- and 17-year olds in Scotland and the rest of the UK (rUK), February 2015, ahead of the 2015 General Election*

	<b>% Scotland</b>	<b>% rUK</b>
Hypothetical voting likelihood in a General Election, if allowed to take part (9 or 10 on a 10-point scale)	67	39
Taken part in non-electoral political engagement	57	40
Engagement with at least 3 news sources on politics	60	43
16-year olds should be allowed to vote in all elections (agree)	66	52

Source: Eichhorn 2017, from a survey of 810 16- and 17-year olds conducted in February 2015, representative for Scotland (N=403) and the rest of the UK (N=407)

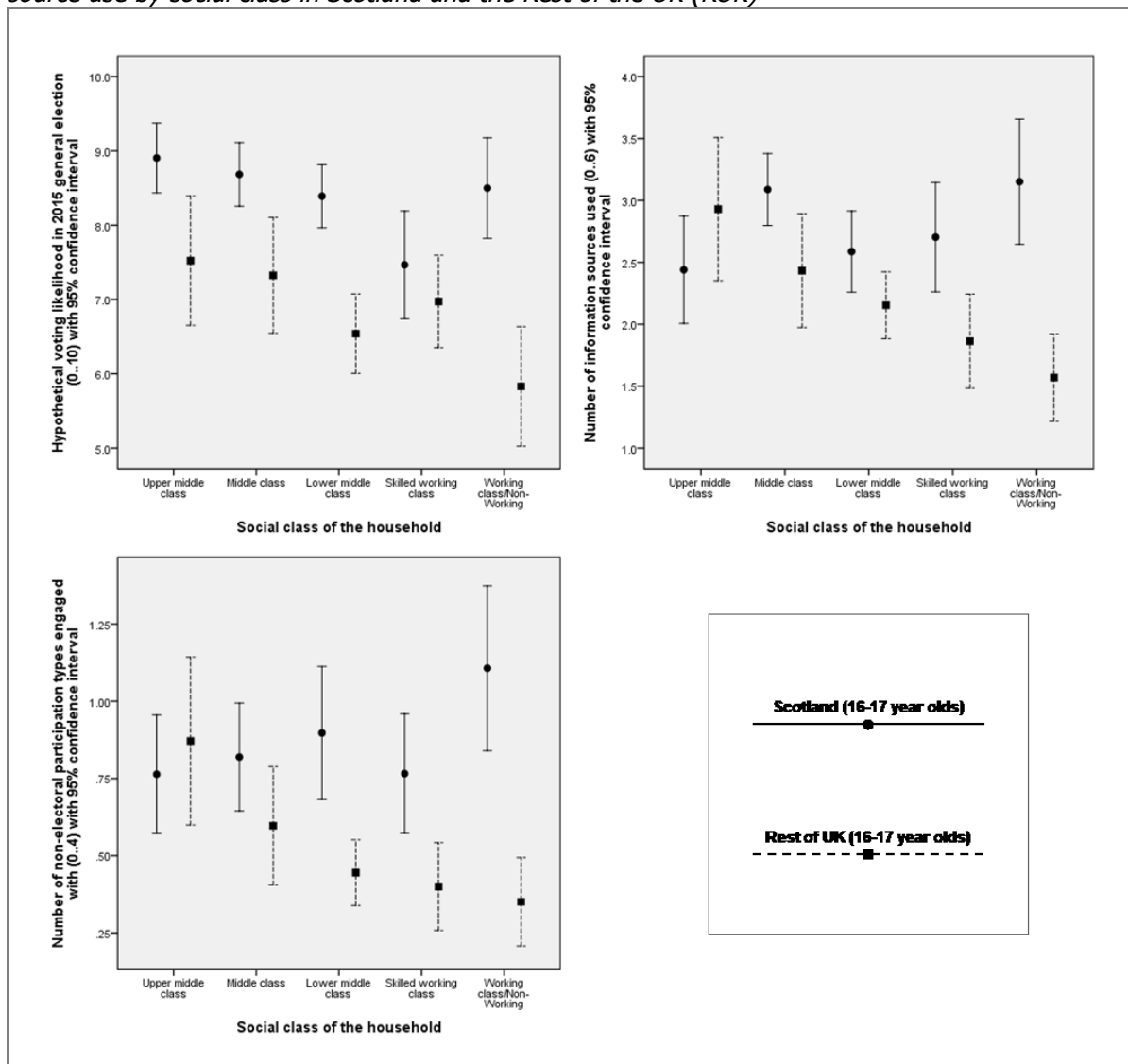
What is more, we found that especially young Scots hailing from less advantaged backgrounds were more likely to be involved in politics than their peers in the rest of the UK. Already during the referendum campaign, we noticed that the classic relationship of political engagement and social class – that people of higher social status are more likely to be involved in politics – did not hold true for young people in Scotland (Eichhorn et al., 2014). Five months after the referendum, we observed this again. While in most of the UK young people of higher social status were more likely to be engaged, social class differences in political engagement were less pronounced amongst 16- and 17-year olds in Scotland. Rather young Scots of all social classes were equally likely to turn out to vote, to become engaged in elite-challenging action and to use a variety of information sources (Eichhorn, 2017).

Figure 1 illustrates these findings. It breaks down voting likelihood, non-electoral political participation and information source usage by socio-occupational class of the household the 16-17-year olds were living in at the time of the survey (February 2015). It thus allows us to



compare how young people’s political attitudes and behavior in Scotland and the rest of the UK respectively may or may not have been correlated to their social class. In all three instances, the confidence intervals overlap for the different social classes amongst the Scottish respondents, suggesting that we could not observe any significant differences between classes. However, for respondents from the rest of the UK, there were significant differences, at least between the highest and lowest social class groupings, suggesting that social background was related to political engagement for young people there – in a way that it was not in Scotland.

Figure 1: Hypothetical voting likelihood, non-electoral political participation and political information source use by social class in Scotland and the Rest of the UK (RUK)



Estimates shown are mean estimates with 95%-confidence intervals by social class of the household for 16- and 17-year-old respondents in Scotland and RUK respectively (Data from February 2015, N=704).

How much of this more engaged cohort of young Scots can be attributed to the lowering of the voting age and how much has to be credited to the unique experience of the referendum is difficult to disentangle. In Scotland, the referendum and the lowering of the voting age coincided. Their individual effects on young people cannot be isolated from one another. From comparisons of young people in Scotland to their peers in the rest of the UK we can conclude that there was at least some distinctive effect of the inclusion of 16- and 17-year olds on their hypothetical likelihood to vote in the 2015 General Election, if they had been allowed to, and their engagement with information about politics in the media. However, much of the difference in young people's participation in demonstrations, boycotts, petitions and their engagement with members of parliament probably has to be credited to the unique referendum experience (Eichhorn, 2017).

We already tried to give an impression of how much the referendum mobilized people of all age groups, including young people. A closer look at how young people in Scotland experience the opportunity to vote can help us assess how much of this change is attributable to the lowering of the voting age and whether any changes are likely to have a lasting impact on youth participation in the future. Based on survey data collected among young people aged 16 and 17 years in Scotland ahead of the 2015 General Election (Eichhorn, 2017) and qualitative interviews with twenty Scottish young people aged 15 to 18 years recruited in schools after the referendum (Huebner, forthcoming) we can start to better understand how young people in Scotland experienced the referendum campaign and the lowering of the voting age.

#### *7.4. How young Scots experience voting at 16*

Young people can be their own worst critics. They often think that politics is too complicated for them to understand, that it is "*over my head*" (Katie, 17).<sup>1</sup> Youth in Scotland find politics just about as hard to understand as their peers elsewhere in the UK: around 55 per cent say they find it difficult (Eichhorn, 2017). But what seems to have changed since the voting age was lowered is that young Scots appear more confident in dealing with political issues.

There are several indicators that suggest greater levels of confidence - or internal political efficacy - among young people in Scotland, both in themselves and their peers. Young Scots

are more likely to talk to friends or family about politics. Around 60 per cent of Scottish 16- and 17-year olds say they talk to their friends and family about political issues compared to just about a third of young people in the rest of the UK (Eichhorn, 2017). Not only are young people in Scotland more likely to vote or to engage with politics than young people elsewhere in the UK. They are also more likely to think that it makes a difference who gets elected and that how the UK is governed matters for their own lives (Eichhorn, 2017). In our interviews, Ross (18) articulated how powerful being able to vote makes him feel and how he thinks his vote is making a difference:

*"I definitely... I feel like I definitely got more power. I have sort of a say on like who's gonna go and be in power. So I definitely feel good about being able to vote. Definitely. (...) I think like my votes will like change things. Like the local elections that I took part in, like my vote helped to like lower the majority that a party held, which was like, I felt quite proud about."*

And young Scots are also much more likely to be in favor of the voting age being lowered for all UK elections – a sign of their confidence in themselves and their peers. Two thirds of 16- to 17-year olds in Scotland feel that young people should be given the right to vote in all elections compared to only half among their peers in the rest of the UK (Eichhorn, 2017). They believe that the act of voting itself gives young people more confidence, Emma (17), for example:

*"And I think there this sort of strength that's come with the voting age being lowered in the Scottish referendum. 'Cause like before it was kind of like constant "Young people don't care about anything." Like "You're just like all off in your own little, frivolous worlds" and "You just don't have enough brains or intelligence or selflessness to care about these issues", when actually they were teaching us to be selfless and they were teaching us to care. And then they lowered the voting age and then suddenly there was this feeling of "Our voices do matter. And we can be engaged."*

Undoubtedly, the referendum experience and the lowering of the voting age played a key role in this increase in political efficacy among young people in Scotland. Taken together, they provided an environment that mobilized young people, that allowed them to connect to formal political institutions such as political parties and, ultimately, to see themselves as independent citizens. Young people describe the experience of the independence referendum as their "*political awakening*" (Ben, 16), a time where they first came to think about politics. Hamish (15), for example, says that he became interested in politics with the referendum "... 'cause that was the first time that I really properly considered politics, I think." Because they were allowed to vote, even some previously disinterested and unengaged young people started to

actively follow and engage with politics during and immediately after the referendum (Breeze et al., 2017). Breeze et al. (2017) also illustrate how closely bound up young people's political engagement was with their growing independence and transition to adulthood.

We identified a number of factors that make young people in Scotland more confident to take political decisions and most of these were particularly potent during the time of the referendum. Discussing politics with parents or friends, or taking a civics-style class positively impact young people's likelihood to vote or to be involved in politics, because they give young people an opportunity to engage with politics and witness how others form their opinions. Reminiscing the referendum campaign, Ben (16) says:

*"I mean, like no one could avoid it. So, I mean, debate was pretty much inevitable certainly. Eh, it was certainly interesting to be able to see other people's opinions and that kind of stuff."*

While talking to parents or friends mainly impacted how interested in politics and likely to vote young people said they were, it was particularly class discussion that contributed to young people's increased confidence to make political decisions. This is also what differentiates the youngest voters' experiences in the referendum most clearly from the rest of the population during this special referendum period. The vast majority of young Scots said that there was at least a little or even much discussion in class during the referendum campaign (86 per cent) and that they enjoyed learning about the referendum (85 per cent). More than a third of young people even wished there had been more discussion in school. And also those who felt ill-informed wanted more discussion or more teaching in school (Hill et al., 2017). While talking to parents and friends seems important for general interest and to instill the necessity to vote, we found that those who had discussed the referendum in class were much more likely to say that politics was not too difficult to understand and that they were confident to make a decision regarding the referendum issue (Eichhorn, 2014; 2018). Even well after the referendum, young people in Scotland are more likely to discuss political issues in class. Almost two thirds of young Scots say they have recently discussed politics in a classroom setting compared to a little more than half among young people elsewhere in the UK (Eichhorn, 2017). There are also more young people in Scotland, who choose a civics-style class in school, although formal civic education subjects are not mandatory in Scotland. 41 per cent of Scottish young people say they had chosen such a class, most likely Modern Studies, a subject which seeks to develop young people's knowledge and understanding of contemporary political and social issues (Andrews & Mycock, 2007). In contrast, in the rest of the UK only 20 per cent of young people say they took a civics-style class (Eichhorn, 2017).

It is difficult to disentangle cause and effect based on the cross-sectional data that is available on young people, their interest in and engagement with politics. However, regression analyses allow us to show that, keeping all other things equal, it is discussion in class that contributes most to young people's confidence to engage with political issues. Young people who had discussed political issues in a classroom setting were more confident in their understanding of political issues (Eichhorn, 2018). While it seems that young Scots turn to friends and family for political opinions, they seem to rely on schools to provide factual or educational information that, ultimately, gives them confidence in their own judgement. Hence, it is also the difference in uptake of political education and in-class discussion that explains some of the difference in young people's confidence with politics between Scotland and the rest of the UK. In other words, participation in civics-style classes and more frequent discussions of political issues in a classroom setting give young people in Scotland that extra bit of confidence in dealing with political issues.

#### *7.5. What we can learn from experiences in Scotland*

The experience of lowering of the voting age in Scotland shows that, under certain circumstances, 16- and 17-year olds can benefit from being enfranchised at an early age. Compared to their peers in the rest of the UK, where the legal voting age remains at 18, young people in Scotland were more engaged in politics and showed greater levels of confidence in their own ability to understand politics and make political decisions in our detailed analyses from 2015. The Scottish experience dispels a number of myths about young people and politics: that young people are not interested in political issues, that they are not mature enough to take political decisions, that they do not care about voting, and that they blindly follow their parents or social media to form political opinions. In contrast, we found Scottish young people to be as interested in political issues as adults, to use a variety of information sources and to hold different opinions from their parents. In the question of Scottish independence, some young people even influenced their parents with their opinions. And most importantly, Scottish 16- and 17-year olds did turn out to vote in Scottish elections, first and foremost the 2014 referendum on independence (estimate around 75 per cent).

The Scottish case also shows how 16- and 17-year olds are different from 18- to 24-year olds. Experiences with first-time voters in the latter age group cannot simply be transferred to those a few years younger. More 16- and 17-year olds turned out to vote in the 2014 referendum

on Scottish independence than their peers aged 18 to 24 years. There are a number of possible reasons for this. We have highlighted the particular importance of civics education and discussions in a classroom setting for young people to develop confidence in their own political judgement and as space to learn about and debate political issues. 16- and 17-year olds are much more likely to be in secondary education than their older peers, and thus much more likely to benefit from civics education and discussions in a formal educational setting. Younger people are also more likely to still live at home, talk about politics with their parents and be motivated to vote by parents and friends.

Experiences from Scotland also provide us with important insights on what kind of circumstances make votes at 16 successful. We found that, in particular, classroom discussion and civics-style education were key for the success of the extension of the franchise to 16- and 17-year olds in Scotland. Above all young people seek out formal politics education and discussions of political issues in a classroom setting. Both help them to get an idea of the different points of view on political issues and to form their own opinions. In Scotland, participation in civics-style subjects and discussions of political issues in class were associated with greater confidence in understanding politics and in making political decisions. For many young people discussions with parents and friends were important, too, especially because discussions were inevitable in and around the 2014 referendum. But instead of just adopting the political opinions of friends or family members, young people seek to critically assess them. They rely on schools to provide them with balanced information that enables them to discuss with others. In that sense, school acts as a facilitator for young people's engagement with politics, while discussions with family and friends are important to get young people interested in political issues in the first place.

Lastly, the Scottish example is a remarkable case of a change of heart on the matter of the voting age among publics and politicians. In a period of less than four years the tide turned for votes at 16 in Scotland. While in 2011 much of the public was opposed to early enfranchisement, by 2015 most Scots were in favor of changing the franchise, including a broad coalition of political parties. This was largely due to the overwhelmingly positive experience of 16- and 17-year olds voting in the Scottish independence referendum. And it has resulted in young people being included in other parts of Scottish society as well, for example the media.

Before we treat the Scottish case as a wholly positive example of the implementation of votes at 16, however, some cautionary aspects need to be raised. The experience of lowering of the voting age in Scotland has brought a number of issues to the fore – some of which are still unresolved to date. One particular problem in Scotland was the inclusion of 16- and 17-year olds in the electoral roll (Stewart et al., 2014). In Scotland, voters must register to be included in the electoral roll and be allowed to vote. Anyone aged 16 or older can register, but this formerly excluded young people who turned 16 after the cut-off date. For the referendum on Scottish independence, administrators went to great lengths to enfranchise 16- and 17-year olds, including the creation of a separate electoral register. At the time this raised questions about potential tensions between electoral registration and child protection (Curtice, 2014). The creation of a separate electoral register for 16- and 17-year olds also allowed for specific targeting of young first-time voters, which makes it somewhat tricky to compare their engagement with the referendum with that of 18- to 24-year olds (who were not specifically targeted).

We have highlighted the special role of formal civic education and in-class discussion for young people's confidence to engage with politics. This finding raises the question how schools and teachers, in particular, accept and fulfil this role in the Scottish context. In a survey conducted by Hill and colleagues (2017) Scottish teachers expressed difficulties with the concept of political literacy. Few saw it as a core part of civic education. Instead, for a majority of teachers moral and social responsibility as well as community involvement took precedence over political literacy. Half of the teachers surveyed also expressed concerns regarding their students' political maturity and knowledge. While Hill and colleagues find that Scottish pupils and teachers agreed on the importance of balance and the necessity to avoid partiality and bias when discussing political issues in the classroom, few teachers felt confident to achieve this. Political education is considered a minefield of potential 'indoctrination' and teacher bias and has traditionally been anti-political in the UK, including in Scotland (Frazer, 2000). In the context of the referendum on Scottish independence local councils issued guidance on how school teachers should engage with the issue. Not only did this lead to somewhat different approaches in different constituencies. It also split teachers. While some teachers wanted more materials and clearer guidance on how to organize class discussions on controversial issues, others – including many students – thought that the guidance that was issued was "unnecessarily constraining" (Hill et al., 2017, p. 65). Given the particular role of civic education in young people's political development, it seems imperative that teachers are adequately supported in achieving balance when discussing political issues in the classroom.

Difficulties with the electoral register and the teaching of political literacy can certainly be overcome with time. However, this is less so for the conceptual issues the Scottish case raises. The lowering of the voting age brought about a contradictory situation, in which young people in Scotland are allowed to vote in some, but not all elections. 16- and 17-year olds can now vote in all Scottish elections, but they are not allowed to vote in UK-wide elections. This means that while 16- and 17-year olds voted in the 2016 elections for the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, most of these young people were not entitled to vote in the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union, which took place less than two months later. The same situation applied to 2017, when young Scots were asked to the ballot in the local council elections in May, but were not enfranchised in the UK's general election for the parliament at Westminster in June. Many young people are dismayed by this contradiction – a finding that is also reported by Breeze et al. (2017) and Hill et al. (2017). Russell (16), a participant in Breeze et al.'s study (2017, p. 771), complains: *"I've been disenfranchised, that's horrible, I got to vote in the Referendum, the most important thing ever, and now I don't get a vote in the General Election, that's pretty crap."* In Huebner's study (forthcoming), Lauren (16) says that not being allowed to vote in all elections makes her feel like a partial citizen: *"I mean, I feel like a citizen, but I feel like a partial citizen in a way that I don't have the same rights as everybody else."* And when comparing the situation of young people in Scotland to those in Wales or England, Hamish (15) finds the playing field is not level:

*"Eh, I think, eh, pff, I think I'd support a move to either lower it to 16 for the general elections or put the council and Scottish elections back up to eighteen. Just so that that's a level playing field. (...) The English 16 year olds certainly, they don't get to vote in their council elections. But then the Scottish ones do. And that's not fair. It's not part of a balanced democracy in that case."*

The differential treatment does not only pertain to the Scottish versus the UK level. Also within Scotland 16- and 17-year olds still face barriers to their full inclusion into the citizenry – despite being able to vote. The formal markers of adulthood are incongruous in Scotland and the lowering of the voting age has certainly not lessened the differential treatment of young people. If 16- and 17-year olds are deemed responsible and mature enough to vote, why then are they not allowed to run as candidates in elections (the legal age continues to be 18) and why can they not be cited to appear in a jury (also from age 18)? These discussions are still to be had in Scotland as well as the rest of the UK. It remains to be seen how the enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year olds will be aligned with other entitlements and responsibilities of young people in Scotland, for example that of candidacy or jury service.



### *7.6. Questions that the Scottish case leaves to answer*

It has been a turbulent couple of years in Scotland. In the five years following the Scottish parliament's decision to lower the voting age, people in Scotland were called to the ballot box no less than six times. However, the newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year olds were only allowed to vote in three out of these six elections: the 2014 referendum, the 2016 Scottish Parliament elections and the 2017 local council elections. They were not enfranchised for the 2015 and 2017 UK General Elections and for the 2016 referendum on UK's membership in the EU. This leaves us with a lot of questions on how these newly enfranchised young people would have participated in other elections. Out of those elections that 16- and 17-year olds were allowed to vote in, we only have data on their turnout in the Scottish independence referendum. Reliable data on turnout by age is lacking for other elections.

It is unclear how much of the positive experience with votes at 16 in Scotland pertains to the particular cohort that was enfranchised during the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence and how it will affect younger cohorts. Throughout this chapter we have illustrated what a unique experience the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence has been and how mobilizing it was for many Scots, not the least for young people. Some findings – for example that on Scottish young people's increased non-electoral participation – may well be an effect of the aftermath of this unique experience, when thousands joined political parties and debated about further constitutional change. It remains to be seen if ensuing cohorts – those who have been less or not at all involved in the referendum – will show similar levels of engagement. Similarly, considering the unusual circumstances of the referendum vote (and arguably other recent elections and political events that have drawn a lot of interest in the UK, e.g. the EU membership referendum or the 2015 and 2017 General Elections), we have to reflect on the question what kind of political engagement young people are getting used to on the basis of this experience. Mycock argued that the particular nature of the referendum vote might very well teach young people how important it is to get involved in politics, but also to look at politics in a binary and adversarial way: "It is unclear whether young Scots are continuing to fight the independence campaign or have established a deeper commitment to traditional democratic politics – be it Scottish or British." (Eichhorn & Mycock, 2015, p. 23).

It remains to be seen whether more “ordinary” kinds of elections, such as parliament or local elections, would generate a similar amount of interest and engagement among the youngest cohorts. There is reason to doubt this. While some young people are happy that they are able to engage at ages 16 or 17, regardless of the level of election, others are more skeptical about their partial involvement. Ross (18), for example, is proud of his participation in the 2017 local council elections and believes his vote made a difference:

*"Like the local elections that I took part in, like my vote helped to like lower the majority that a party held, which was like, I felt quite proud about. Like 'I've helped changing this.'"*

Emma (17, and usually very involved in politics) is more skeptical. Reflecting on the different levels of interest that national and local politics draw, she says:

*"The council election I was just kind of like don't really know what's, I feel like there's kind of a divide between like local politics and...like national politics. Whereas like national politics is quite easy to get involved in. With your council you're just like, 'I don't know who any of these people are personally. I'll just like vote randomly.'"*

We need more and reliable data on young people's turnout in elections, their interests and vote choice quality as well as qualitative insights into young people's evaluation of different kinds of elections before we can answer questions on how the story about Scotland and young Scottish voters continues.

A finding that made many particularly hopeful was that of increased levels of non-electoral forms of participation among the youngest Scottish voters, such as participating in demonstrations, boycotts, signing petitions, or corresponding with an elected representative. This kind of connection between the lowering of the voting age and broader experiences of political engagement would be quite remarkable and very encouraging for proponents of a lower voting age. However, as Eichhorn (2017) reports, much of that increase probably has to be credited to the unique referendum experience. The more robust effects are reported for voting and general political interest. While it would certainly be a good outcome if, by means of a lower voting age, young people learnt about the importance of participating in elections, voting is not the only form of political participation. Campaigns in favor of the lowering of the voting age like the one we have witnessed in Scotland run the danger of purporting an image of political engagement that revolves solely around voting. Or as Ross (18) says "...voting's

*really...the main thing we can do.* “Young people need opportunities to engage with politics in other ways, too, in order to develop broader feelings of political efficacy. Either because they simply want to “do” politics differently or in order to develop a comprehensive image of the role of the citizen.

Finally, our findings on the particular role of schools and classroom discussion in the development of young people’s political literacy and confidence raise questions around the role of knowledge and education for young people’s political engagement. What does good civic education look like and what are the mechanisms through which it impacts young people’s political efficacy? We need to understand how education and the classroom experience impact young people’s willingness and confidence to engage with political issues, what the effects are on different kinds of young people, and what good civic education can and should look like. Qualitative and applied research that is embedded in the day-to-day context of schools is required to answer these questions. We need to learn what exactly happens in the classroom when teachers and students discuss political issues and how in this context young people’s political development can be guided and facilitated. We also need to ask questions about who exactly benefits from this kind of virtuous circle of political interest, civic education, and political engagement. We have seen that shortly after the independence referendum young Scots of different social classes showed very little difference in their levels of engagement, while in the rest of the UK young people of lower social status were much less likely to be involved. Based on this finding alone it could be argued that the lowering of the voting age is a way to alleviate social class differences in political participation, possibly because it removes factors that contribute to inequalities later in life, for example going to university. However, it seems just as plausible that in a world where classroom discussion and the confidence of teachers to address controversial political topics is key for young people’s engagement with politics pupils at better schools or with well-trained teachers grow more confident in their own political decisions. Research needs to explicitly address questions on inequalities of participation in this context, in order to avoid that recommendations for more civic education disproportionately benefit those young people who have better access to it. In order to evaluate these hypotheses, we do not only need more data on young people’s engagement with political issues. We particularly need substantive data that allows us to evaluate smaller groups of young people, for example when broken down by their social status, and long-term studies that follow young people’s development over time.



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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms. All qualitative data from Huebner (forthcoming).