Section 1: Focus on lowering the voting age (in response to question 4)

In the past studies focussing on a hypothetical lowering of the voting age had to rely on indirect investigations to assess its potential impact. However, we now have comprehensive insights from actual empirical experiences of voting age reductions, most comprehensively in Austria (where the voting age was lowered to 16 for elections at all levels in 2007) as well as Scotland (where the voting age was lowered initially for the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 and subsequently for all further local and Scottish Parliament elections). Based on studies on the empirical impact in those cases, we can preliminarily conclude that early enfranchisement can indeed have positive effects on civic engagement of young people. However, it is important to note that these positive impacts are also related to other relevant factors, in particular civic education. The following paragraphs will present more details.

Austria provides us with the longest-term European example of a lowered voting age. Researchers in the country identified both initially positive effects on civic engagement and attitudes of young people, characterised as a “first-time boost”\(^1\), but were also able to demonstrate the existence of long-term positive effects.\(^2\)

The findings in Austria correspond closely to insights gained from research into the Scottish experience that was carried out by a team at the University of Edinburgh and coordinated by the author of this evidence submission, albeit on a much shorter timescale than the Austrian studies, of course.\(^3\) During the 2014 independence referendum itself, the research showed that prospective first-time voters

- Showed similar levels of interest compared to the average adult population in Scotland;
- Increased their engagement with a great variety of news sources on political issues;
- Did not simply follow their parents’ lead (with more than 40% holding a different view to one of their parents).\(^4\)

Traditionally, turnout amongst the youngest age groups was measured to be the lowest in most elections across Scotland and the UK.\(^5\) However, in the Scottish independence referendum, turnout at 75% amongst 16- to 17-year-olds was greater than for the next older age group (18-24) at only 54%.\(^6\) While it was still lower than the overall population average (85%) the gap was much

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3 ESRC-funded project “Survey of Young Scots”. Reports available from the Applied Quantitative Methods Network (AQMeN) at [http://aqmen.ac.uk/referendum/youngpeople](http://aqmen.ac.uk/referendum/youngpeople).

4 Eichhorn, J., Paterson, L., MacInnes, J. and Rosie, M. 2013. ‘Results from a survey on 14-17 year old persons living in Scotland on the Scottish independence referendum’. AQMeN briefing paper.


smaller than in any previous vote, while the difference for the 18- to 24-year olds remained large. This provides an important insight countering prior work that was critical of electoral franchise expansion based on the study of adult first time voters aged 18 or above. Studies based on opposing early enfranchisement based on the observation that 18-24 year olds comparatively did not make as much use of their vote have to be called into question, as we see that 16- to 17-year-olds seem to behave differently to their slightly older counterparts. Indeed, this mirrors findings elsewhere that younger first-time voters show higher participation rates than slightly older first-time voters. Voting at 16 or 17 seems to be a very different experience to voting at a slightly older age and seems to be engaged with more at this earlier age.

In addition to the age comparison in the context of the Scottish independence referendum, we also have carried out work to assess whether differences between young Scots and their respective counterparts in the rest of the UK (RUK), who had not previously been enfranchised at 16, existed in advance of the 2015 general election. Based on two representative samples of 16 and 17 year olds in Scotland and RUK respectively we were able to find the following:

- Scottish 16- and 17-year olds were much more likely to say that they would be very likely to vote in general election if they were allowed to (67%) compared to their peers in RUK (39%).
- Furthermore, the young Scottish respondents were also more likely (57%) to have taken part in at least one form of non-electoral form of political participation (such as signing a petition, writing to a member of parliament or taking part in peaceful demonstrations) compared to their counterparts elsewhere (40%).
- 16- to 17-year olds in Scotland were also more likely to recently have used a wider range of information sources to get to know more about politics. While 60% in Scotland reported having used at least 3 of 6 possible information source types, only 43% in the rest of the country said the same.

In summary, previously newly enfranchised 16- to 17-year-olds in Scotland showed higher levels of civic engagement ahead of the 2015 general election compared to their RUK counterparts.

The differences between Scotland and RUK were not merely a consequence of the Scottish independence referendum. While some of the variation could be attributed to factors related to the referendum, some of the difference between Scotland and RUK are not explained when taking those into account. While the Scottish independence referendum presented a unique situation and is responsible for some of the uptake in civic engagement in Scotland generally, including for

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young people, some additional effects could be observed for 16- to 17-year olds specifically that are not exclusively linked to the referendum.

These findings were extensively acknowledged and cited by the Scottish Parliament’s Devolution (Further Powers) Committee in their concluding recommendation to lower the voting age for all Scottish elections\(^\text{12}\), which was ultimately adopted unanimously by the Scottish Parliament. The research has also been acknowledged in a motion in the House of Commons\(^\text{13}\) and cited in further debates.\(^\text{14}\)

In addition to measuring differences in the average degree of civic engagement, we also find differences in the social distribution between young people in Scotland and RUK. 16- to 17-year-olds in RUK showed the classic social class pattern ahead of the 2015 general election. Those in higher social classes were more likely to say they would vote, if they could, they also were more likely to have participated in non-electoral forms of engagement and tended to use a greater range of information sources compared to peers from lower social classes. In Scotland we were not able to find this pattern anymore in 2015. There were no statistically significant differences between young people of different social classes regarding their civic engagement.\(^\text{15}\) This suggests that - in addition to higher levels of civic engagement amongst newly enfranchised young people in Scotland - also inequalities in civic engagement were lower compared to their RUK peers.

\textit{Section 2: Focus on civic education (in response to question 5)}

Civic education plays a very important role in enabling young people to engage politically, both in terms of voting\(^\text{16}\) and non-electoral forms of participation.\(^\text{17}\) Educational research has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of civic education and knowledge for supporting pro-civic political socialisation of young people with its effects complementing socialisation through the family.\(^\text{18}\)

However, it is crucial to distinguish between different types of civic education and their respective effects. While the formal instruction of “civics” (such as the study of political structures and processes) is meaningful in particular to acquire knowledge, it is insufficient in achieving comprehensive support of pro-civic attitudes and behaviour in young people.\(^\text{19}\) In addition to


\(^{19}\) Torney-Purta, J. 2002. ‘The School’s Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in
formal instruction, researchers have shown repeatedly that engagement with political issues in the classroom in a discursive format is crucial to achieve greater political participation of young people.\(^\text{20}\)

We found these findings confirmed in our own research of 16- and 17-year-olds in the UK.\(^\text{21}\) Pupils who had taken a class where political issues were studied formally were more likely to have

- participated in non-electoral forms of participation,
- been using a greater range of information source types, and
- said that they did not find politics difficult to understand.

However, only students who were in classes were political issues were actively discussed additionally were more likely to say that

- they would be very likely to vote in an election if they were allowed to do so,
- it made a difference who got elected to office, and
- 16-year-olds should be given the right to vote in all elections.

In summary, an interplay between formal civic education and active discussions of political issues in the classroom is required to achieve comprehensive positive effects for civic engagement and attitudes.

Our research, in accordance with previous work in the field cited earlier, suggests that formal civic education and qualified discussions of political issues in the classroom should be a mandatory part of school education for all pupils, as otherwise some would be better prepared to become active citizens than others.

There are substantial differences in the proportion of young people who are exposed to such classes across the UK. While 68% of 16- to 17-year-olds in Scotland said they had taken a class in school in which mainly issues about politics and society were discussed, only 50% of their peers elsewhere said the same. Young people in Scotland were also more likely to have discussed political issues recently with friends (65%) or family (63%) compared to their RUK peers (38% and 39% respectively).\(^\text{22}\)

Young people who discussed political issues in class in Scotland were also more likely to discuss political issues with their family at home.\(^\text{23}\) This is an important insight, as it suggests that young people are not only affected by other agents, such as schools or parents, but may also become influential in shaping discussions with them, when being enabled.

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previous research\textsuperscript{24} and suggests that earlier political socialisation of young people may have broader societal effects, including on their parents.

In line with these findings, we could also observe increased support amongst the general population in Scotland for 16-year olds voting in elections. While support was traditionally low (at about 30\%\textsuperscript{25}) and support in the rest of the UK remains at about one third as well\textsuperscript{26}, a majority of Scots now supports the lowering of the voting age to 16 for elections at all levels.\textsuperscript{27}

18 August 2017

\textsuperscript{27} Scottish Parliament. 2015. ‘Devolution (Further Powers) Committee. Stage 1 Report on the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill, 4\textsuperscript{th} Report (SP Paper 725)’. (p. 65)