

# **Votes at 16 in Scotland, Wales and Austria: Lessons for Aotearoa New Zealand**

**A report prepared for the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust**

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# Executive Summary

In an era of multiple challenges to healthy democracies, ensuring positive participation in elections and political conversations is more critical than ever. Lowering the voting age is one step that a number of countries have taken to broaden democratic participation and help to foster engaged, informed and lifelong voters. In doing so they have provided a clear body of evidence in support of the youth-led, grassroots campaign for votes at 16 in Aotearoa.

This report sets out high level findings from nineteen interviews I conducted with individuals and organisations in Scotland, Wales, and Austria in 2023 about those countries' experiences of votes at 16. I also asked about their approach to citizenship education for young voters. I supplemented these with additional research on the impact of votes at 16 across other states in Europe. All three countries have unique political systems which shape voting practices, preferences and the outcomes of elections. What is consistent is their broadly positive experience of votes at 16, demonstrating that there is little to fear and much to gain from lowering the voting age in Aotearoa.

First, it's clear that young voters make responsible political choices. Like any age group they have a wide variety of values and priorities, which are reflected in how they vote. There is no evidence that young voters make political decisions that are any less 'legitimate' than older voters. Nor are there simple conclusions to draw about their preferences or political allegiances.

Secondly, positive early life voting experiences help people to practice informed decision making and deliberation, and to build connections between their own experiences with the process of law and policy making. With votes at 16, a higher proportion of young people are voting for the first time while they are attending school, creating a positive opportunity for skills-based civics education that connects to real world actions for students.

Thirdly, there is positive evidence from Austria and Scotland about the long-term positive impacts of early voting on turnout. 16 and 17 year old first time voters continue to vote in higher numbers later in life compared to those who don't (or can't). These trends are supported by research in other countries who have lowered the voting age. While it's too soon to draw conclusions as to why, experts point to the significant benefits of the stability and community connections of starting to vote in early adolescence, compared to at the age of 18 to 21 which can be a time of upheaval when young people leave home.

However, there are important lessons to be learned about implementing voting age changes and high-quality civics education. Political parties need to engage with

young voters in ways that are genuine and accessible, through taking seriously issues that motivate them and in the mode and manner of communication. Journalists and producers should likewise make an effort to reach young people – their duty to inform them as citizens and take seriously their concerns as voters. Electoral processes, in particular registration and the accessibility of information about voting and political parties, must be accessible. Opportunities for young people to discuss the meaning and role of votes, voting and political decision making should be embedded in schools and other spaces of learning from an early age. And most critically, for genuine and sustained success, young people need to lead and inform how changes are implemented.

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## Introduction

Enfranchisement is an inherently political issue. Who gets a say on how social, economic and political decisions are made is fundamentally a question of power. States governed by representative democracies have increased over the past century, but it is worth recalling just how contested the basic principle of the right to vote has been, and how recently many democracies excluded large numbers of people from participation based on their gender, ethnicity or religion. Nor are these tussles a thing of the past.

There are multiple and ongoing threats to fair democratic participation across the globe, encompassing outright exclusion as well as disinformation and vast sums of money spent on political campaigns. All of this comes at a time when the ability of democracies to deliver good outcomes for all people is being questioned, as costs of living spiral and the climate crisis creates new challenges.

Amid this wider context, the small but growing trend to extend voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds is a positive and hopeful development. Young people's greater participation in political debate and decision making is an opportunity to 'grow the pie', and to broaden and enliven our democracy. It is not a silver bullet for waning trust or disenchantment with political decision making, but no single change to democratic process is. As we grapple with questions of intergenerational fairness - economic, social and environmental – it is worth considering where the balance of power lies in decision making that will shape the future.

That this issue is on the agenda in Aotearoa is largely thanks to the determined efforts of Make it 16, a youth-led movement who have spearheaded an effective and evidence-based campaign. Within this context, this report sets out to provide a short overview of relevant lessons from other jurisdictions who have lowered the voting age to 16, with a view to informing the wider public and political conversation about the age of enfranchisement and civics education. To understand the context, history, impact, and remaining questions on youth voting I sought out the perspectives of a wide range of people across academia, civil society, education and NGOs.

In particular I am interested in the practical implications and benefits or challenges of including 16 and 17 year olds in democratic processes, and how young people have experienced this process. This report is inherently limited in scope, and I have not set out to create new research – though more on this topic would be valuable. I hope it is a useful resource for people and organisations who are supportive of democratic innovation.

## Summary of youth voting experiences

All three countries which were the focus of this study have experiences of youth voting that can help to inform decisions made in Aotearoa. Scotland and Austria's cases are particularly helpful as they changed the voting age in 2014 and 2007 respectively, providing more data on long term trends and outcomes. Naturally all three countries also differ significantly from each other and to the New Zealand context.

### **Scotland**

Scotland's experience is one the most illustrative to draw on for Aotearoa New Zealand, with nearly a decade of data to draw on since the voting age was changed in 2014, as well as similarities in political system structure and overall population size. The history of youth voting in Scotland is deeply intertwined with the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. While young people and youth organisations had campaigned prior to that time for youth voting, momentum really took off when the Scottish National Party (SNP) successfully negotiated for 16 and 17 year olds to be able to vote in the referendum. Most other parties in the Scottish Parliament were in support, with the exception of the Conservative party.

Young people's participation in the independence referendum - both the debates as well as the vote itself - probably exceeded expectations, even if it did not ultimately change the outcome as the SNP had hoped. Schools, universities, youth and community groups, youth wings of political parties, and civil society groups mobilised to create opportunities for young voters to learn about the key issues and discuss their perspectives.

A week before the referendum, 13,000 16 and 17 year olds attended a live debate in Glasgow. By polling day, more than 90% of eligible 16 and 17 year voters had registered to vote. Following the broadly positive experience of youth voting in the referendum, the permanent lowering of the voting age became a consensus issue for all political parties in the Scottish Parliament and was passed into law shortly afterwards.

Ten years on, young people in Scotland are now able to vote in both local and national elections for the Scottish Parliament, though remain barred from voting for Scottish representatives in Westminster. Although the Scottish Parliament holds substantive power on everyday issues that affect young Scots, this variation in eligibility undoubtedly continues to impact their experiences and can lead to confusion, frustration and disengagement. This variability also impacts registration efforts by election officials and adds complexity to political education in schools as well, especially if Scottish elections fall consecutively after Westminster elections.

Civics education in Scotland is primarily delivered through Modern Studies, the study of political, social and economic issues in the UK and around the world. It is offered

from year 9 (around age 13) in some schools, and some students are able to study the subject as part of their A levels. Though it is not available at every school, it is taught at around 300 of 350 state schools, and most independent schools. Education Scotland provides guidance and oversight of the learning objectives but teachers also have the ability to bring in resources and lesson ideas on contemporary issues.

While Modern Studies is a really positive vehicle for civics education there are some ongoing challenges. Not all students who are voting at 16 are able to access the subject at school, and broader issues of different levels of quality of education and equitable access to resources across different regions hold true here as well. Local government authorities in Scotland have significant say over the content and direction of the curriculum, which can contribute to the variability of civics education. This became particularly pertinent during the independence referendum when some schools or regions were hesitant to engage with political parties or civil society in preparing students to vote.

While the learning objectives of Modern Studies lends itself well to supporting students to think critically about voting and learn more about the wider political context, how it is delivered and the wider school context are also critical. To best support young people, researchers have identified that more opportunities for deliberation and discussion in the classroom are needed. These are most effective in a wider environment where students are empowered to take their own perspectives seriously and encouraged to participate in decision making on issues that affect them, at school, at home, or in the community. Proactive efforts to address inequities in political participation are also critical.

The wider story of young people's political participation in Scotland is positive, whilst also pointing to opportunities for improvement. Firstly, the broad trend is that votes at 16 has boosted long term turnout in elections, including at ages and life-stages when people typically are not very engaged. Young voters who were enfranchised for the referendum are strikingly more likely to keep voting throughout their early twenties compared to those who voted at 18. Similarly, though not quite as significantly, young people who were able to vote at 16 or 17 turned out in higher numbers in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections. This holds true regardless of their age, gender, region or socio-economic background.

In the longer term, the lowering of the voting age does not appear to have boosted young people's other kinds of political engagement, including petitions, letters to MPs or demonstrations - despite a short surge immediately after the referendum. There are positive signs that votes at 16 and 17 initially reduced inequality in turnout in Scottish elections for young people from poorer families (generally underrepresented). However, the boost to other kinds of political engagement (including petitions and demonstrations) from the referendum did not persist over time.

## **Wales**

The case of Wales is at this stage harder to draw definitive lessons from, but nevertheless demonstrates some of the opportunities and challenges for votes at 16. Like the Scottish Parliament, there was strong support for youth voting in the Senedd (Welsh Parliament) prior to the change taking place, who nevertheless lacked the powers to make such a change. Following the 2016 devolution of additional powers to the Senedd, an expert panel was convened to consider what changes would be required to prepare Welsh politics for the future. Decreasing the voting age was part of a broader suite of recommendations which the Senedd implemented, and was trialled for the first time in the 2021 Welsh elections.

Senedd elections have long suffered from low turnout and engagement from voters of all ages in Wales, an issue deeply intertwined with the matter of the devolution of powers to the Senedd from Westminster. Unlike Scotland and Austria, the Welsh political discourse is also impacted by an under-resourced local media ecosystem, with comparatively fewer publications reporting on Senedd decisions, elections and candidates. Rates of economic deprivation are also higher in Wales than the rest of the UK, which also impacts turnout.

The first election to test votes at 16 and in 17 in Wales took place in 2021 and was significantly impacted by Covid-19, with voting happening while social restrictions were still very much in place. The timing of the election conflicted with many young people's school assessments, meaning youth engagement workers, political parties, and the media sought to engage with young people during a period where many had very limited time to engage. Without a public debate on youth voting (owing to broad support for the change at the political level), awareness of the change was lower, alongside the general lower engagement in Senedd elections.

To support youth engagement, voting information and education was mostly focused on school-based interventions, with government and civil society collaborating to try to reach a wider group of new young voters. Some examples of these include Project Vote Parallel Election, run by the Children's Commissioner of Wales, where children voted for candidates standing in a school based constituency. Another was Democracy Box Wales, co-created with students. Teachers were also provided with a number of resources through the "Hwb" hub, administered by the Welsh government. Peer-led social media campaigns were also effective in reaching specific networks or demographics of young people.

Good data on the participation of 16 and 17 year olds in the 2021 elections is not readily available, but the best evidence available suggests they turned out to vote at levels similar to other younger age groups. Patterns of socio economic inequality were also broadly repeated, with young people from families who already engage with voting being more likely to know about the election and be registered. Some young people experienced barriers to registration and the awareness raising

campaigns around the vote started too late to ramp young people up from being aware of the change, understanding what it meant for them, registering, deliberating and finally voting. A sustained and planned form of citizenship and political education in schools was not implemented, despite recommendations from observers of other youth voting changes elsewhere. The impact of Covid-19 restrictions was significant, and future elections will provide an opportunity to test how changes made in responses to lessons learnt from 2021 will affect participation and turnout.

## **Austria**

Austria is also a useful case study for broader lessons on youth voting, where 16 and 17 year olds were granted the right to vote in national elections in 2007. While there are some critical differences in terms of political system structure, and the complicating factor of EU and regional elections, the overall trend echoes the experiences of Scotland and Wales.

The genesis of youth voting in Austria was also 'top-down', with the legislation to lower the age (as well as enable postal ballots) forming part of a coalition deal between Social Democrats and Conservatives. It was not forecast publicly in advance and came as something of a surprise. However, as with the Scottish case, groundwork had been laid through campaigning by young people themselves, notably by the umbrella group Austrian Federal Youth Representative Council. In 2007 a majority of Austrian provinces had already lowered the voting age to 16 for local, and in some cases regional elections, demonstrating that a national level change was possible.

In the first election after the law change, analysis of the votes (completed manually without disaggregated data available) found that 16 and 17 year olds voted at a higher rate than 18+ year olds. This has broadly been sustained in elections in the 17 years since then, with the youngest voters also showing higher levels of satisfaction with democracy and comparative levels of political engagement. While some political parties and members of the public were opposed to youth voting when it was first mooted, votes at 16 is generally seen as the new normal now in Austria. Turnout fluctuates based on a number of different issues during each election, but Austria has one of the highest rates of electoral turnout in the EU - around 79% in 2018, compared to an EU average of 64%. Vote choice for this age group, like all ages, is affected by the wider political discourse and the perceived salience of the issues at stake in the election, but patterns of voting are comparable to those of their older peers.

Political education is well established in Austria and available in most schools, starting with more exploratory principles in primary school and then with citizenship forming one of 11 education principles in all Austrian schools. This broadly follows three pillars; firstly as a concept that is relevant to all subjects, as a subject on its own, and embedded in the democratic practices within schools. Citizenship studies

are structured differently across schools - combined variously with law, history, geography or by itself - and what is taught will be dictated to some extent by the principal, teachers and the wider school community. They are supported by a number of civil society organisations who work collaboratively with the education authorities and schools to provide support to teachers and students. A key issue is developing resources and tools to help with incorporating new and unfolding political issues into the classroom, as many students want to learn about and discuss what is happening contemporaneously. Even with this programme, some young voters still raise issues about not having enough information on voting and political candidates, and educators' tactics and resources need fairly constant innovation and adaptation to stay relevant.

## Key findings

In summary, there are some key lessons from the experiences of Scotland, Wales and Austria that can be used to guide and inform any future decisions on youth voting in Aotearoa New Zealand.

- There are many positive effects, and no demonstrable negative effects from lowering the voting age in any country where it has been implemented (though the availability of data is variable). 16 and 17 year olds empowered to vote are overall more interested in politics, likely to vote, and trusting in institutions. Generally speaking they were more engaged than people enfranchised at 18, and this effect seems to persist throughout their life.
- The substantive impact of youth voting on young voters and the wider environment will naturally vary significantly based on broader social and political developments as well as voting systems. However, there are no clear signs that 16 and 17 year olds vote, as a cohort, in a significantly different manner to other age groups in terms of which party or candidate they choose.
- Youth voting fairly quickly becomes the new normal, assuming no ongoing opposition from political parties or other groups. While this can be helpful in reducing the negative messages about young people's right or ability to participate, it can also remove the incentives to support youth participation or encourage political parties to connect with and represent young people.

- Supporting young people to engage in elections requires effort from officials, schools, the community and families, and an ability to adapt and change these approaches based on feedback. There is no one solution that will work for everyone, and proactive efforts to overcome discrimination and systemic barriers to political participation need to be at the forefront.
- The genesis for youth voting will affect what is needed for a successful implementation, as well as the barriers to and opportunities for success. “Top down” efforts with broad political accord enable the public service and other actors to work together effectively, but can (unintentionally) prevent more inclusive approaches led by civil society. “Bottom up” efforts may face more opposition and amplify negative messages about young people’s right or ability to participate, but also can create energy and awareness about youth voting that supports turnout and engagement in the long term.
- Salience is key - elections with low voter engagement and turnout will not magically be fixed by more people participating, and young people’s turnout in low salience elections should not be used to draw wider conclusions. Both the Scottish and Welsh experiences also show the potential frustration and disengagement that can be caused by different voting ages for local or national elections.
- Civics education is vital, and has long standing benefits in supporting engaged citizens beyond the act of voting itself. There is no one right way to do this, but it’s important to find a balance between a structured curriculum which supports teachers to navigate sometimes fraught territory, and enabling communities and teachers to have a say on adapting the material to suit their needs.
- As important as content is structure and process. A skills based approach which emphasises deliberation, epistemic literacy and critical thinking, is likely to be far more beneficial than simply providing information about democratic structures and voting rules. Students also benefit from a long lead-in on citizenship education, rather than one tightly focused on participating in a specific election.
- Many young people are seeking greater understanding around politics and civics, even without changes to the voting age. However, engagement in political education is more impactful when combined with the ability to take

action where your decision will have an impact. To that end, schools and communities need to combine principles of civics education and voting responsibilities with a wider environment that is empowering and supportive of young people and their rights to have a say.

## Recommendations

My primary conclusion from this research is that there are multiple benefits for New Zealand to lower the voting age to 16 for all elections - local and national - and incorporate a skills based civics education into the wider curriculum.

These changes will have the greatest impact if young people are involved in the process of enfranchisement. Election authorities, communities and schools should enable young people to help design processes, policies, and communications around the process of enfranchisement, and in get-out-the-vote campaigns in the lead up to elections.

Barriers to registration should be proactively identified, with support for young people to register in advance of reaching 16 and campaigns aimed at families, youth networks and communities to support a wider conversation about votes and voting.

Within the wider discourse, young people need to see themselves represented as voters who are capable of considering the issues and policies at stake and supported to make informed decisions. Media organisations and journalists should proactively engage with young people to understand the issues that they are concerned about as voters, and treat them with respect.

Civics education needs leadership from education agencies, teachers, and subject matter experts. To be truly effective it needs to be skills-based as well as imparting critical information about voting and elections. And finally, these changes need to be accompanied by a wider cultural environment in which young people are encouraged to appreciate and value their own perspectives and empowered to make decisions about issues that affect them.

## Sharing the lessons learned from this report

The key findings from this report have to date been shared in a number of forums. Firstly in a submission to the Independent Electoral Review Panel, which recently submitted its findings including a recommendation to lower the voting age to 16 to Parliament. Secondly to the separate Select Committee process on the Bill to lower the voting age to 16 for local elections only, which passed its first reading in the house in 2023. I've also discussed the key findings with Mana Mokopuna, the Children and Young People's Commission, and with Make it 16 - an advocacy group whose efforts led to the initial Supreme Court decision.

However, since I was awarded this Fellowship, the landscape for voting age reform has shifted substantially in Aotearoa. The National - Act - NZ First coalition government has stopped the Bill for votes at 16 from progressing to second reading, and has stated its opposition to any other kind of age reform. For the foreseeable future, it seems unlikely that any changes will take place within Parliament. However, there is much that can be done within communities to help lay the groundwork for possible future changes and I hope this report will support those who are interested to be able to do so.

## **List of contributors**

Jan Eichhorn, Senior Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh

Christine Huebner, Senior Lecturer at the University of Sheffield

Scottish Youth Parliament

Modern Studies Association Scotland

Education Scotland

Electoral Commission Scotland

Bruce Adamson, former Children's Commissioner for Scotland

British Youth Council

The Politics Project

Electoral Reform Society

Kevin Davies, Head of Public Engagement at the Welsh Parliament

Laura McAlister, Professor of Governance and Public Policy, University of Cardiff

Welsh Electoral Commission

Dr. Eva Zeiglovitz, Director at IFES

Patricia Hladschick, polis – The Austrian Centre for Citizenship Education in Schools