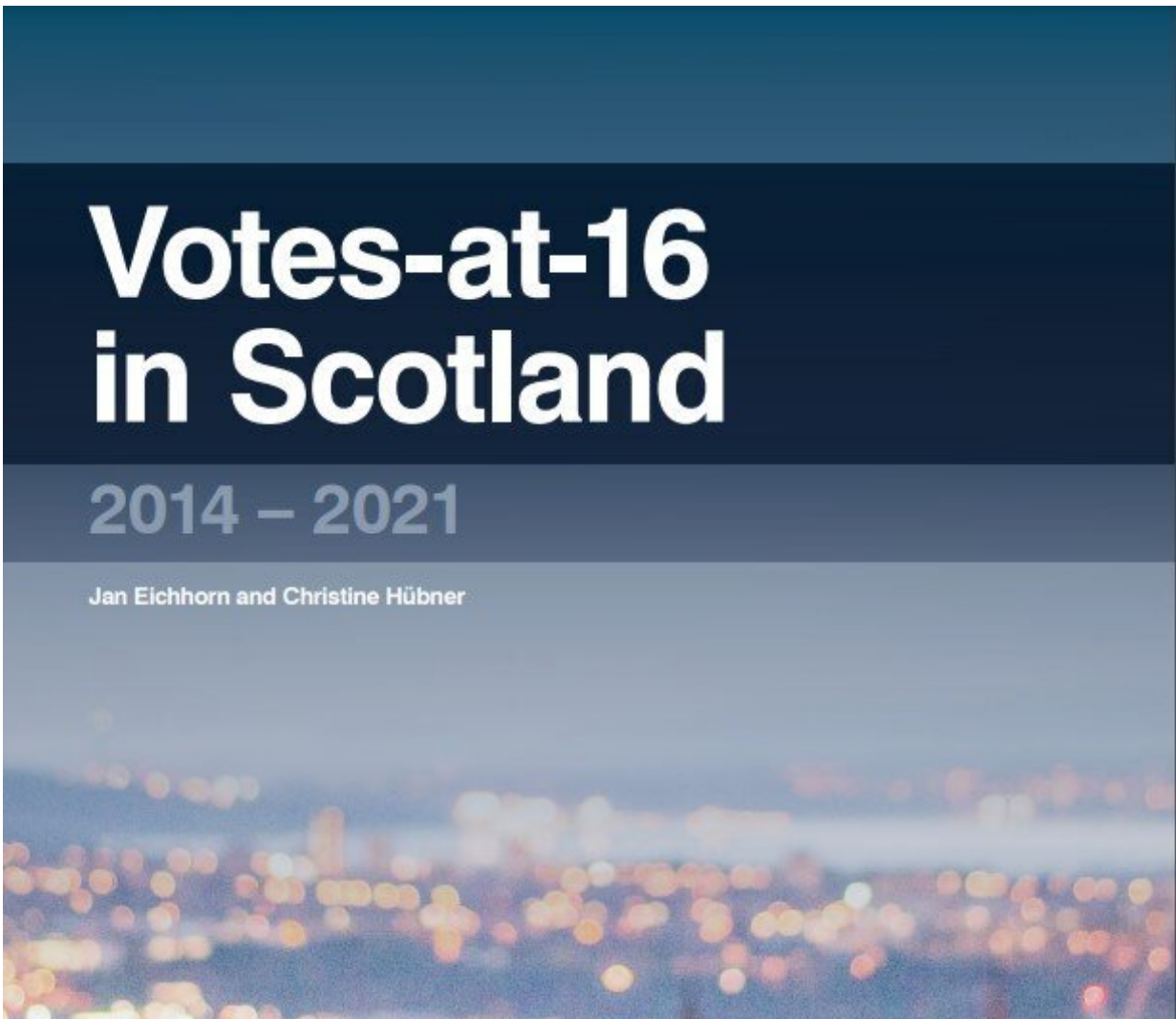


Lower voting age boosts participation in Scottish elections

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Credit: University of Edinburgh

Younger first-time voters in Scotland retain a habit of voting in elections and participate in greater numbers than older first-time voters, a study suggests.

In the 2021 Holyrood elections, people under 30 who had been able to vote from age 16 went to the ballots in greater numbers than those enfranchised from age 18, the report found.

Those who were able to vote as a 16 or 17 year-old were also more likely to continue voting into their 20s, researchers said.

Long-term impact

A team from the Universities of Edinburgh and Sheffield used voting habits from the 2021 Scottish Parliamentary elections to assess for the first time the long-term impact of Scotland lowering the voting age to 16 in 2014.

The change was introduced for the 2014 independence referendum and then extended to Scottish local and parliamentary elections in 2015.

Overall, researchers say the move has had positive long-term consequences for turnout. The boost was unrelated to whether people cast their first vote as a 16 or 17 year old in the independence referendum or in later elections.

Political engagement

However, they found lowering the voting age had no longer-term effects on non-electoral forms of [political engagement](#)—such as involvement in demonstrations and petitions—or on addressing socio-[economic inequalities](#) in political engagement.

When voting aged 16 or 17, the study found that socio-economic turnout inequalities were reduced and engagement in non-electoral politics was boosted, but these trends were not maintained as voters got older.

Patterns of inequality

Standard patterns of [inequality](#) re-emerged as people moved into their 20s, with those from higher socio-occupational classes more likely to vote.

A lasting impact was found, however, for good civic education. Those who had taken classes in school where political issues had been discussed voted in greater numbers even as they grew older.

Researchers surveyed 904 people aged 16 to 31 about their voting habits after the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections.

They compared results from [young people](#) who could vote at 16 in the referendum on Scottish independence in 2014 and Scottish Parliament elections in 2016 or 2021 to young people whose first vote was at 18 in general, local or Scottish Parliament elections since 2010.

Dr. Jan Eichhorn, of the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science, lead author of the study said, "Allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote was a good decision taken by the Scottish Parliament. Many younger first-time voters retain a habit of voting and participate in greater numbers than older first-time voters. The findings strengthen the case for enfranchising younger voters across the UK to improve long term voting behavior. But more can be done. Making sure all young people receive great civic education that includes learning how to discuss political issues well, could help reduce persistent social inequalities in turnout."

Dr. Christine Hübner of the University of Sheffield's Sheffield Methods Institute, said, "The data allows us for the first time to look into the long-term trends in voting in Scotland after 16- and 17-year-olds were given the vote. This change appears to have disrupted the usual lifecycle patterns for political engagement, with the decline in [voter participation](#) during early adulthood years—the mid-twenties—being smaller for those enfranchised at age 16. This shows these young people not only [vote](#) in higher numbers, they continue voting at ages where voter turnout is usually at its lowest. The report clearly demonstrates that advocating for a lowering of the voting age to 16 for all gives more people the opportunity to benefit from engaging with politics."

The report makes five recommendations for governments to overcome some of these inequalities and encourage lasting change in democratic engagement among young people beyond the act of voting.

These include strengthening access to political literacy in schools, encouraging young people to engage with politics, and providing opportunities for democratic debate across all age groups in places such as workplaces and educational institutions.

The team says more research could be done to understand why lowering the voting age initially reduces inequality in voter turnout and engagement but fails to last, and how that could be addressed in the future.

More information: Votes at 16 in Scotland 2014-2021 study.
www.sps.ed.ac.uk/votes-at-16-in-scotland-study

Provided by University of Edinburgh

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