Parliamentary Affairs (2015) ***68***, *291–313*
Advance Access Publication 19 September 2014
doi:10.1093/pa/gsu019

Should 16-Year-Olds Be Allowed to Vote in Westminster Elections? Public Opinion and Electoral Franchise Reform

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Britain has a long and often celebrated history of progressively expanding the electoral franchise. In recent years, the idea has been advanced to allow 16-year-olds to vote in general elections. This article uses data from a July 2013 national survey to examine public attitudes on this topic. These data show that less than one person in six favours lowering the voting age, with a large majority preferring the status quo. Younger—but not the youngest—people, men, working class and lower income persons, self-identified members of the ethnic majority and Scots tend to be most favourably disposed towards lowering the voting age. Multivariate analyses confirm these socio-demographic relationships and demonstrate that views about reducing the voting age covary in theoretically expected ways with several attitudinal variables prominent in the literature on voting, political participation and support for democratic political systems. Although statistically significant, none of the relationships of interest is especially strong. Thus, an effort to lower the age of majority would lack widespread popularity and be only weakly leveraged by the demographics of the British electorate. If franchise change occurs, it likely will be the result of an elite-driven project that succeeds because of widespread public indifference.

For centuries the UK has been one of the world leaders in electoral franchise reform. Not only is the House of Commons referred to as the 'Mother of Parliaments', but the UK was also one of the first states to enact universal enfranchisement. In 1969, it was also the first major democracy to lower the voting age to 18. Now, 45 years later, there is a debate about a further lowering of the age of political majority to 16. Although proposals to introduce this reform were defeated in Parliament in 1999 and again in 2005 (McAllister, 2013), the issue continues to be discussed.

In 2003, the Electoral Commission initiated an analysis of the age of majority subsequent to an abrupt decline in rates of participation in the 2001 general election; its report, issued in 2004, came out against the idea (Electoral Commission, 2004). At the same time, there is widespread support for lowering the age of electoral majority in parts of the voluntary sector. Both the Power Inquiry (2006) and the Youth Citizenship Commission (2008) identified benefits of the proposal, although the latter also articulated reservations.

Debate about lowering the voting age can be seen as part of a wider concern about youth disengagement from politics and elections in Britain. The 1983 British Election Study documented that 73% of those aged 18–24 voted in the general election but, by the time of the 2010 election, participation by 18–24-year-olds had fallen to 42% (Whiteley, 2014, p. 2). The Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship, chaired by the late Bernard Crick, articulated its concern about bolstering political participation by young people when it made a strong case for citizenship education in schools. The report stated that

> There are worrying levels of apathy, ignorance and cynicism about public life. These, unless tackled at every level, could well diminish the hoped-for benefits both of constitutional reform and of the changing nature of the welfare state. To quote from a speech by the Lord Chancellor earlier this year (on which we end this report): 'We should not, must not, dare not, be complacent about the health and future of British democracy. Unless we become a nation of engaged citizens, our democracy is not secure'. (Advisory Group Report, 1998, p. 7)

The report prompted the introduction of compulsory citizenship lessons in schools, an initiative which has had positive effects on political engagement among young people (Tonge *et al.*, 2012; Whiteley, 2014). It can be argued that lowering the voting age to 16 will reinforce the impact of citizenship education by allowing young people to become actively involved in the process of choosing their government. In this light, the debate on lowering the voting age can be seen as part of a broader discussion about how to revitalise British democracy.

This article examines public opinion about voting at age 16 in Britain. Survey evidence presented below indicates that people's attitudes toward the performance of the political system and their fellow citizens' matter. Specifically, individuals who are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in Britain and those who believe that there are benefits to voting support lowering the age of majority. In addition, people who have high levels of social trust and positive views of the capacities of others are more likely to favour reducing the voting age. There are also interesting demographic relationships. Younger people are more supportive of lowering the voting age than are the elderly but the relationship is curvilinear, with the probability of supporting voting at 16 being greatest among those in the 25–34 age bracket.

In addition, those of a higher status and upper income are less likely than lower status individuals and those with lower incomes to favour reducing the voting age. This is interesting because the civic voluntarism model (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba *et al.*, 1995), one of the best known theoretical accounts of political participation, argues that high-status, well-resourced individuals are the most likely to participate. So there are intriguing patterns in public attitudes about reducing the age of majority which require explanation.

The article begins by reviewing previous research on lowering the age of majority. This review motivates a theoretical discussion of likely determinants of public attitudes to the scope of the franchise in a country. This discussion focuses on what we would expect to observe when drawing on theoretical models of political participation for guidance. The third section presents analyses of public attitudes to changing the voting age to 16 using data gathered from questions asked in a national survey conducted in Britain in July 2013. In the conclusion, we discuss implications of the empirical findings for understanding the politics of voting age reform.

1. Research on reducing the voting age

Internationally, there have been voting age reductions or trial runs of such reforms in a variety of countries including Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Nicaragua, Norway, Switzerland and US states of Massachusetts and Maryland. These efforts have helped to keep the issue on the political agenda in Britain (Council of Europe, 2011).[1] In 2006, the Isle of Man reduced the voting age to 16, followed by Jersey and Guernsey in 2007. In 2012, a decision was made to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. The Northern Ireland Assembly and the National Assembly of Wales also have indicated their desire to reduce the voting age to 16, although neither body has the power to enact the change. In 2011, a report of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe endorsed lowering the voting age to 16 in the 56 member states of that organisation (Council of Europe, 2011).

Part of the discussion about reducing the voting age has focused on the normative implications of lowering it to 16, with discussion revolving around the age at which it is appropriate for different rights to be granted (e.g. Cowley and Denver, 2004; Folkes, 2004; Chan and Clayton, 2006) and the ways in which citizens are represented (Hart and Atkins, 2011). Empirical analyses also have been undertaken to inform the debate and ascertain the impact of permitting 16-year-olds to vote. Findings from this emerging literature largely focus on two topics: whether 16–17-year-olds are likely to exercise their franchise, and whether they are mature enough to make informed political choices.

[1] There also have been active discussions in recent years on lowering the voting age in Australia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Ireland, Malta and Venezuela (Council of Europe, 2011).

It is well known that young people tend to vote at lower rates than their elders, and there has been a lengthy debate regarding the reasons why young people are less likely to be active participants in the electoral process. Some scholars argue that life-cycle effects account for youth abstention (e.g. Niemi *et al.*, 1984; Plutzer, 2002; Konzelmann *et al.*, 2012), whereas others contend that there are strong generational or contextual/period effects (e.g. Blais *et al.*, 2004; Clarke *et al.*, 2004; Franklin, 2004; Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2007; Bhatti and Hansen, 2012). If life-cycle effects account at least in part for turnout differentials across age groups, then a second relevant question is the likelihood that newly enfranchised young people will exercise the electoral rights they are given.

Studies by Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) and Franklin (2004) have shown that reducing the voting age from 21 to 18 has been associated with a *decrease* in overall turnout. Blais and Dobrzynska estimate that turnout falls two percentage points for every 1-year reduction in the age of electoral majority (1998, p. 246). In a detailed analysis, Franklin shows that the cumulative effect of successive generations of people voting at 18 rather than 21 is a reduction in aggregate turnout rates of an estimated 3%–4% across established democracies (2004, chs 3 and 5).

However, several scholars, including Franklin, have argued that 16- and 17-year-olds are actually more likely to vote than those aged 18 and 19. Franklin argues that '[a]lmost any other age from fifteen to twenty-five would be a better age [than 18] to be first confronted with the need to acquire the skill and knowledge necessary for casting a vote; and since it would be politically difficult or impossible to now re-establish an older voting age, the most promising reform that might restore higher turnout would be to lower the voting age still further, perhaps to fifteen' (2004, p. 213). Folkes notes that 18–20-year-olds tend to be more highly mobile than 16- and 17-year-olds and therefore more likely to be missing from the electoral register (2004). The majority of 16-year-olds live at home with their parents and the latter might be expected to exert a mobilising influence on them. There also is some evidence that democratic practices in schools can instil participatory norms in 15–16-year-olds (Benton *et al.*, 2008). These possibilities gain empirical support from observed patterns of turnout declines among people between the ages of 18 and 21 during what are the first years of eligibility in most countries (Bhatti and Hansen, 2012; Bhatti *et al.*, 2012; Konzelmann *et al.*, 2012).

Related research shows that voting is habit-forming, such that participating in an election makes people significantly more likely to go to the polls in subsequent elections (Pultzer, 2002; Gerber *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, if people vote in the first election for which they are eligible, they are more likely to continue to do so (Franklin, 2004; Aldrich *et al.*, 2011; Dinas, 2012).[2] Thus, increasing turnout

[2]However, UK research reports that first-time voters often express a sense of disappointment following their first experience at the ballot box (Henn *et al.*, 2002).

among younger people is likely to have a 'booster effect' on overall turnout levels in the medium to long term.

Although it is too soon to know the long-term implications of the recent reforms, analyses of turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds shed light on what might happen in countries that have not yet lowered the age of majority. Following the reduction of the voting age to 16 in Austria, participation rates among 16- and 17-year-olds were comparable to those of the electorate at large, with turnout decreasing across the 16–20 age bracket (Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014). In an experiment that reduced the voting age in local elections to 16 in selected Norwegian municipalities, turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds was higher than is generally the case for first-time voters (Bergh, 2013), and there is similar evidence from German Laender (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 6). In the first elections on the Isle of Man with a reduced voting age, 57.6% of the registered youth electorate voted (although only approximately one-third of eligible 16- and 17-year-olds were entered on the electoral register due to administrative shortcomings which were identified following a formal inquiry; Wright, 2007).[3] On balance, available evidence suggests that reducing the voting age to 16 may help to alleviate youth abstention.

A second area of research concerns political maturity—specifically whether 16- and 17-year-olds have the cognitive and emotional resources needed to make reasoned political judgements (Electoral Commission, 2004; Folkes, 2004; Chan and Clayton, 2006; Benton *et al.*, 2008; Hart and Atkins, 2011). Zeglovits and Zandonella (2013) suggest that one of the main reasons that 16- and 17-year-olds exhibit less interest in and knowledge of politics is precisely because they are not enfranchised. Using the natural experiment in Austria where the voting age was reduced from 18 to 16, they were able to demonstrate that levels of political interest increased in the 16- to 17-year-old age group. After the reforms, these people exhibited interest levels comparable to 18-year-olds. Similarly, Wagner *et al.*, (2012) found that 16- and 17-year-old Austrians exhibited levels of political interest, knowledge, non-electoral participation and issue position-vote choice consistency broadly similar to those of 18-year-olds (see also Glantschnigg *et al.*, 2013). Even though younger voters reported lower levels of political interest than the overall population, they appeared capable of making informed choices.

However, not all the evidence points in a positive direction. Analysing the above-mentioned trial that introduced voting at 16 in selected Norwegian municipalities, Bergh (2013) found low rates of political maturity among 16- and 17-year-olds, even after they had been enfranchised. It is possible that the varying findings between the Austrian and Norwegian cases can be accounted for by the fact that in Norway

[3] Similar to the UK, electoral registration is effectively compulsory on the Isle of Man, in the sense that citizens are legally required to provide the information requested of them by election registration officials.

adolescents were enfranchised only in local elections and the lower salience of these second-order contests may have blunted the impact of enfranchisement on their political development. In sum, evidence regarding political maturity is mixed, and it may well be that the conclusions reached in various studies reflect normative considerations about how much maturity is 'enough' in the electoral sphere.

A third area of analysis is the normative question of the age at which different rights are granted. At 16 people in the UK can enter the world of work and pay taxes on the same basis as adults. They also can join the armed forces and can consent to sexual relations. Thus, in many of the most important spheres of people's lives, the age at which rights are granted is 16. At the same time, there are also a number of rights that are only granted conditionally at this age (Russell, 2014). People can only join the armed forces or, in most parts of the UK, marry at 16 and 17 with their parents' consent. Moreover, it may be that the financial dependence on parents which most 16- and 17-year-olds experience may lead to intellectual dependence, although this argument is less conclusive. In addition, it has been noted that the exercise of political rights is meaningless unless the holders of those rights have the capacity to use them effectively. Whether many 16- and 17-year-olds have such capacity is debatable (Degerman, 2014).

One relatively neglected area of research is what the public thinks about the enfranchisement of 16-year-olds. There have been remarkably few in-depth studies of what people, including young people, actually think if the idea of lowering the voting age to 16. However, we do know there was only limited support in most democratic states in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s for reforms to reduce the voting age to 18 (McAllister, 2013). Similarly, an ICM poll carried out in the UK in 2003 on behalf of the Electoral Commission revealed that 78% opposed the idea of lowering the voting age to 16, with many citing the inexperience and immaturity of 16- and 17-year-olds. Among people aged 18–24, the number in favour of a lower voting age was slightly higher, but it still was only 33%. Regarding younger groups, 48% of 16-year-olds and 47% of 17-year-olds favoured keeping the voting age at 18 and only 35% of 16-year-olds and 27% of 17-year-olds supported lowering it to 16 (ICM, 2003, p. 13). Similarly, a recent survey documented that only 36% of Scots supported lowering the voting age to 16 for the forthcoming independence referendum (Nelson, 2012).

Over the past decade, commercial polling agencies occasionally have fielded questions on lowering the voting age, but political scientists have played scant attention to the drivers of support for youth voting. One exception is recent research by Ian McAllister, which uses data gathered in the Australian Electoral Study (McAllister, 2013). McAllister reports that fully 94% opposed lowering the voting age to 16. Perhaps not surprisingly, he finds age to be the most important demographic factor, with younger people exhibiting more support for the measure. Another significant factor is income—people with lower incomes were

more likely to support a change than those with higher earnings. He links this latter finding to '[t]he fact is that children from households with lower incomes are more likely to leave school early to enter work. As a result, they feel a stronger entitlement to vote before they reach the age of 18 compared to those who remain at school' (McAllister, 2013, p. 6).

Below, we investigate whether these Australian findings are echoed in the UK. First, however, we discuss theoretical perspectives that may be relevant for understanding public attitudes about changing the voting age.

2. Theoretical perspectives

As the previous discussion indicates, empirical findings about lowering the voting age are limited. That said, in this exploratory analysis we can draw on the extensive literature on political participation for guidance regarding why individuals might support or oppose such a change. There are a number of theories which have been used to explain why people participate in elections (Clarke *et al.*, 2004, 2009; Whiteley *et al.*, 2013). To understand public attitudes to lowering the voting age, we draw on these theoretical ideas. One of the best known models of political participation is the civic voluntarism model, first introduced by Sydney Verba and his colleagues in the 1970s. They initially studied participation in the USA (Verba and Nie, 1972; see also Verba *et al.*, 1995) and, subsequently, their model was employed in other countries including Britain (e.g. Verba *et al.*, 1978; Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Parry *et al.*, 1992). The core idea is that participation is driven by an individual's resources which provide the means for involvement in politics and society. Verba *et al.*, define resources in terms of '*time, money and civic skills*' and argue that high status individuals who are 'resource rich' will participate more extensively than low status persons (Verba *et al.*, 1995, p. 271). Enhanced political participation includes a greater propensity to vote in elections.

The question of public attitudes to changing the voting age is not discussed directly in connection with the civic voluntarism model, but the focus on the importance of social status as a key component of political engagement carries the implication that high status individuals will favour expanding the franchise to 16-year-olds. If they are disproportionately likely to vote themselves, it is plausible that they would regard it as a good thing if other people, particularly the young, could also vote in elections. However, existing research on the relationship between social status and attitudes to voting at 16 indicates that high status individuals actually tend to oppose an extension of the franchise (McAllister, 2013). This finding is confirmed by our analyses below and it can be understood by considering another theoretical account of participation—a rational choice model.

As is well known, rational choice theory is based on the idea that individuals are calculating utility maximisers who participate in politics if the benefits of doing so

exceed the costs (Downs, 1957; Tsebelis, 1990; Clarke *et al.*, 2004). However, there is a growing literature in economics and psychology that suggests that narrowly defined rational choice models are a poor guide to actual real world decision-making (see Kahneman, 2011). To use a term introduced initially by Simon (1957) individuals are much more likely to be 'satisficers' rather than 'optimisers', that is, they seek a satisfactory rather than an optimal solution to choice problems, including those in the realm of politics.

Recent work in behavioural economics suggests that individual choice behaviour is characterised by the use of *heuristics*—simplifying devices for coping with uncertainty and reducing information-processing costs in complex choice environments (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979, 2000; Camerer, 2003; Gigerenzer, 2008; Gigerenzer *et al.*, 2011). These strong and recurrent empirical findings indicate that the standard narrowly defined rational choice model needs to be modified. In the political realm, one salient heuristic is partisanship; abundant evidence from voting studies in Britain and elsewhere shows that party labels provide people with guides for making decisions in situations where relevant information is either absent or difficult to acquire (e.g. Sniderman *et al.*, 1991; Clarke *et al.*, 2009; Whiteley *et al.*, 2013). In the context of the debate about lowering the age of majority, Labour is promising to include a commitment to reduce the voting age to 16 in its next manifesto and the Scottish Nationalists have already accepted votes for 16-year-olds in the independence referendum. Reacting to cues from their parties, Labour and SNP party identifiers should be more likely than other people to favour lowering the voting age.

A second political heuristic is provided by general ideological orientations. Historically, expansion of the franchise has been a major project for those who view widespread political participation and extensive civic engagement as part of a larger progressive political agenda. Accordingly, people on the left of the ideological continuum should be more likely to endorse expanding the franchise than those on the right. In the present context, this line of reasoning implies that the former will be more likely than the latter to support lowering the voting age to 16.

Relevant also are ideas associated with the general incentive model of participation which was developed to explain high cost, high intensity forms of participation associated with party activism (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). This model retains the insight from rational choice theory that individuals pursue courses of action where perceived benefits outweigh costs, while taking into account a broader set of incentives for action neglected by the classical model.

Rational choice and general incentives models can explain the apparent paradox of high status individuals opposing an extension to the franchise, referred to earlier. The idea is that high status individuals are more likely to participate in politics because they have more at stake and so get involved, in part, to protect their interests (Pattie *et al.*, 2004). In this regard, Oliver (2000) has shown that political

participation in the USA is greater in heterogeneous communities than in homogenous ones. His argument is that individuals do not need to participate in the latter since their interests will be protected by the fact that their fellow citizens are very much like themselves and, thus, share similar interests. This is not the case in more heterogeneous communities, where individuals with different, potentially competing, interests are likely to challenge one another for scarce resources. A perceived need to protect their interests encourages people in heterogeneous communities to participate more.

Affluent, high status individuals typically are in well-paid jobs, and so issues of taxation and public spending are important to them. In addition, they are likely to be home owners and so housing policies and planning issues are significant, and they are quite likely to oppose redistributionist policies, a common assumption in formal models of policy-making (see Melzer and Richard, 1981; Person and Tabellini, 1999). As a result, high-status individuals have an incentive to participate themselves, as well as an accompanying incentive to minimise participation by low-status people who would contest for resources. As rational actors, high-status persons will oppose actions that would expand possibly detrimental political competition.

Generally, the vast majority of teenagers are largely dependent on their families and either not in work at all or engaged in low paying jobs. The great majority pay no income tax and they are very unlikely to be home owners. Moreover, they have an interest in high levels of public spending, particularly on education, so overall their economic characteristics should ensure that they favour redistributionist policies. These considerations help to explain, in part, why young people were more likely to vote Labour in 2010 than their older counterparts (Whiteley *et al.*, 2013, pp. 119–120). This reasoning implies that high-status, high-income individuals likely will oppose lowering the voting age and may even favour increasing it. McAllister's (2013) finding that age is a strong predictor of attitudes to lowering the voting age makes sense. It is in the interests of young people to exert more influence on the political process by acquiring the vote, so not surprisingly they will be in favour of this change. However, there is an extensive literature which shows that young people are more likely to be disengaged from politics than are their middle-aged and older counterparts (Clarke *et al.*, 2004, 2009; Whiteley *et al.*, 2013). Young people have a much lower sense of a duty to vote than do older people and the electoral turnout gap between them and older cohorts is substantial. Young people's impoverished sense of civic duty helps to make them indifferent to the idea of supporting an extension of the franchise. Voting is 'not on the radar screen' for large numbers of young people. The implication is that there is likely to be a curvilinear relationship between age and support for lowering the voting age than a simple linear one. The expectation is that young people will be less enthusiastic about the idea than those in their late twenties and early thirties,

although this is not true for elderly voters. The elderly have a direct interest in ensuring that public expenditure favours them rather than the young and, accordingly, they are likely to be strongly opposed to extending the franchise to 16-year-olds.

The social capital model provides yet another theoretical perspective for developing expectations about correlates of attitudes concerning the age of majority (e.g. Pattie *et al.*, 2004). The civic voluntarism model concentrates on individual resources, whereas the social capital model focuses more on collective ones. Putnam (1993, p. 167) defined social capital as 'features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating co-ordinated actions'. The idea is that if individuals are part of a dense set of social networks involving interactions with others, not based on commercial relationships, this will foster interpersonal trust and help build social capital in society (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Fukuyama, 1995; Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Whiteley, 1999). Social capital encourages individuals to become involved in cooperative activities with other people beyond their immediate family. Communities with high levels of social capital experience higher levels of subjective well-being, better health and economic prosperity and more extensive political participation (Putnam, 1993, 2000).

The implication is that individuals who have high levels of social capital are more likely to participate themselves and are more likely to favour the participation of young people. Because social capital is the product of community resources rather than individual resources, the incentives to exclude others from participating are much less important. This is because these individuals are not in competition with each other for a scarce resource, but rather all benefit from living in a community rich in social capital. In effect, social capital has the characteristics of a public good rather than of a private good (Samuelson, 1954). This fact greatly reduces the incentives to exclude others in the community from the political process. Accordingly, we might expect individuals who are rich in social capital because they trust others and view the capacities of others favourably will support lowering the voting age. Those with high levels of social capital view people of all ages as trustworthy and competent and, accordingly, their participation in electoral politics is to be encouraged. In contrast, those who see their fellow citizens or particular groups of them as untrustworthy should be opposed to extending the franchise.

Attitudes toward the act of voting and the benefits and costs of doing so should be influential as well. Specifically, the belief that voting is a duty—a fundamental obligation of citizenship—should encourage franchise expansion. If all citizens have a duty to vote, then everyone should be allowed to fulfil this duty. As for benefits and costs, following rational choice theory, those who believe that there are benefits to be had by participating in politics will be more likely to think it is

a good idea to extend the franchise. In contrast, those who perceive significant costs associated with political participation will be less likely than others to support lowering the voting age.

Finally, judgements about political performance should be relevant. Valence politics theories of electoral choice stress the importance of evaluations of policy delivery in areas such as the economy, public services and national and personal security for understanding the dynamics of public support of political parties and their leaders (e.g. Clarke *et al.*, 2004, 2009; Whiteley *et al.*, 2013). Similar arguments have been employed to help account for variations in support for democratic political regimes and communities (e.g. Easton, 1965; Kornberg and Clarke, 1992). In the present context, the implication is that those who judge that Britain's existing democratic political system is not performing well will be more favourably disposed to changing current arrangements, including the age at which people are allowed to vote, than are those who believe that the existing system is working well. Not all those who are dissatisfied with the performance of the political system will favour *lowering* the age of majority, but some will.

Before proceeding to the empirical analyses, it bears emphasis that the voting age is not a salient issue for most people. Monthly national surveys conducted over the past decade as part of the British Election Study repeatedly document that large majorities are concerned about 'bread and butter' issues such as the state of the economy and the quality of public services rather than electoral reform or other possible changes to the political system (e.g. Clarke *et al.*, 2009; Whiteley *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, some people may not even know what the actual voting age is, although a knowledge test included in the 2010 British Election Study post-election in-person survey showed that fully 83% responded 'false' to a statement that the minimum voting age was 16 (12% thought it was). Thus, available evidence strongly indicates that although a large majority of people know what the current voting age is, possible changes in it do not rank highly on their issue agendas.

3. Who wants 16-year-olds to vote?

With these theoretical ideas and facts in mind, we present findings from a national survey of the British electorate conducted in July 2013.[4] To gauge attitudes towards changing the voting age, respondents were asked if they thought 'people should first become eligible to vote when they are: (a) 16 years of age, (b) 18 years of age, (c) 21 years of age, (d) 25 years of age'. Responses to this question summarised in Figure 1 indicate that less than one person in six (16.1%) indicated that they wanted to lower

[4]The survey was conducted via Internet as part of the 2010 British Election Study's Continuous Monitory Survey (CMS) by YouGov plc., with Joe Twyman serving as study director. The sample size is $N = 1111$. For details on YouGov's survey methodology, see http://yougov.co.uk/publicopinion/methodology/.

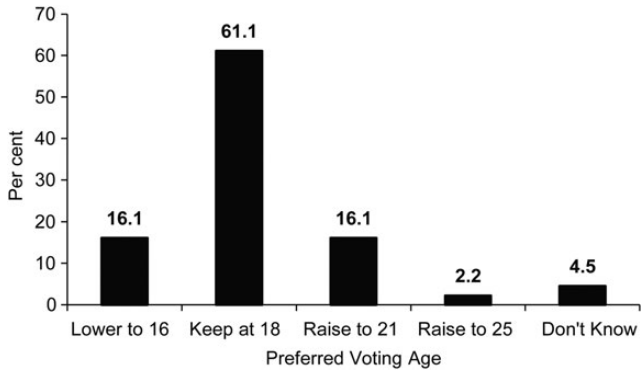

Figure 1 Distribution of public opinion regarding preferred age of majority.

the voting age to 16, with an exactly equal percentage wanting to raise it to 21. A small group (2.1%) wanted to go further and increase it to 25 and 4.5% said they 'didn't know'. The dominant sentiment—expressed by over three respondents in five (61.1%)—was to privilege the status quo and keep the voting age where it is. Clearly, there was only weak support across the electorate as a whole for the idea of lowering the age of majority.

A lack of enthusiasm for reducing the voting age to 16 characterises several major socio-demographic groups. In this regard, Figure 2 shows that less than one person in three in any of the groups defined in terms of age, country, education, ethnicity, income or social class endorses the idea.[5] However, lowering the voting age is not equally unpopular among all groups. As documented in Figure 2, reducing the voting age is somewhat more popular among men (20.4%), those aged 36–45 (27.6%), ethnic majority persons (17.4%), lower income individuals (22.7%), those in the working class (21.9%) and residents of Scotland (29.3%). The pattern for educational levels is uneven, with those leaving school at ages 16 or 19–20 being most supportive (22.3% and 20.6%, respectively). The average of these percentages is 22.8%. In contrast, the average level of support among women, lower income people, ethnic minority individuals, those with very low or very high levels of formal education, middle- and upper-class persons and residents of England or Wales is 13.4%. Viewed in broader perspective, both of these summary percentages are quite small and they testify that lowering the voting age is not an idea that is warmly received in any major socio-demographic category in the British electorate.

We next test the several hypotheses articulated above. For this purpose, we employ a multivariate statistical model that enables us to determine the significance

[5]Measurement of various socio-demographic characteristics is discussed in the the Supplementary material, Appendix.

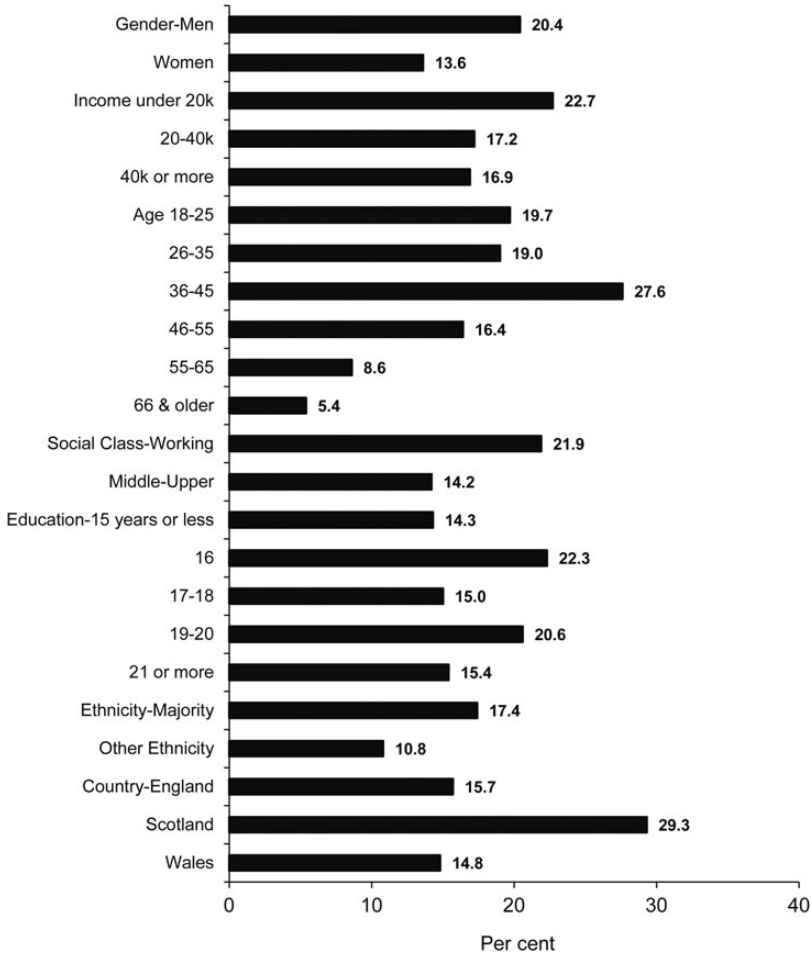

Figure 2 Percentages of socio-demographic groups favouring lowering voting age to 16.

of the effects of various predictor variables while controlling for the possible effects of the others. The dependent variable is support/opposition to lowering the voting age to 16, with those who favour the idea scored 1 and those opposed to it scored 0. Because this variable is a dichotomy, we estimate model parameters using a binomial logit model (Long and Freese, 2006). The predictor variables in the model include the socio-demographic characteristics discussed above, as well as several attitudinal variables identified in the theoretical discussion. Specifically, the latter variables include perceived benefits and costs of voting, sense of civic duty to vote, opinion about the desirability of requiring a political knowledge test as a prerequisite for voting, left–right political ideology as proxied by attitude

toward the trade-off between lower taxes and increased public services, party identification, satisfaction with the practice of democracy in Britain and level of social trust.[6] To determine if the relationship between attitudes towards lowering the voting age and age are linear or curvilinear, the logit analysis is performed twice, first with age included in its original form (Model A) and, second, with a quadratic specification that includes both age and age squared (Model B).

Results of these multivariate analyses (see Table 1) indicate that several of the predictor variables behave as anticipated. Both Models A and B show that attitudes towards civic engagement and the practice of democracy in Britain work as expected with people who perceive the benefits of political participation being more likely to endorse reducing the voting age to 16. As also hypothesised, those who are satisfied with the way democracy is working are less likely to favour lowering the voting age. Attitudes towards one's fellow citizens' matter as well; people with high levels of social trust and those who reject the idea of imposing a knowledge test as a prerequisite to vote are more likely to endorse reducing the age of majority. However, the other attitudinal predictors, that is, perceived costs of political participation, sense of civic duty, left–right ideological orientation and party identification,[7] do not directly influence attitudes towards changing the voting age.

Controlling for the several attitudinal variables, several socio-demographic predictors are statistically significant. As hypothesised, higher-income and middle- and upper-class people are less likely than others to favour lowering the voting age.[8] This is also true for men, members of the ethnic majority (self-described 'white British') and residents of Scotland. In addition, Model A indicates that younger persons are more likely to endorse the idea of lowering the age of majority than are older people. However, as also hypothesised, there is evidence that the age relationship is curvilinear. The coefficients estimated in Model B indicate that, as age increases, support for allowing 16-year-olds to vote initially rises ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.05$) and then falls ($\beta = -0.15$, $p < 0.001$). The shape of this relationship is depicted in Figure 3 which illustrates how the probability of favouring lowering

[6]See the Supplementary material, Appendix for information on the measurement of the several predictor variables.

[7]Partisan differences in support for lowering the voting age are very small. Specifically, 16% of Conservative party identifiers favour the idea, and the percentages of Labour, Liberal Democrat and UKIP identifiers doing so are 19%, 14% and 13%, respectively. Similarly, 16% of minor party identifiers and nonidentifiers endorse the idea. Even among SNP identifiers, support is decidedly a minority viewpoint, with 25% indicating they are in favour.

[8]Also consonant with the rational choice hypothesis, additional multivariate analyses indicate that higher income individuals are significantly more likely ($p < 0.01$) that other people to favour raising the voting age.

Table 1 Binomial logit analyses of preference for lowering voting age to 16

	Model A		**Model B**	
Predictor variables	***β***	**s.e.**	***β***	**s.e.**
Satisfaction—democracy in Britain	−0.238***	0.076	−0.230***	0.077
Benefits of political participation	0.342**	0.123	0.333**	0.123
Costs of political participation	0.083	0.180	0.058	0.181
Sense of civic duty	−0.050	0.081	−0.052	0.081
Knowledge requirement to vote	−0.187**	0.080	−0.157*	0.080
Social trust	0.073*	0.042	0.079*	0.042
Left–right political ideology	0.023	0.046	0.022	0.046
Party identification				
Conservative	0.376	0.274	0.401	0.274
Labour	0.160	0.241	0.126	0.242
Liberal democrat	−0.109	0.411	−0.131	0.412
UKIP	−0.191	0.451	−0.115	0.453
SNP	0.326	0.568	0.249	0.579
Other party	0.436	0.595	0.377	0.597
Age	−0.346***	0.068	0.611*	0.309
Age squared	xx	xx	−0.151***	0.048
Education	−0.087	0.059	−0.104	0.061
Ethnicity—majority	0.746*	0.342	0.723*	0.340
Gender—male	0.363*	0.179	0.351*	0.179
Income	−0.068***	0.022	−0.069***	0.022
Social class	−0.475**	0.186	−0.448**	0.187
Country				
Scotland	0.670**	0.283	0.715**	0.290
Wales	−0.115	0.429	−0.076	0.433
Constant	0.592	0.716	−0.682	0.829
McKelvey R^2	0.18		0.22	
Percent correctly classified	84.0		84.1	
AIC[†]	928.71		919.84	

Note: Respondents wishing to lower voting age to 16 are scored 1 and all other respondents are scored 0; nonidentifiers are reference category for party identification; England is the reference category for country; xx, variable not included in model.
[†]For the AIC (Akaike information criterion), smaller numbers indicate better model performance.
***p ≤ 0.001; **p ≤ 0.01; *p ≤ 0.05.

the voting age to 16 changes across several age groups.[9] As shown in Figure 3, the probability increases modestly from 0.20 among 18–25-year-olds to 0.23 among 26–35-year-olds and then falls progressively in older age groups, bottoming out at 0.03 for those aged 66 or older. This means that the age effect reaches a maximum between 21 and 35 years of age and thereafter declines in importance.

[9]Probabilities are computed using the CLARIFY procedure (Tomz *et al.*, 1999) as implemented in Stata 12.

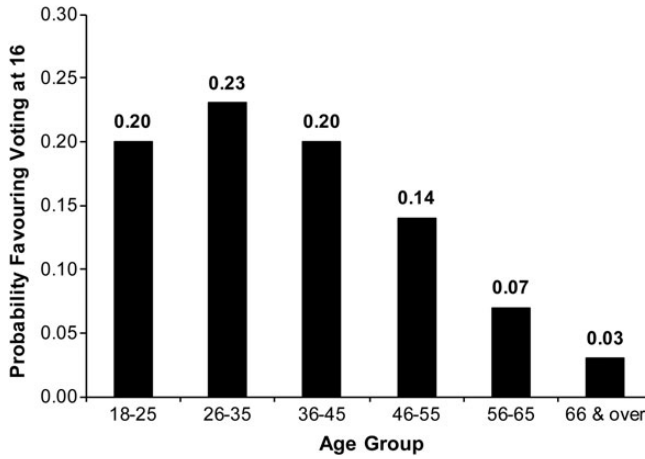

Figure 3 Probability of favouring lowering voting age to 16 by age group.

Figure 4 provides a general summary of the strength of the various statistically significant relationships in Model B. This figure shows how the probability of supporting changing the voting age to 16 would change if one of the significant predictors were changed from its minimum to its maximum value, while holding all other predictors at the mean values. For example, Figure 4 shows that, *ceteris paribus*, moving levels of satisfaction with the practice of democracy in Britain from a situation where everyone was 'very satisfied' to one where everyone was 'very dissatisfied' are quite modest—prompting an increase of 0.11 points in the probability of supporting lowering the age of majority. Changes in this probability associated with other attitudinal predictors are of similar magnitude—increasing the perceived benefits of political participation and enhancing levels of social trust would boost the probability of supporting lowering the voting age by 0.08 and 0.09 points, respectively. Rejecting the idea of using a knowledge test to qualify for voting has the same sized effect. Age aside, the size of effects associated with other socio-demographic characteristics are modest as well, ranging from a low of 0.04 points for gender to a high of −0.11 for income and residency in Scotland. Taken individually, none of the attitudinal or predictor variables is capable of producing large swings in attitudes towards the desirability of voting at 16.

4. Conclusion: unpopular and unnoticed

Britain has a long history of progressively expanding the electoral franchise. In recent years, the proposal has been advanced to build on this tradition by allowing 16-year-olds to vote. Survey data presented above strongly suggest that—in the

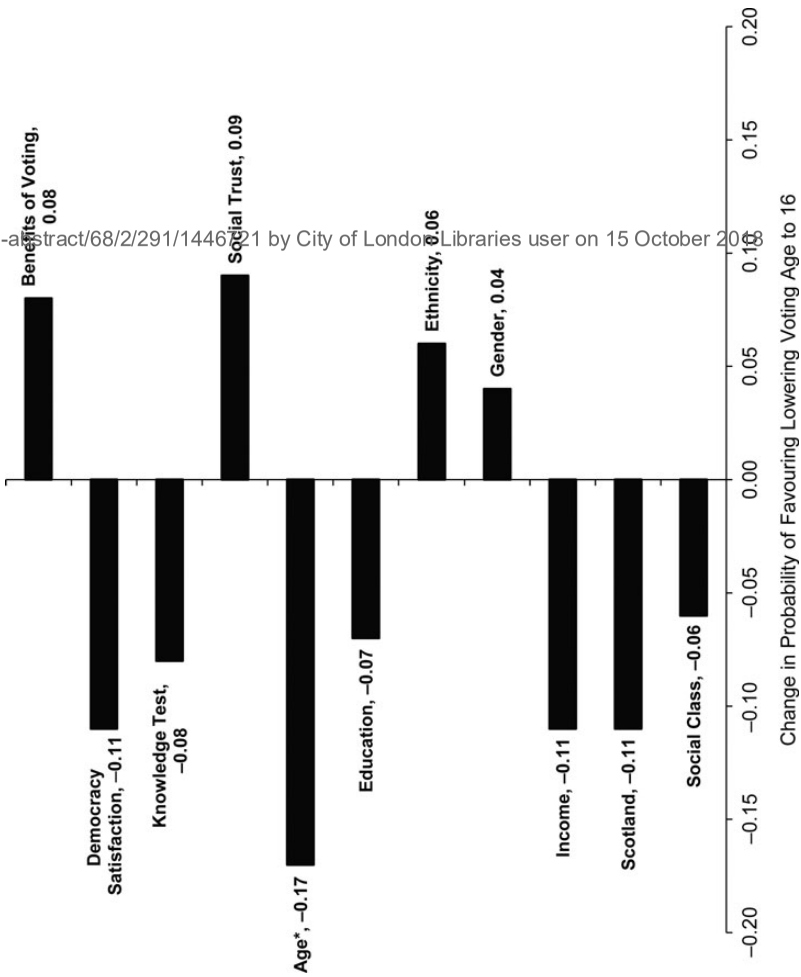

Figure 4 Effects of predictor variables on preference for lowering voting age to 16.

public mind at least—this is an idea the time for which has 'not yet come'. Circa July 2013, less than one person in six favoured lowering the voting age to 16, this number being less than the number who would raise it to 21 or even 25. Even in Scotland where 16- and 17-year-olds will be allowed to vote in the forthcoming independence referendum, less than one person in three supports reducing the age of majority. Across Britain as a whole, the dominant sentiment—expressed by three persons in five—was to leave the voting age at 18, where it has been since 1969.

Sentiment in favour of the proposal to lower the voting age is not evenly distributed across the population. Consonant with rational choice and general incentives theories of political participation, older, higher-income and middle- and upper-class individuals are less favourably inclined towards the idea than are younger, lower-income and working-class persons. However, analyses indicate that the age relationship is curvilinear, with support for the idea of reducing the age of majority first rising slightly and then falling sharply across older age groups. This finding is consistent with abundant previous research showing that 18–24-year-olds tend to have a particularly low sense of the duty to vote and a lack of enthusiasm for electoral politics. There are other significant socio-demographic relationships—men, persons in the ethnic majority and Scots all are somewhat more enthusiastic about lowering the voting age.

Attitudes matter as well. As suggested by rational choice and valence politics theories, people who perceive benefits of political participation and those who are dissatisfied with how Britain's democracy is currently functioning are more likely to want to reduce the voting age. In addition, consonant with social capital theories, people who view their fellow citizens as politically competent and meriting their trust are more likely to favour extending the franchise to 16-year-olds than are those who view others as possibly less than competent and trustworthy.

These several relationships accord well with expectations based on theories and previous research about factors affecting levels of political participation and support for the structures and processes of democratic political systems. However, none of these relationships is particularly strong. For example, even a massive increase in social trust coupled with much more sanguine views of the benefits of political participation and the capacities of one's fellow citizens would enhance the probability of favouring lowering the age of majority by slightly <0.25 points. Such a scenario is very unlikely and, even if it was realised, it would still leave the overall probability of supporting votes for 16- and 17-year-olds at <0.5. Furthermore, of course, the demographics of the electorate change only slowly. The strongest demographic relationship with attitudes towards the franchise involves age, but the 'greying' of Britain's population is working against increased support for a reduction in the age of majority. Similarly, ethnic minority persons are less likely to favour votes for younger people, so increased immigration is not likely to be a vehicle for building support for the idea.

In sum, it appears that a proposal to lower the voting age to 16 would be widely unpopular and only weakly influenced by the political psychology and socio-demographics of the British electorate. If franchise change is to occur, it will not happen because voters are enthusiastic about the idea. Previous experience with franchise reform suggests that were the voting age to be lowered, the new age would eventually rise in popularity and be difficult if not impossible to reverse; this implies that in the absence of strong public opinion on the issue, there is considerable scope for statecraft on the topic. Political elites wishing to lower the voting age may hope that a large majority of the electorate are currently only very weakly engaged on the issue, thereby allowing change to be effected without much opposition. In particular, if Labour were returned to government in the next general election the party has an obvious incentive to pursue this reform since it has enjoyed relatively strong support among young voters (e.g. Whiteley *et al.*, 2013, p. 169).

Suggestive of the minimal salience of lowering the age of majority, not one of the 1100+ respondents in our July 2013 survey mentioned the issue or any other aspect of electoral reform as the most important problem facing country. Of course, elite-driven franchise change also requires a government wishing to proceed and there is no indication that the present Coalition at Westminster wants to do so—certainly not before the 2015 general election.[10] Labour has indicated that it supports votes for 16- and 17-year-olds but, again, the import of this obviously depends on the outcome of the next election and the political context it precipitates. Prospects for reducing the voting age are hostage to the larger uncertainties of British politics.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material available at *Parliamentary Affairs* online.

[10]Following the 2010 general election, electoral reform was part of the deal that produced the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government and the ensuing May 2011 referendum on the Alternative Vote (Whiteley *et al.*, 2013, chs 6 and 8). It is conceivable that an electoral reform package that included lowering the voting age could be part of a future deal. In this regard, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats likely believe that they would benefit at the ballot box from reducing the voting age since young people have tended to support these two parties in recent general elections. For example, data from the 2010 British Election Study's campaign panel survey indicate that fully 65.5% of those in the 18–24 age group voted either Labour or Liberal Democrat and 27.7% voted Conservative. Among those 66 and older, the equivalent percentages were 41.2% and 45.7%, respectively. CMS data suggest that the Labour–Liberal Democrat edge among young voters has continued since the election. For example, in the 18–24 age group in the July CMS 2103 survey, 59.2% said they intended to vote Labour or Liberal Democrat, and 28.3% said Conservative. The equivalent percentages for the 66 and over age group are 34.1% and 43.5%, respectively.

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