

Votes at 16 in Wales: both a historic event and a long-term process that requires a commitment to supporting young people's democratic education

[Tom Loughran](#), [Andy Mycock](#), and [Jon Tonge](#) reflect on the key lessons that can be drawn from the process of lowering the voting age in Wales, identify features that were unique to the Welsh context, and propose important policy recommendations for ensuring the long-term success of 'Votes at 16' in Wales.

May 2021 saw 16- and 17-year-olds able to vote in Welsh Senedd elections for the first time. The introduction of 'votes at 16' in Wales was an important landmark in devolution as it represents the first significant reform of the electoral process to have been conceived, passed, and enacted by the Welsh Government alone. In an interview for our Leverhulme Trust-funded project, [Lowering the Voting Age in the UK](#), the Llywydd of the Senedd, Elin Jones MS, noted 'it took 18 years for us to get the powers to allow us to develop our own electoral rules and a constitution that works for Wales'.

That the devolved institutions have taken the lead in voting age reform is important in a number of respects. It has produced a significant divergence in the voting rights of young people, highlighting growing asymmetries in how youth and adult citizenship are framed across the UK. Such inequalities matter, as the growing 'postcode lottery' of voting age is placing more pressure on Westminster to 'level up' youth political rights by devolving electoral powers to allow policymakers to consider votes at 16 in England and Northern Ireland. Most significantly, voting age reform in Wales demonstrates that the policy debate regarding votes at 16 is shifting from a normative discussion of its relative merits towards consideration of the necessary requirements for its successful implementation and evaluation.

In advocating an evidence-based approach to voting age reform in Wales, the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Project are supporting the '[Making Votes-at-16 Work in Wales](#)' project [as part of a portfolio of initiatives](#) to support the extension of the franchise. Initial findings from this research raise a number of questions as to how and in what ways democratic institutions undertake voting age reform in the UK and internationally. Initial data from the Welsh Government suggest that between 40-45% of eligible 16-17-year-olds registered to vote in the 2021 Senedd elections. This compares unfavourably with higher rate of registration among 16-17-year-olds who were granted the right to vote for first time in the [2016 Scottish Parliamentary election of nearly 70%](#).

This, at first glance, does not augur well for supporters of votes at 16 elsewhere, particularly as the overall turnout rate for the [Senedd elections has been confirmed at 47%](#). If turnout trends for first-time 16- and 17-year-old voters in Wales mirror those in Scotland, it is likely that turnout of this youngest cohort will be between 5% and 10% lower than the overall figure. It is likely that those opposed to extending 'Votes-at-16' to the rest of the UK will likely cite such evidence widely.

To do so would, however, overlook several important factors which have impacted on the introduction of votes at 16 in Wales. First, evidence from 2021 suggests that Senedd elections remain second-order electoral events that have yet to gain the same level of national recognition of Scottish Parliamentary elections. The first national elections in Scotland where 16-17-year-olds could vote in 2016 was a particularly high saliency election as it occurred in the polarised shadow of the 2014 Scottish referendum, which itself had unprecedentedly high turnout rates across all age groups.

Second, the Senedd election of 2021 was a COVID-19 election. Extensive engagement activities organised by the Welsh Government, Senedd, and youth democracy organisations across Wales aimed at young people in schools and relevant community organisations were severely constrained by lockdown restrictions. Importantly, focus groups we have led established that the online activities that replaced these in-person events were limited in their capacity to engage young people, particularly among hard-to-reach and digitally-disadvantaged groups.

Third, although policy-makers in Wales adopted [an evidence-based approach to the introduction of votes at 16](#), they did not heed some of the policy lessons [from Scotland](#) or [the universal reform of the voting age to 18 in 1969](#). Our recent policy brief, '[The Welsh Way to "Votes-at-16"](#)', is based on extensive interviews with young people across Wales and highlights the importance of a synchronised policy approach whereby newly-enfranchised voters feel sufficiently politically socialised, engaged, and literate to vote for the first time. Young first-time voters in Wales in May 2021 frequently stated they were unclear about the role and function of Senedd or its impact on their lives and chose not to vote. Such feedback again highlights that the provision of statutory and universal democratic education both in schools and colleges, and also through local community youth groups, as a vital component of successful voting age reform.

We have found that the lack of comprehensive democratic education also impacts on the ability of young people to understand the 'voter journey' to the ballot box, with many having little understanding of how to get on the electoral register or how to vote. This lack of awareness is a barrier to younger voters, who often disengage due to anxieties about the process of voting. The Senedd elections highlight the need to ensure the Electoral Commission in Wales and electoral registration teams in local authorities are appropriately resourced to ensure a comprehensive registration programme for 16- and 17-year-olds in schools and local communities places where young people gather.

Finally, it is important to also note the positive and relatively consensual political culture around the introduction of votes at 16 in Wales. This noted, although COVID-19 constrained some election campaigning, there is a need for the main political parties to exert themselves more to welcome newly-enfranchised young voters and also design policies to attract their votes. Moreover, they need to ensure the views and voices are heard continuously, and not just at the ballot box. The introduction of votes at 16 in Wales is both a significant moment in Welsh political history *and* a process which requires a long-term commitment to supporting young people's democratic education and participation.

Note: Further details about the Leverhulme Trust-funded 'Lowering the Voting Age in the UK' project's latest [report](#), and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust-funded 'Making Votes-at-16 in Wales Work' project, please see [here](#).

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