

The Austrian experience shows that there is little risk and much to gain from giving 16-year-olds the vote

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*Sadiq Khan recently called for the voting age to be lowered to 16 in the UK. **Markus Wagner** and **Eva Zeglóvits** examine arguments for and against, arguing that it is a reform that carries few dangers and can motivate schools to reach out to and motivate young people.*



On 24 January, Labour's shadow justice secretary Sadiq Khan [called for](#) the voting age in all elections and referendums in the UK to be lowered to 16. There are, he said, three good reasons for such a reform: it is a right that 16-year-olds deserve to have; it would stimulate political engagement; and it would lead to higher turnout in the longer term. These are not arguments that we need to debate from a purely theoretical standpoint: in Austria voting at 16 was introduced for all elections in 2008. So, what does the Austrian experience tell us about the validity of Khan's standpoint?



Khan's first argument is that at 16 Britons have many of the rights and duties of other citizens, including paying tax and National Insurance if they are working. They are also mature and interested enough to take meaningful decisions in elections. So, it is only right for them to be able to vote as well.

We do not want to pass judgement on the moral or legal right of citizens under 18 to take part in elections. However, what we can say is that in Austria there is good evidence that at 16 citizens are just as interested and motivated to participate in politics as other citizens under 25. There have been some suggestions that citizens under 18 are not yet adult and mature enough to participate meaningfully, but in Austria there is no substantive evidence that this is the case. Despite their youth, the level of political knowledge among those under 18 is also comparable to that of slightly older [Austrians](#). Evidence from other countries where those under 18 (such as from the [UK](#)) do not have the right to vote is not useful here as having the right to vote may change the way young citizens think about politics. Indeed, in Austria we have found that political interest among young people aged 16 and 17 increased after they were granted the right to vote.

Second, Khan says that lowering the voting age would 're-energise political debate and engagement in the UK' and 'encourage young people to get more involved in mainstream politics'. These are ambitious claims for what is, in the end, a rather minor political reform. We would not go so far as to claim that the nature of politics in Austria has changed in any fundamental – or even minor – way as a result of the reform. For example, it is not obvious that party campaigns at elections take young voters' needs or preferences more into account. There has also been no noticeable uptick in youth participation in politics in general. Here, Khan's rather grand claims are wishful thinking.

And, finally, this reform might lead to higher turnout in the long term as schools could provide necessary information and encouragement, leading to higher voting rates among young voters. Here, Khan is on firm ground: [current political science research](#) does show that voting is a habit that is acquired early on in life, and it is a habit that is rarely broken once it is there. Those who start out voting are likely to do so again, but those who fail to vote at their first election are less likely to pick up the habit later on.

However, for this to be a reason to lower the voting age, citizens under 18 would have to be more likely to vote than their peers just over 18. For Austria, we know that in some regional elections 16 and 17 year olds' turnout exceeds turnout of older first time voters by [8 to 10 percentage points](#). But preliminary evidence indicates that the difference was less pronounced in the 2013 federal elections, and this means the reform would be less likely to lead to significant long-term changes in overall turnout levels.

Yet, Khan is right to stress the need for measures to accompany a lowered voting age, for instance increased citizenship education and the provision of voting booths. In Austria, there have been several measures to encourage those in school to go out to vote. However, as people get used to the fact that 16 year olds have the right to vote, the effort and attention paid to first time voters seems to diminish. Schools always play a role in fostering political interest; what we have found is that this role becomes even more important when young people have the right to [vote](#). What is even more essential is that young voters are reached out to even if they have left school already: turnout is already unequal across social groups, so we have to take care to address in particular those who are least likely to be interested in politics and to turn out to vote.

Politicians should not over-sell the benefits of lowering the voting age. Yet it is also a reform that carries few dangers and can motivate schools to reach out to and motivate young people. So, more important than whether the voting age is lowered is the question of *how* this is done and what measures accompany the reform.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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Sadiq Khan
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