

Case study: *the time is right for 'Votes at 16'*

¹²⁴ See Eicchorn, J. (2014). *How lowering the voting age to 16 can be an opportunity to improve youth political engagement: lessons learned from the Scottish Independence Referendum*, and Eicchorn, J. (2013). *Will 16 and 17 year olds make a difference in the referendum?*

¹²⁵ <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentary/business/28862.aspx?r=9570#.VDoxQxCjKAA>

¹²⁶ See, Scotsman (2014). <http://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/top-stories/majority-back-votes-for-16-and-17-year-olds-1-3563881>

The Scottish independence referendum on 18th September 2014 was the first time that the right to vote was extended to include 16 and 17 year olds in the UK. This has been viewed by many children's organisations as a real culture change towards recognising and respecting children and young people as rights holders and active members of society. The levels of engagement in the debate by children and young people have challenged many adults' preconceptions and shown a real desire to be included in mainstream political debate – an arena in which children and young people have been repeatedly excluded.

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) has been campaigning to lower the voting age from 18 to 16 since its inception in June 1999. It has always viewed young people as active, engaged citizens keen to affect positive change in their local communities. Many of the traditional arguments against lowering the voting age have included reasons such as political apathy among young people, a lack of maturity to make an informed decision and the view that young people would simply vote in the same way as their family. The decision to lower the voting age for the purposes of the referendum on Scotland's constitutional future provided an appropriate test of these arguments.

Through its young voter engagement project, the SYP engaged with more than 15,000 young people face-to-face, engaged with many thousands more online and registered over 3,000 young people to vote. In addition, over 80% of 16 and 17 years olds who were eligible registered to vote in advance of the referendum. Social attitudes research carried out by academics at the University of Edinburgh provide an additional empirical basis on which arguments against lowering the voting age can be disproved. Key findings from the research indicate that young people are at least as politically engaged as adults and that there is no evidence to support the view that young people will simply vote the same way as their families.¹²⁴ Arguments to extend the voting franchise have now received cross-party Parliamentary¹²⁵ and widespread public support.¹²⁶

In light of the experience and evidence of the referendum, the SYP view the lowering of the voting age to 16 as a crucial aspect to the realisation of Article 12 moving forward.

"I think it's paramount that young people have a say in the running of their country and who represents them. We are engaged and interested and despite what people say, we're mature enough to make an informed decision. At 16, we can get married and we can fight for our country, but we're still denied the right to vote, which I think is ludicrous. It's time for the youth to be listened to permanently."

Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament