

Special Committee on Democratic and Electoral Reform

Democratic and Electoral Reform – Written Submission

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This submission builds on evidence from original research into the democratic engagement of young people. I am a researcher at the University of Sheffield in the UK. I regularly conduct and review original research on mechanisms that can increase democratic engagement among young people, in particular among cohorts who join the electorate as first-time voters. I am an expert on youth democratic engagement and have researched and advised governments, mainly in Europe, on the lowering of the voting age from 18 to 16 years.ⁱ

I welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Special Committee on Democratic and Electoral Reform in relation to the first part of the Committee's mandate. My submission is made with a view to strengthening democracy in British Columbia through increasing voter participation and civic engagement among young people.

Based on evidence from my research and that of internationally renowned colleagues, I propose that the Committee consider enfranchising younger people, for example 16- and 17-year-olds. I make this recommendation because the inclusion of younger cohorts in the electorate offers opportunities to increase democratic representation, ensuring intergenerational inclusivity, and to create stronger habits of political engagement and long-term trust in democratic institutions.

Recommendation: Consider the lowering of the voting age to 16 for elections of Members of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia

1. Why Lowering the Voting Age Creates Opportunities to Strengthen Democracy

- 1.1. Many established democracies, including Canadaⁱⁱ, face declining trust in political institutions and participation in elections. The decline is particularly pronounced among younger people and results in an overrepresentation of older cohorts in election outcomes and policymaking.ⁱⁱⁱ
- 1.2. Younger people's underrepresentation among voters contributes to declining trust and participation because it skews the political discourse and policymaking towards the interests of older, more numerous voters. This risks exacerbating intergenerational inequalities.^{iv} Policies, particularly those on long-term issues (climate, pensions, housing, public debt), disproportionately affect younger generations, who are underrepresented in decisions on these issues.
- 1.3. Lowering the voting age – to allow more and younger people to vote in elections of Members of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia – offers an opportunity to strengthen democracy, first because it addresses young people's underrepresentation in democratic institutions. The enfranchisement of younger people increases the number of young voters in the electorate relative to older voters and makes their voices more likely to be heard.

- 1.4. Evidence from countries that have lowered the voting age to 16 shows that the enfranchisement of younger people does not negatively impact democracy, elections or election outcomes. Instead, it can be an opportunity to build long-term political engagement, thereby increasing participation among younger cohorts, as well as increased trust in institutions among younger age groups.^v
- 1.5. The lowering of the voting age can address democratic deficits by sending a clear signal of intergenerational inclusivity and democratic renewal.

2. Evidence on A Lower Voting Age as A Chance to Strengthen Democracy

- 2.1. Several countries have already lowered the voting age to 16. Sixteen and 17-year-olds are allowed to vote in elections in Austria, Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Cyprus, Ecuador, Greece, Malta, and Nicaragua. In a further nine countries under 18s are allowed to vote in some, but not all elections – for example in municipal elections in Estonia and Israel, parts of the UK and the United States. In Germany, Switzerland, and the UK, 16- and 17-year-olds are allowed to vote in elections in some regions, for example for federal state or regional parliaments in parts of Germany and Switzerland, Scotland and Wales, and in elections for the European Parliament in Germany and Belgium.
- 2.2. Experiences from countries that already allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in elections provide empirical evidence to assess the opportunities and potential outcomes of a voting age 16. My research and that of colleagues observes the following democratic benefits:
- 2.3. **Higher turnout among younger first-time voters:** Research in Germany, Austria, Scotland, and Latin America consistently shows that, when allowed to vote, 16- and 17-year-olds turn out at higher rates than young people who were enfranchised at age 18 or older.^{vi} We believe that this is because 16 is a better-suited age of enfranchisement than 18, as 16- and 17-year-olds often live in more stable and supportive environments (in the parental home, in full-time education) compared with 18- to 20-year olds, who often experience their first election in a highly transitory phase of their lives, e.g. whilst moving out of the parental home, taking up work or further education.^{vii}
- 2.4. **Habit formation:** This higher turnout among young people who are allowed to vote for the first time at 16 or 17 may be long-lasting, countering trends of declining turnout. In Austria and Scotland, young people who were enfranchised at 16 or 17 were more likely to turn out to vote in elections well into their 20s compared with young people who experienced their first vote at an election with a voting age of 18.^{viii} It is theorised that voting is habit forming.^{ix} As cohorts of young people vote in larger numbers early in life, they are likely to continue participating in elections throughout their lives.
- 2.5. **Increased trust in democratic institutions:** Research in Austria and Latin America also shows lasting increases in trust in political institutions and satisfaction with democracy among young people who were enfranchised at 16 or 17. For up to seven years after the lowering of the voting age, Austrian 16- and 17-year-olds showed higher levels of external efficacy – that is the belief that governments will respond to citizens' demands – and were more satisfied with democracy compared with 18- to 20-year-olds.^x In Latin American countries, research finds that, as young people grow older, those who were first eligible to

vote at 16 or 17 showed higher levels of trust in parliament and political parties and were overall more satisfied with democracy than citizens who could only vote at an older age.^{xi} It is important to note though that the causality of these observations – whether it was the lowering of the voting age or other, external factors that led to this increase in trust – is difficult to establish.

- 2.6. **Reducing inequalities in democratic participation:** When combined with statutory, high-quality civic education, a lower voting age can offer opportunities to address inequalities in electoral and democratic participation. In most established democracies, including Canada, who turns out to vote and who does not is differentiated by social background. As engagement decreases, in particular among younger cohorts, democratic engagement is becoming more unequal.^{xii} After the lowering of the voting age in Scotland, we found 16- and 17-year-olds to be rather equally engaged with elections and other types of civic activities, regardless of their social background.^{xiii} Voting while still in secondary education can provide a supportive, structured environment to all first-time voters and address the unequal distribution of support young people have in their political development when relying on families or peers. Research shows that schools and colleges can play a crucial role in compensating for a lack of parental guidance.^{xiv}
- 2.7. In light of this evidence, several countries have seen campaigns and efforts to lower the voting age, among others, Ireland, Spain, Estonia, Lithuania, New Zealand, and Germany. In July 2025, the United Kingdom announced draft legislation to enfranchise 16- and 17-year-olds in all elections to be brought before parliament in 2026-27 as part of a broader package of reforms to restore trust in democracy.^{xv}

3. Evidence on the Impact of A Lower Voting Age on Elections

- 3.1. In countries that lowered the voting age to 16, the inclusion of 16- and 17-year-olds in the electorate did not result in major changes to political outcomes. In Austria, the lowering of the voting age did not change the political landscape as the youngest voters tended to support political parties on both ends of the political spectrum.^{xvi} Even for marginal elections, such as Scotland's 2014 referendum on independence, research shows that the inclusion of 16- and 17-year-olds did not change the outcome.^{xvii}
- 3.2. In British Columbia, too, including 16- and 17-year-olds in the electorate is unlikely to change election outcomes. Sixteen and 17-year-olds make up around 4 percent of the population of British Columbia, or 5 percent as a proportion of currently registered voters, assuming all 16- and 17-year-olds join the register.^{xviii} This is similar to proportions across constituencies in the UK, where we modelled that the inclusion of 16- and 17-year-olds in the electorate has only a theoretical chance of impacting election outcomes – that is only if all young people turned out to vote and voted for the same candidate – and in fewer than 15 percent of constituencies.^{xix}
- 3.3. Including 16- and 17-year-olds in the electorate also does not make election outcomes worse or less representative. Research from Germany and Austria shows that 16- and 17-year-olds are able to pick a political party or representative that best represents their views to the same extent as other, older voters.^{xx}

4. Evidence on the Impact of A Lower Voting Age on Society

- 4.1. The introduction of a lower voting age can have wider societal impacts beyond the young people who are immediately affected by a change in legislation, contributing to its potential to strengthen democracy and signal democratic renewal. Our research shows signs of the following outcomes:
- 4.2. **Generational ripple effects:** Increased political engagement among young people can influence families and peers, broadening participation beyond youth cohorts and addressing issues of intergenerational justice. If young people participate in elections at 16 and 17, while most are still living at home with their parents, they have the potential to shape political discussions within the family or household. Research shows that young people can have a small, but sizable effect on the political opinions of adult family members, especially on issues on which young and older voters tend to disagree.^{xxi}
- 4.3. **Increased political and media responsibility:** The inclusion of younger voters in the electorate can change how political parties and the media respond to and include younger voters. In Scotland, BBC Scotland raised the visibility of 16- and 17-year-olds by creating a diverse panel of young first-time voters who provided input into programmes, were panellists on productions on different political topics, and audience members of the final referendum TV debate.^{xxii}
- 4.4. **Public opinion:** Research shows that opinions on a lower voting age among the wider public are malleable.^{xxiii} In Scotland, the public was not in favour of a voting age of 16 before 2014. However, support for a lower voting age increased substantially after the lowering of the voting age, with up to 60 percent of the population supporting the measure after the change of the franchise.^{xxiv}
- 4.5. **Civic efficacy and political identity:** Being allowed to vote at a younger age gives young people a sense of being valued as democratic actors. This is because voting at age 16/17 endows young people with an opportunity to form autonomous opinions and take responsibility for their involvement in a democratic decision.^{xxv} This can contribute to allegiances with the political system and young people's development of political identity, as found in Scotland and Wales.^{xxvi}

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ⁱ See the following publications for information on my research and work with governments on the lowering of the voting age: Eichhorn, J., & Huebner, C. (2023a). *Votes at 16 in Scotland 2014-2021*. Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh. Accessible at: <https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/votes-at-16-in-scotland-study>

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