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Making Votes-at-16 Work in Wales Lessons for the Future



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Summary

The 2021 Senedd election was the first election in which young people aged 16 and 17 were enfranchised to vote in Wales. The election came with a range of unique challenges, not the least because of the coronavirus pandemic. Given these challenges, how did young people experience the election and what worked to mobilise 16- and 17-year-olds to vote? Based on large-scale qualitative research with 16- and 17- year-olds across Wales and with stakeholders involved in youth work and youth democratic engagement, this report provides a comprehensive look into how the pioneering generation enfranchised to vote at age 16 in Wales experienced the 2021 Senedd election and analyses what can be learnt for young people's engagement in future elections and youth political engagement in Wales.

The findings highlight that young people in Wales faced a range of barriers to turning out to vote in the 2021 Senedd election – some exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, others that would have materialised regardless of the pandemic. Some young people were better placed than others to overcome these barriers, and experiences of engagement with the election varied considerably among young people from different social groups and different parts of Wales. Three main findings emerge from the research:

1. Timing is key

Most efforts to mobilise young people to vote focused on the weeks leading up to the voter registration deadline and the election day itself. As first-time voters, however, young people have complex voting journeys that are contingent on several connected stages, including young people being informed and aware of elections, signing on the electoral register, engaging with political parties and the media, and then voting. Efforts to support young people in their voting journeys need to start earlier and, crucially, suit young people's timeframes. The timing of the election conflicted with many young people's school assessments, meaning youth engagement workers, political parties, and the media sought to engage with young people during a period where many had very limited time to engage.

2. Delivering Votes-at-16 is a complex and joint effort

Many well-designed and engaging initiatives by Welsh institutions and parts of civic society supported young people along specific steps of their voting journeys. Informal networks and a willingness to cooperate across the sector were noted positively by many stakeholders. The degree of coordination across initiatives and particularly across the various stages of young people's voting journeys, however, was not as developed as it could have been with a formalised network and more time to consolidate approaches and resources. Efforts were predominantly focussed on schools-based interventions, recognising that schools play an essential role in youth political engagement. However, we find that schools were often overburdened to accommodate and deliver all the initiatives directed at them, leading to significant gaps and inequalities in the provision of political education.

3. Inequalities persist

Whether young people participated in the 2021 Senedd election partially depended on the support of family members, particularly on whether their parents voted or not. Voting (especially for the first time) is often a social experience. Voting at 16 may open up this experience for more young people, but it also manifests inequalities for young people who do not receive the same degree of support. Additionally, we also observe regional variation in the extent to which political actors sought to engage young people and in how important young people deemed voting in Senedd elections. Understanding this regional variation is key in developing Wales as a meaningful civic space for all young people.

Policy Recommendations

- Develop comprehensive youth voter engagement interventions and strategies that support young people in each stage of their voting journeys and implement these systematically across Wales.
- Ensure sufficient time and resources for a planned and coordinated rollout of youth voter engagement measures and interventions to offer timely support to young people along each stage of their voting journeys both in the lead-up to *and* between elections.
- Remove practical barriers to voting that are specific to newly enfranchised voters to making it easier for young people to vote, such as the introduction of automatic voter registration, the avoidance of scheduling elections in exam periods, by locating voting/polling stations in schools or colleges.
- Tackle inequalities in election engagement by coordinating the systematic rollout of educational measures and voter engagement work through Welsh education and by ensuring all schools and colleges across Wales have adequate dedicated time and space for political education and to deliver voter literacy work ahead of and between elections.
- Ensure all young people have opportunities and spaces to learn about and exchange political views and form political opinions. These could include class debates, mock elections, and engagement with politicians in schools, colleges, youth groups, and youth centres, and through peer-to-peer social media campaigns.
- Political parties must directly engage with young people across all parts of Wales at the national and local constituency levels, by publishing party policies in formats young people are likely to access and by promoting a more diverse and younger range of candidates standing for local and Senedd elections.
- Political parties, civic society organisations, and media outlets must collaborate with young people to enhance their visibility as legitimate democratic actors by developing their role in voter engagement networks, political debates, and media coverage both during and between elections.
- Maintain and consolidate the networked approach to voter engagement work in Wales by strengthening and formalising networks to support further collaboration and coordination in the creation and implementation of youth voter engagement programmes and interventions, and in the generation, analysis, and sharing of evaluation data.
- Continue to learn from the experience of Votes-at-16 in Wales through the longitudinal collection of evidence of the impacts and outcomes of voting age reform.
- Engage in UK-wide and international networks to contribute evidence to better understand what conditions and approaches are particularly important for the successful implementation of Votes-at-16.
- Advocate for a lowering of the voting age at the UK level to alleviate current disparities in voting rights and associated frustrations among young people across Wales.

Introduction

For around 66,000 16- and 17-year-olds living in Wales the 2021 Senedd election offered a first-time opportunity to cast a vote in a national election. Having supported the lowering of the voting age since 2012, the Welsh Assembly gained the right to legislate on its own electoral arrangements in 2017 and introduced Votes-at-16 for local and Welsh elections in time for the 2021 Senedd election.

The lowering of the voting age in Wales came with high expectations. Previous experiences with Votes-at-16 in other countries, such as Austria or Scotland, highlighted that the policy can have positive effects on young people's political interest, engagement, and civic attitudes. This hope was reflected in the introduction of Votes-at-16 in Wales, with a broad consensus across governing political parties on wanting to strengthen young people's rights and support and momentum from the civil service in Wales. However, experiences with voting age reform also highlighted challenges and that the reform's success depends on the context of the introduction, and which measures accompany it (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021; Tonge et al., 2021).

In the leadup to the election, many initiatives worked with and created resources for young people to make the first edition of Votes-at-16 in Wales a success. Which of these efforts worked to mobilise 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in the election and why? The research conducted for this report provides an insight into young people's experiences of the 2021 Senedd election and a systematic evaluation of what worked to mobilise them to vote. Based on large-scale qualitative research with diverse groups of young people from all over Wales as well as stakeholders working with young people, we assess which lessons can be learnt from the first edition of Votes-at-16 in Wales and what is necessary to

mobilise young people to vote in future elections and to strengthen youth political engagement in Wales in the long term.

Wales is a distinct case among countries having introduced Votes-at-16. Compared to general UK elections, Senedd elections are considered low profile by many – established voters and young first-timers alike – and turnout in Welsh elections has never been above [50 per cent](#) (Davies et al., 2021). Mobilising young people to vote can be particularly challenging in an environment that is perceived as less important or politically charged. Previous research has also shown that many people in Wales, including young people, have a poor understanding of the powers and responsibilities of the Welsh Government, and low levels of engagement with Senedd activities and politicians (Foster, 2021; Loughran et al., 2021; Pearce, 2019). This is a particularly acute issue in more marginalised post-industrial communities, rural and coastal locations, and among ethnic minority groups who often feel less of a connection with Welsh political institutions.

Whether Votes-at-16 in Wales can be classed as a success or not is yet to be decided. Turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds in the 2021 Senedd election seems comparable to other younger age groups, though notably lower than among people aged 55 years or older (Electoral Commission, 2021). This noted, the proportions of young people registered to vote ahead of the election varied widely across local authorities (Barker & Flint, 2021; Electoral Commission, 2021). Representative data on how many young people turned out to vote on election day and to what extent young people from different societal groups and parts of Wales engaged with the election is lacking. Reports of issues with election awareness and voter registration among 16- and 17-year-olds however indicate that lessons

for future elections can and must be learnt from this first experience of Votes-at-16 in Wales.

Offering a detailed insight into the context in which the 2021 Senedd election – the first-ever election for 16- and 17-year-olds in Wales – took place and the experiences of newly enfranchised young voters, this report draws out lessons on ‘what works’ to engage and mobilise young people. It also provides recommendations for strengthening Votes-at-16 and youth political engagement in Wales in the long-term. We identify three areas to focus efforts:

1. Supporting young people along all steps of their voting journeys.
2. Removing inequalities inherent in young people’s voting journeys, and

ensuring all young people have equal capacities to vote.

3. Creating a political and societal culture that makes Wales meaningful as a civic space for young people.

The report addresses Welsh policymakers, politicians, and political parties as well as young people, parents, teachers, youth workers, and anyone working on strengthening youth political engagement in Wales. As the second nation in the UK to introduce Votes-at-16, the findings are also highly relevant beyond Wales for policymakers and youth engagement activists in Scotland, England, Northern Ireland, and internationally, because they extend the evidence base on the outcomes of Votes-at-16 in the UK and internationally.

Research and Methodology

Between April and August 2021, we conducted focus group discussions with 86 young people from all over Wales. Some young people participated in one discussion, others in two – one in the leadup to and one after the 2021 Senedd election. In small groups, the participants discussed their experiences of the election and their views of Welsh politics and governance. In addition, some participants kept election diaries, sharing their thoughts on and in-the-moment insights into their experiences of the election.

The young people who participated in the research represent diverse groups of young people from a mix of geographical locations across Wales, including rural and coastal communities, young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, from Welsh-medium schools, and from predominantly Welsh-speaking areas. The majority were aged 16 and 17, with few participants aged 14 and 15, having recently turned 18 or slightly older. A detailed overview over the participants, how they were recruited, and how the discussions were facilitated and analysed can be found in our [methods note](#).

In addition to research with young people, we conducted interviews with 34 stakeholders of youth voter engagement in Wales on the context of their work with young people and the election. This includes representatives of the Welsh Government, the Senedd Commission, the Electoral Commission, of local councils, Welsh youth organisations, youth engagement activists, electoral registration officers, and youth workers.

The data were analysed thematically, focusing on recurrent experiences among young people. This report reflects the themes and issues that were recurring among participants and across Wales, with individual quotations used to illustrate these themes. Where findings are unique to a particular group or demographic, this is specified. Case studies highlight initiatives that stood out particularly positively for some young people.

Context matters for the success of Votes-at-16

The introduction of Votes-at-16 in Wales came with high expectations. Other countries having lowered the voting age to 16, such as Austria and Scotland, reported higher turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds compared to 18- to 24-year-olds and increases in political interest and civic attitudes among the youngest voters (Electoral Commission, 2014; Zeglovits & Zandonella, 2013). Whether or not however Votes-at-16 indeed strengthens young people's political engagement and civic attitudes when enfranchised at ages 16 and 17 (rather than at ages 18 to 21) depends on the specific context of voting age reform, and which measures accompany it (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021; Tonge et al., 2021).

In Wales, the lowering of the voting age followed a process largely managed from the 'top down' (Loughran et al., 2021). The Welsh Assembly supported Votes-at-16 as early as 2012 but initially lacked the constitutional powers to legislate a change of the voting age. The Wales Act 2017 amended the devolution settlement and enabled the Senedd to pass its own electoral arrangements, including on the voting age in Welsh and local elections. With a view towards strengthening young people's representation in Welsh democracy and the political will among the governing parties, once the legislative powers were held in Wales the lowering of the voting age became "a natural next step".



We've seen in Scotland a huge amount of public debate about this [Votes-at-16]. We didn't really have that. It was kind of a - not a foregone conclusion - but it just seemed like a natural next step in Wales. And definitely the easiest bit of reform to pick off of the tree after elections were devolved.

Jessica Blair, Electoral Reform Society

Two distinct pieces of legislation swiftly introduced Votes-at-16 in Wales: the 2020 Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act at the national level and the 2021 Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act to see the voting age lowered for local elections in Wales. These two pieces of legislation were driven, largely from the top down, by members of the Senedd Commission and the Welsh Government. The process came with considerable effort and momentum from the civil service in Wales to ensure there was political consensus and support for the implementation of the reform, including from civic society organisations and academics (Loughran et al., 2021).

This swift and largely consensual introduction of Votes-at-16 in Wales had two consequences: (1) it aided the formation of networks of actors working together on the implementation of the reform, and (2) it precluded a broader public debate of the reform that would have given visibility to young people as legitimate citizens and might have paved the way for the introduction of systematic accompanying measures, such as enhanced political education and youth voter engagement work.

Strong networks were established between administrators of voting age reform and stakeholders in Welsh civic society. These played an important role in the implementation of the policy leading up to the 2021 Senedd election. Though not formalised, these networks demonstrated a willingness to collaborate on voter engagement work and were mentioned as strong positive features of voting age reform by stakeholder interviewees. Consolidating and formalising these networks offers an opportunity to transform a unique feature of the 'Welsh way to Votes-at-16' into a long-lasting environment that jointly delivers measures and strengthens young people's political engagement in Wales.



One thing I've been really encouraged by is the way that the sector has all come together. I think the fact that we were able to work so closely with the Electoral Commission and the Senedd Commission in the development of our educational resources, that they were all complementary, that they were all hosted on Hwb being the same platform, I think our ability to all work together across different organizations has been a really strong point.

Welsh Government Official

The rapid and largely consensual introduction of the voting age reform in Wales also brought about specific issues in its implementation. For one, there was little public debate of Votes-at-16 in Wales and little time for youth organisations to stage broader 'bottom-up' campaigns in favour of the reform. In contrast to debates about lowering of the voting age elsewhere (e.g., in municipalities across the United States or in New Zealand), young people were largely invisible in the reform process in Wales and, consequently, played little role in its implementation. Given this, the short period between passing the legislation and the first election that included 16- and 17-year-olds did not allow for Welsh young voters to become sufficiently visible in public debates. For Votes-at-16 to be successful in Wales in the future, it is critical that young people are recognised and engaged with as legitimate democratic actors, and that political parties and the media are seen to engage with young people's concerns and policy issues.

A second issue specific to the implementation of Votes-at-16 in Wales was that the legislation did not include concrete statutory measures of political education – something that had been discussed in the reform process in Wales and identified as crucial in previous experiences of voting

age reform elsewhere (Eichhorn, 2018; Schwarzer & Zeglovits, 2013). This meant that, despite school-level commitments to citizenship education (Kisby & Sloam, 2012), when the legislation came in there were no set plans for a coordinated effort to enhance political education within schools and colleges. Providers of educational interventions to be delivered through schools (including the Senedd, the Electoral Commission, voter engagement workers, and youth organisations) struggled in their efforts to systematically deliver measures of political education throughout the period leading up to the election.

These issues, specifically regarding timing and delivery, were exacerbated by the unique pandemic context, in which the 2021 Senedd election, and with it the first-time implementation of Votes-at-16 in Wales, took place. Certainly not a normal election, efforts to mobilise young people to vote in the 2021 Senedd election were severely hampered by the restrictions introduced to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic context presented unique pressures in three distinct ways:

- (1) pressures on democratic institutions and electoral actors who had to manage pandemic measures and staff shortages in addition to administering an upcoming election;
- (2) uncertainty about the format and timing of the election, with ongoing speculation about the postponement of election followed by the Welsh Government's commitment to hold the May election announced in February 2021;
- (3) unprecedented educational chaos with young people switching between learning from home and face-to-face teaching, and teacher-managed assessments affecting 16- and 17-year-olds, in particular.

These pressures exacerbated known issues of voting age reform, firstly regarding the **timing** of voter registration and first-time voter engagement work. A number of stakeholder interviewees reported having started their registration and mobilisation activities “*too late*”, which created a very dense space with lots of voter engagement work competing for attention in the weeks leading up to the registration deadline and ultimately the election.

The coronavirus pandemic further complicated the **delivery** of voter engagement work, particularly through schools and youth groups, as activities had to be delivered online rather than face-to-face. In a context of persistent uncertainty in schools related to pandemic measures and with regard to assessments, a systematic rollout of voter engagement interventions through schools was severely compromised.

Online delivery of interventions was consistently reported as a challenge, particularly in reaching young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who do not have an established interest in political issues. It also presented opportunities to engage specific groups of young people, for example those with mobility- or long-term health-issues. In this way, the pandemic exacerbated some **existing inequalities**, where – despite lots of voter engagement efforts – some young people were just not reached.

Young people and their political concerns were also not made visible in the campaign leading up to the election, as political parties and the media prioritised resources elsewhere. Political parties missed out on doing work specifically to engage young people, while media reporting lacked coverage of young people’s concerns ahead of the election. Even social media campaigns, albeit successful at reaching specific young people, did not cut through to reach wider audiences of young people from less politically charged environments.

“

I feel that had the pandemic not been around, there definitely would’ve been more focus on the fact 16-year-olds get to vote for the first time, and perhaps it would’ve made young people feel their voices are at the centre and they matter, but I feel the pandemic is dominating every discussion nowadays.

Xenia, 16, from Wrexham

For future elections involving 16- and 17-year-olds in Wales, it is key that strong networks of actors are maintained, whilst addressing issues with the visibility of young people as legitimate democratic actors, the timing and delivery of voter engagement work. Votes-at-16 in Wales must be accompanied by supporting measures, first and foremost political education that enhances political literacy and political confidence, and a unified effort to enable voter engagement work in schools and colleges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Maintain and consolidate networked approach to voter engagement work by strengthening and formalising existing networks
- Make young people in Wales visible as legitimate democratic actors, e.g., by bringing young people into voter engagement networks and making them visible in national debates
- Ensure sufficient time and resources for youth voter engagement work in the lead-up to and between elections
- Schedule a systematic rollout of voter engagement work through schools and colleges, e.g., by planning dedicated time and space for political education throughout Welsh education

#1 Supporting young people in their voting journeys

Given these challenges in the introduction of Votes-at-16 in Wales, young people faced barriers on their journeys to voting in the 2021 Senedd election: focus group participants point towards a widespread lack of awareness of the election among 16- and 17-year-olds. Additional barriers mentioned include occasional problems with voter registration, insufficient engagement from political parties and the media, and a lack of encouragement to turn out to vote on election day. While a number of young people reported that they did turn out to vote in the 2021 Senedd election, others explained how they dropped off their voting journeys at different stages, when facing one or a combination of these barriers.

Raising awareness

A range of awareness raising measures were implemented ahead of the 2021 Senedd election by the Senedd Commission, the Welsh Government, the Electoral Commission, the Children's Commissioner for Wales, Citizens Cymru, youth organisations such as Youth Cymru, Urdd Gobaith Cymru, Boys and Girls Clubs of Wales, the Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team Wales, and by local authorities and independent youth engagement activists.

A majority of these initiatives engaged with young people in secondary schools, with learning resources and awareness raising campaigns distributed through teachers and school staff and available to download through Hwb Wales, a digital platform for learning and teaching in Wales hosted by the Welsh Government. Others focused on addressing specific groups of young people directly, through social media campaigns or events with members of youth organisations or specific characteristics or interests.

Most 16- and 17-year-olds who participated in the research were unaware of and had not participated in any such programmes.

Few mentioned having received information ahead of the election in school, with some of these participants recalling seeing resources distributed by or engaging with the Senedd's campaign on how the Senedd and voting for its members works.

“

Most people in my other classes didn't know there was even an election going on, so when the teacher brought it up, they were just like, 'wait, there was an election?'. And they didn't vote, or they weren't even registered.

Hannah, 17, from Wrexham

Other young people reported receiving no information in school. The participants also broadly mentioned seeing little coverage of the Senedd election in the media, particularly in comparison with English and Scottish elections, which stakeholder interviewees saw as an issue specifically of the Welsh media landscape.

“

In terms of media coverage, I couldn't tell you honestly. Sorry, that's like, you know, not useful, but I just didn't know.

Ace, 16, from Pembrokeshire

Social media campaigns were mentioned as successful by young people from specific groups, for example young people from ethnic minorities, but they were not reported to have cut through more broadly. Even though many focus group participants deemed social media a good space to raise awareness for elections among young people, few reported seeing information about the 2021 Senedd election on their social media feeds. This is most likely due to an issue of reach and timing. For campaigns to cut through broadly, efforts need to be

coordinated jointly and the timing needs to suit young people first and foremost. In particular, social media campaigns operate in what is an information-dense space for young people and can have difficulties to cut through the noise. Stakeholder interviewees reflect that for the 2021 Senedd election awareness raising campaigns fell into a period that was both information-dense (due to ongoing news and uncertainty about the pandemic) and did not suit young people (who were occupied with the return to schools and preparing for assessments).

Peer-led social media campaigns that targeted specific networks or types of young people made for an exception to the low reach of awareness raising campaigns. Specific participants recalled engaging with campaigns that were addressed at young people like them or promoted by peers in their wider networks of friends, e.g., the Make Your Mark '21 campaign run by

young members of the Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team (EYST) and the #Our-Moment campaign run by young volunteers at Citizens Cymru (see case study below “Spotlight on Peer-to-peer social media awareness campaigns”).

For future elections to be successful in engaging young voters, young people need to first be aware of an election and their right to vote in it. Awareness can come from the media, including social media, and from dedicated informational and educational interventions, such as formal and informal educational initiatives in schools and community settings such as youth clubs. Dedicated interventions that raise awareness for elections, but also (social) media campaigns specifically targeted at first-time voters support young people in two ways: (1) by allowing them to learn about their right to vote and the process of voting, and (2) by enabling them to see themselves as legitimate citizens.

Spotlight on

Peer-to-peer social media awareness campaigns



Two awareness raising campaigns that did cut through to specific groups of young people social media were peer-led: Make Your Mark '21 run by young members of the Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team (EYST) and #Our-Moment run by young volunteers at Citizens Cymru.

Through posts on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter, the campaigns delivered accessible messages created by young people for young people on topics such as voter registration, the ballot paper, the function of the Senedd, and summaries of manifestos or political parties' positions on key issues. Both campaigns also showcased a wide range of young people's voices that encouraged peers to vote in the election – often young people who would otherwise not have engaged.

Some of our research participants spoke positively of the impact of these peer-led campaigns and how it encouraged them to become engaged with the election:

“I thought that ‘Make Your Mark’ was really brilliant in the fact that it went right back down to basics. It explained what devolution was, it explained how the Senedd works as a government, you know, itself, it didn’t just go straight into the minutia of, like, a party’s manifesto and try and use terminology that would confuse younger people, you know, they really broke it down very well.”

Alison, 17, from Cardiff

Voter registration

Timing and awareness also present issues for young people needing to register to vote – more so than the practicalities of voter registration. The majority of the young people who participated in the research found the steps of registering to vote straightforward. Few spoke of practical barriers: one young person tripped up over not finding their National Insurance number, two over problems filling in the online form.

Compared to practical difficulties, the combination of a lack of awareness of the election and confusion around the timing of the voter registration deadline presented a much larger barrier for the young people who participated in the research. While some of the most politically interested participants reported registering well ahead of the registration deadline, a number of those who were not initially aware of the election and their need to register to vote explained that by the time they learnt of the elections it was too late to register to vote. Some young people also reported a lack of information around how to register to vote and confusion over whether or not they were already on the electoral roll.

“

I signed up but it said it would take three weeks and I did it about four days before the election, so....

Heisenberg, 17, from Gwynedd

A key factor in young people's experience with voter registration was the support they received in their direct environment, for example in their family or from their local council. Some young people received more information on and support with registering to vote than others and support networks, in particular parents, were crucial in informing and assisting young people with the registration process. A number of participants told us that their parents made sure

they knew how to navigate the registration and, on some occasions, even completed the registration for them.

“

I had to be told to register, 'cause it was one of the things that I just wasn't aware I had to, like I wasn't aware that we could vote yet.

Jacko, 17, from Pembrokeshire

Local councils, too, played a key role in welcoming young people to the vote, but they took different approaches to it, giving young people different experiences depending on the area they lived in. While the Vale of Glamorgan launched an iPad competition to motivate young people to register to vote, other local councils sent letters to all young people. In a number of local areas, however, focus group participants report having received no specific information on registering to vote at all.



Figure 1. Local voter registration campaign with iPad competition in Vale of Glamorgan

While it is welcome that local councils and family support networks aid young people in voter registration, disparities in approaches and a reliance on family capacity to support young people in voter registration ultimately led to inequalities in the support offered to young people in this process. For the broad success of Votes-at-16 in future elections, there needs to be a more systematic approach to enrolling first-time voters across local areas and families.

One systematic solution – Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) – would make many of

these problems obsolete and offer opportunities to eradicate inequalities in voter registration. However, it would not solve problems regarding awareness of the election among young people. Without automatic voter registration the focus should be on the timing of awareness raising campaigns and the registration deadline and on removing practical issues young people might face, such as requiring a National Insurance number or easy-to-complete online forms. It is important that the Electoral Commission and local electoral registration officers have the time and resources to collaborate on sharing evidence of successful removal of barriers and effective support measures and collaborate on the

Electoral campaign engagement

Once registered to vote, young people must be supported in making their political choices. More so than older voters, 16- and 17-year-olds are likely to not yet have established patterns of partisanship, highlighting the need to ensure they are informed about political parties' positions and policies to be able to make confident vote choices. Despite registering to vote, several focus group participants reported dropping off their voting journeys at this stage, precisely because they did not feel they had enough information to confidently make a political choice.



I regret not voting, but I just felt like it was not, like it wasn't fair of me to vote just for the sake of voting, 'cause I didn't, didn't look into it as much as I should. I think I didn't know enough to compare all the parties together.

Kat, 17, from Gwynedd

The task of addressing and supporting young voters in their political decision-making falls first and foremost onto political parties. This should be supported with informa-

systematic rollout of future voter registration campaigns to all 16- and 17-year-olds across Wales.

Additionally, disparities in the age of enfranchisement across the UK and the resulting issue of separate electoral rolls need to be addressed. Especially in the leadup to future UK-wide elections, when young people registered to vote in Wales will have to register to vote once more to join the UK electoral roll, this will likely confuse some young people in Wales. It is important they are made aware of the fact that they will have to re-register to vote, even if they are already registered to vote in Welsh elections.

tion provided by other actors, such as schools, teachers, and youth workers. It is important that this information is not depoliticised and to focus on relevant political issues – regardless of whether these are presented by political parties in a more partisan way or by non-partisan actors.

This makes support at this stage of the voting journey different from awareness raising campaigns. To better understand their electoral choices and consequently exercise their vote, young people need to receive party-political information, both in terms of clear statements on policies and by engaging with political issues in ways that are relevant to young people.

Engagement with the electoral campaign for the 2021 Senedd election was highly varied among the young people who participated in the research. Many said they had engaged with campaigns, mostly by way of reading posted leaflets, but also that they not been targeted by political parties as young people. A notable minority of young people revealed that they had little or no awareness of the parties' campaigns at all.



Figure 2. A young person's election diary entry showing campaign leaflets

Perceptions of the quality and reach of the campaigns among young people varied between political parties, especially in relation to young people's political interests. Among focus group participants, Plaid Cymru and, to a lesser extent, Welsh Labour were viewed as having engaged to the most extent with young people and engaged with their issues when compared with other political parties. Particularly in Welsh-speaking areas such as Gwynedd, focus group participants perceived candidates, predominantly those of Plaid Cymru, as more interested in young people's opinions than elsewhere.

“

If it weren't for the leaflets through my door, I would've been convinced that no-one was campaigning this year. I have seen nothing.

Ethan Y., 18, from Wrexham

The content of the campaigns and concrete policy proposals were largely seen to have little relevance for young people's lives. While the focus group participants engaged with a broad range of political issues, from education and racism to agricultural and health policy, most did not see these issues addressed in the campaigns in ways that were relevant to them.

“

I didn't really see much in terms of what they had, like what they were giving forward for young people.

Toto18, 16, from Gwynedd

Stakeholder interviewees additionally criticized that political parties (with the exception of the Welsh Liberal Democrats) did not produce youth-specific manifestos. Moreover, the late publication of manifestos did not allow those working with young people sufficient time to produce versions and materials from the manifestos that were accessible to a broader group of young people.

First-time voters, particularly aged 16 and 17, need to be supported with relevant party-political information – on political issues and policy proposals – so that they feel confident in their political choices. This must come from political parties that engage with young people and address political issues in ways that are relevant to young people. Interventions driven by actors other than the political parties, for example debates in schools or youth groups, election hustings, and youth workers producing youth-specific materials, rely on the content provided by political parties and the engagement of political candidates. While such measures can make important contributions to supporting young people in their vote choices, at this stage they can only fill gaps left by political parties, for example by translating party-political information for young people.

Spotlight on

Politicians campaigning with young people



While most politicians attracted broad criticism for a lack of engagement with young people's views, some actively involved young voters in their campaigns.

One such example is Jane Hutt, MS for the Vale of Glamorgan. Jane engaged young people in her campaign, for example through a meeting with a member of Welsh Youth Parliament in the lead up to the election. She also compiled endorsements from young people in her constituency, which cited work that she had done for young people in the area. One focus group participant got involved in Jane's campaign after previously joining Welsh Labour. Having taken part in canvassing and encouraging peers in school to register to vote, she reflected on her campaign involvement:

"It was a good, it was really good going round [canvassing]. I had a lot of people saying to me that it was really good that there are Votes-at-16 now, even like, non-16 and 17-year-olds, quite older people were saying it is really good. Long overdue."

Patricia, 17, Vale of Glamorgan, about campaigning with Jane Hutt, MS

This shows that where young people's political views are forefronted by politicians and where young people and politicians get to interact on equal levels, this can have a positive and meaningful impact on young people's engagement with politics.

Turning out to vote

Once young people are aware of an election, registered to vote, and feel confident to make political choices, for most the final stage of their voting journeys, turning out to vote, is more pleasure than a chore. In their election diary entries, several young people noted how excited they were to vote on election day.



I was the first person at my village polling station this morning, and my dog came with me! I was pleased to have the right to vote today.

Rory, 17, from Pembrokeshire

The majority of 16- and 17-year-old research participants chose to go to the polling station over postal vote – some because they did not know how to apply for

postal vote, others out of excitement and to get the full experience of voting for the first time. Survey research conducted by the Electoral Commission confirms the majority use of polling stations among first-time voters, indicating that the uptake of postal vote was lower among 16- and 17-year-olds than in any other age group (Electoral Commission, 2021).

The actual experience of going to the polling station and voting turned out to be varied among the young people who participated in our research. While some young people found the process straightforward and exciting, for others the act of voting turned out to be underwhelming compared with their expectations. A number of young people experienced confusion over being given different numbers of ballot papers than they expected and different papers

than their parents or older siblings. Few young people reported difficulties at the polling stations, such as being given the wrong papers (see also Democracy Volun-



It could get confusing as well, 'cause people might not know what they can and can't vote in. 'Cause I was expecting to be able to vote for a police commissioner as well, then they didn't give me the paper and I was like, why didn't I get?

Baz, 17, from Wrexham

teers, 2021), with only one focus group participant speaking of polling station anxiety because they did not know how the vote itself worked.

In contrast to first-time voters, young people who, despite registering to vote, did not turn out on election day cited several different reasons for their non-participation:

- **A lack of family support:** A large number of young voters reported going to the polling station with their parents or family members, and many said their families had actively encouraged them to vote. In contrast, young people who did not have a family member encourage or accompany them, oftentimes reported not having turned out to vote.

Establishing long-term habits

Whether or not voting in Welsh and local elections becomes a long-term habit for young people depends as much on the experience of participating in their first elections as on the political knowledge they hold or their perceptions of political efficacy ahead of future elections. This noted, it is critical that young people have a straightforward and positive experience of participating in their first-ever election. This requires that barriers to voting and complications associated with voter registration,

- **Lack of time or opportunity on the day:** A number of research participants referred to pressures from employment and, in particular, the timing of school assessments as barriers that kept them from turning out to vote on election day.
- **Doubts about efficacy:** Some young people said they did not see the point in turning out to vote, hinting at doubts about the efficacy of a single vote and the legitimacy of elections in terms of delivering results for individual young people (output legitimacy).

For a long-term investment in young people's engagement with elections, young people need to see barriers to voting, such as a clash of elections and assessment periods, removed. However, for newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds in Wales the role of parents and family members in encouraging young people and providing opportunities to get out to vote cannot be underestimated. As such, it is even more important that young people – particularly those who do not have supportive family members – are encouraged and systematically provided with opportunities to turn out to vote on election days, for example by incorporating voting into school or college schedules on the day.

separate electoral rolls, and different ballot papers on election day, are addressed. It also requires systematic efforts to support young people along each step of their voting journeys, in terms of (1) systematically raising awareness for elections and young people's right to vote, (2) efficient and barrier-free voter registration, (3) relevant party-political information and campaign engagement with political issues in ways that are relevant to young people, (4) providing opportunities for young people to

turn out to vote on election, day, and (5) establishing long-term voting habits.

Furthermore, to establish longer-term voting habits, it is crucial that young people experience political efficacy – both within and outside of the context of elections. Experiencing political efficacy means that young people have the necessary information and feel confident to make a vote choice that aligns with their preferences, and that they are assured that their votes make a difference in the democratic system. This requires political actors to engage with young

people as legitimate voters and with political issues in ways that are relevant to young people.

However, for the experience of political efficacy it is also crucial that young people have an understanding of how they can influence the political system outside of elections. This requires a broader investment into political education, enhancing young people's visibility as legitimate members of the electorate and an understanding of the voting journey as starting long before any particular election period or campaign.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop support strategies for each step of young people's voting journeys, and implement these systematically across Wales to reach young people in all kinds of environments
- Develop systematic and joint awareness raising measures, including programmes for their delivery through the media and schools, and allow sufficient time for campaigns to roll out ahead of an election
- Ensure Electoral Commission and electoral registration officers have time and resources to collaborate on a country-wide voter registration programme and address confusion around separate electoral rolls for 16- and 17-year-olds
- Political parties must provide young voters with appropriate campaign information, engaging with political issues that are relevant to young people (such as youth party manifestos) in spaces, online and offline, where they discuss politics
- Encourage non-partisan youth voter engagement work to provide overviews of party positions in formats young people are likely to access
- Remove barriers to voting that are specific to young voters by introducing automatic voter registration, by avoiding scheduling elections in exam periods, by incorporating polling stations into schools or colleges

THE VOTING JOURNEY

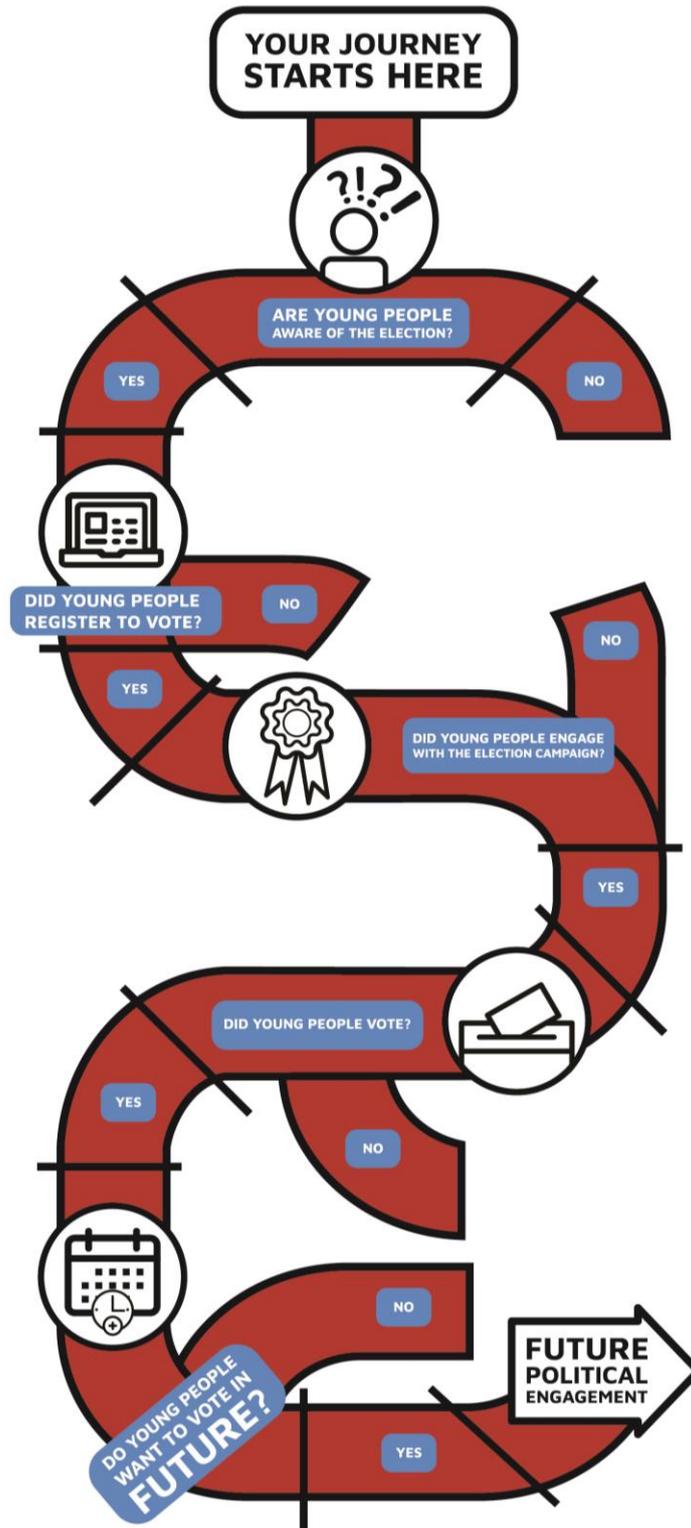


Figure 3. A roadmap of young people's voting journeys

An interactive version of this infographic for policymakers, practitioners, and young people with more information and recommendations for each stage can be accessed here: <https://www.ukvotingage.co.uk/votingjourney>

#2 Reducing inequalities: Ensuring all young people have capacities to vote

Across Wales, 16- and 17-year-olds reported considerable variation in their voting journeys in this first experience of Votes-at-16. Some young people began their voting journeys with significant capacities to engage in campaigns and with political issues. Others found themselves with little support throughout the various stages of their voting journeys.

The research revealed variation first and foremost between young people who did and did not receive support and encouragement to engage with the election from family members, and to a lesser extent, from friends, teachers, or youth workers. An over-reliance on family support led to a replication of largely existing inequalities among young people, even if an aim of the lowering of the voting age was for this to change. In Wales, the political engagement of parents or family members continues to be the most important determinant of young people’s political engagement ([Muddiman et al., 2019](#)).

In addition to family support, young people also experienced a diversity of supportive environments depending on where in

Wales they lived. Regional variations in terms of the support young people received in schools, or from teachers, or electoral administrators, made for very different settings in which young people were politically socialised and engaged in the lead up to the Senedd election.



I think ‘cause I’m influenced by a lot of politics in my family, and my area in general, yeah, I always knew I was gonna vote.

Taylor Nelson, 16, from Vale of Glamorgan

Some focus group participants reflected on how the Senedd election in their areas was highly contested. They noted this led to the election campaign, and conversations about it, entering more areas of daily life such as among friends in school. There was also variation in the extent to which young people’s votes were sought by candidates or local councils, with some constituencies proving largely uncontested by political parties and thus seeing little to no political debate or voter engagement activities targeted at first-time voters.

Table 1. Focus group participants who voted and did not vote on family support and discussions about politics

Young people who voted did talk about politics with family members	Young people who did not vote did not talk about politics with family members
<p>I think, definitely, if I didn’t know so much about politics or if my family personally wasn’t just generally so much into politics, I would have really struggled with finding information about parties.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Fflur, 17, from Torfaen</p> <p>I just basically asked my parents for their opinion, kind of followed their lead and their votes really.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Sali, 16, from Gwynedd</p>	<p>It [politics] is never been anything that’s been big in our family either.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Toto18, 16, from Gwynedd</p> <p>I also didn’t talk about it [politics] with my family because it can get quite argumentative sometimes.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Ada, 17, from Vale of Glamorgan</p> <p>No, I didn’t talk with anyone really [laughs].</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Heisenberg, 17, from Gwynedd</p>

This variation across the country and across families impacted how much support young people received as first-time voters two distinct aspects: (a) in knowing how to vote and what for (procedural knowledge), and (b) who to vote for (political knowledge).

Knowing how to vote and what for

Young people who participated in the research expressed how important procedural knowledge – knowing how to vote, what voting is for, and how the Senedd works – was for their individual voting journeys. Formal providers of such procedural knowledge, particularly the Welsh Government, the Senedd Commission, the Electoral Commission, and local electoral registration officers, as well as more informal providers (such as youth organisations like Urdd Gobaith Cymru), delivered a range of educational measures to boost young people’s knowledge of how and why they should vote. Reflections from research participants however show that the delivery and reach of these educational measures across different groups of young people and across the country was inconsistent. Despite intensive efforts, some young people were just not reached.

“

I didn't really have any, yeah, any events to go to really. (...) No, there wasn't really much for me to get involved in in my area unfortunately.

Taylor Nelson, 16, from Vale of Glamorgan

Regardless of who were the primary suppliers of such educational measures, young people and stakeholder interviewees assigned a large part of the responsibility of boosting young people’s procedural knowledge of electoral participation to schools and colleges. The first experience of Votes-at-16 in Wales however was not accompanied by dedicated and statutory measures to foster universal political

education. Consequently, we found that schools and colleges lacked sufficient time and space in the curriculum to teach classes on how to vote or to accommodate ad hoc requests to timetable educational measures from outside providers of voter literacy, such as the Senedd or Electoral Commission, while also dealing with the intense pressures of pandemic-related measures.

“

So, what I'm not sure about really is to what extent those young people who need the support more than others received the same kind of depth and quality of education during the pandemic, and if those young people were receiving messages regarding Votes-at-16, that they would perhaps get more effectively when attending school or college in person.

Senedd Commission Official

Without dedicated, uniform, and statutory measures to foster political literacy through political education, the diverse capacities of individual schools and colleges generated further inequalities in the support young people received to turn out to vote. In the worst case, school capacities exacerbate existing inequalities, in particular those based on regional levels of deprivation (Weinberg, 2021).

For a long-term investment into the political and electoral engagement of 16- and 17-year-olds in Wales a concerted effort must be made to introduce educational measures to ensure all young people know how and why to vote. Votes-at-16 must be accompanied by a reform of political education that enables schools and colleges to deliver political literacy more equally across the country. Educational voter engagement interventions need to be harmonised and their rollout across schools be coordinated, so that educational institutions are not forced to weigh off different educational interventions against one another.

Confidently making political choices

Investing in political literacy is just one aspect of strengthening Votes-at-16 in the future and enabling young people to exercise their right to vote. For many research participants political knowledge – knowing who to vote for, seeing a point in casting a vote, and perceiving one’s vote to make a difference – were just as important as knowing how voting works.

Across the focus groups, many participants said they also wanted to be educated on political positions and standpoints. They argued that being taught about the differences between political parties would enable them to confidently make an informed choice in the election.

This kind of party-political information, and the confidence young people associate with having it to hand, is especially important seeing that several participants had



Having that more knowledge about how to vote and stuff like that, but also having more knowledge about the candidates themselves. Like, I think, like, nobody really, I didn't even know who was, like, running against who to be honest, I just, I had to, like, search it up myself. And I know I could do that myself, but like I think people need that extra push.

Zoey Brooks, 17, from Vale of Glamorgan

internalised the expectation that they were deficient citizens who are not yet capable of making an informed and efficacious vote choice. Other focus group participants expressed concern over the perceived legitimacy of young people as voters, expecting that adults would lay blame for the election outcome whichever way the election and turnout in it went.

Spotlight on

Project Vote Parallel Election



Though aimed at 11- to 15-year-olds, the Project Vote Parallel Election run by the Children’s Commissioner for Wales combined two ways of increasing young peoples’ capacities to vote: by helping young people understand how to vote and teaching them to make realistic choices on who to vote for.

In the days leading up to the election, young people in secondary schools across Wales took part in an e-ballot, making choices between the political parties standing in the Senedd election in the constituency of the school. More than 9,000 young people within 36 of 40 Welsh constituencies voted in the mock election. Of those who completed a survey after taking part, 59 per cent said that they were more likely to vote in a Senedd election in the future (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2021).

As an educational measure that conveys both procedural knowledge and allows young people to experience what voting is like, Project Vote can have a lasting impact on youth turnout in future cohorts of young people:

“I think the next election campaign doesn't start six months or a year before the election. It starts now in the sense that we need to be creating that infrastructure and getting stuff ready in schools, like the Children's Commissioner have done with their Project Vote and young people from 11 to 16 have been voting anyway.”

Senedd Engagement Official

Supporting 16- and 17-year-olds in their voting journeys requires both procedural knowledge on how to vote, what voting is for, and how the Senedd works, and party-political information to be provided, and ideally, they are provided in combination whilst giving young people the space to form political opinions. Introducing Votes-at-16 as an individualised and depoliticised right alone is not enough to engage young voters, who look critically at their own capacity and legitimacy to cast a vote.

“

‘Cause we don’t really talk about it, it’s not like a big subject. So, like teachers don’t really speak to us about it or anything. So if we don’t, ‘cause we don’t really know enough, it’s sort of hard to choose a party to vote for, and then I guess you don’t really wanna vote for somebody you don’t know what they’re on about or what their aims are.

Toto18, 16, from Gwynedd

Schools and colleges can play a role in providing this information and as spaces

that bring information on knowing how to vote and knowing who to vote for together. This goes beyond educational measures and includes giving young people opportunities to informally exchange views on political issues and experience political efficacy, such as in debates, mock elections, and discussions with political candidates (such as those offered by the Politics Project). In all of these measures it is important that discussions are explicitly party-political, and that young people learn to express and engage with partisan views across the political spectrum.

Youth groups and civic society organisations can also contribute to this by exploring links between families and within peer networks of young people as informal spaces of political socialisation. This can include offering opportunities to discuss political views in youth centres and youth groups as well as dedicated measures to encourage political conversations among family members. Also, supported peer-to-peer campaigns on social media can offer spaces for young people to discuss issues with peers and form political opinions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure all schools, and colleges, have equal time and space in the curriculum to deliver formal voter literacy work ahead of and between elections
- Coordinate the rollout of educational measures offered by formal and informal providers in schools and colleges through networked actors in voter engagement work
- Make a long-term investment into the political engagement of young people by introducing statutory political education in Welsh schools and colleges
- Offer young people spaces to form political opinions in schools and colleges, for example through organised debates, mock elections, or visits and in-school debates with politicians
- Encourage civic society organisations to provide young people with informal spaces to exchange views on political issues, e.g., in youth centres, families, or peer-to-peer social media campaigns

Spotlight on

Youth Election Hustings



Youth hustings staged by and for young people, such as the ‘Not Your Usual Digital Hustings’, held in April 2021 and hosted by Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs of Wales and Swansea MAD, offer young people opportunities to come into contact with and hear a debate between political candidates on issues that matter to young people.

Young people across Wales were invited to submit questions to the hustings and some were able to comment directly to politicians on their answers. Topics included racism, jobs, and the environment. Attended by candidates of all major political parties and hosted by Radio One’s Steffan Powell, the event engaged over 50 young people. Some research participants attended this event and commented positively upon the format, the degree of youth voice, and its impact upon first-time voters:

“I thought it was really good (...) It was actually questions that young people had said, so it wasn’t just the general questions that we wouldn’t understand - it was topics that young people actually wanted answering and things like that, so I thought it was good.”

Jay, 20, from the South Wales Valleys

Another benefit of the hustings raised by a research participant is that these events provide opportunities to contribute to a conversation about politics for young people who do not usually speak about politics in their social networks.

“The hustings event and things like that are the only time I ever think or, uhm, actually have a conversation about politics ‘cause it’s not something you really bring up with friends or, uhm, a lot of the time.”

Jane Jones, 20, from North Wales

#3 Working on Wales as a meaningful civic space

A unique feature of lowering of the voting age in Wales is that newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds have been encouraged to become engaged in a civic space that is devolved from that of the UK. Even though current and future cohorts of 16- and 17-year-olds know nothing but devolution in Wales, this does not necessarily mean they hold clear and uniform views of Welsh governance, of democracy in Wales, and of what it means to engage in it. How young people evaluate Wales as a civic space relates to their willingness to vote in Welsh elections.

For many young people, Wales as a civic space is meaningful, even if often not concretely and not in a uniform way. More so than older citizens, young people in Wales show a notably different dynamic of support for Welsh institutions. They tend to be more likely to identify as Welsh citizens and satisfaction with the Welsh Government is higher among young people than all other age groups.

“

I think that Wales having its own separate body to, like, you know, make, not even like broad sweeping changes, but just make small, localised changes, I think that's a good idea. It at least justifies Wales being a separate country from England.

Jacko, 17, from Pembrokeshire

There is considerable variation in the appreciation of Welsh governance among young people, however. Wales as a civic space is not – and has previously not been – uniformly meaningful for young people (see for example Pearce, 2019; Scully, 2013). For many of the young people who participated in this research, the coronavirus pandemic helped actualise, and to some extent, legitimise the role of the Welsh Government. Focus group

participants described how the responsibilities of the Welsh Government and their relevance to young people's lives became more visible during the pandemic – particularly compared to the UK government at Westminster, but to some extent also compared to local councils.

“

I think people have come to realise that how much power actually there is in Cardiff Bay, and because obviously, with the daily briefings and that.

Ywain Guevara, 17, from Anglesey

However, post-devolution Wales as a civic space is not uniformly understood and not always in concrete ways. When asked what Wales and Welsh government meant to them, some research participants gave answers focused on outcomes, often setting Welsh policy apart from policy at the UK-level, while others discussed the symbolism of having a Cardiff-based government with Welsh as one of its official languages. For some young people, their understanding of Welsh governance focused solely on the role of the First Minister or, even more specifically, Mark Drakeford as a person. Again others, specifically some young people in Wrexham and Pembrokeshire, rejected the idea of Wales as a civic space entirely, some seeing Westminster as more authoritative on important policy issues and others not identifying as Welsh themselves.

Geography and language matter hugely for young people's understanding of Wales as a civic space and appreciation of Welsh governance. Young participants in Gwynedd and Carmarthenshire had diverse but often more favourable views of the Senedd, but also had higher expectations of the Welsh Government, and devolution than young people in the east of the country.

Table 2. Range of views of Welsh governance and Wales as a civic space among focus group participants

Variety of evaluations of Wales as a civic space that are broadly positive	Variety of evaluations of Wales as a civic space that are broadly sceptical or negative
<p>I think the Senedd is important, so we have a place in Wales that is connected to politics, so that we're not governed by people 150 miles away and that we actually get to have a choice in our governance. Mari, 17, from Pembrokeshire</p> <p>Wales is, can look after itself really. And I think over Covid with Wales making their own decisions and stuff, it's shown they can actually make decisions and they're better than England and the other countries. Llywelyn, 17, from Gwynedd</p> <p>I'm feeling quite positive about the Senedd. I think Mark Drakeford and the Senedd have worked really well during the pandemic, and I'm very hopeful for its future. Maggy, 17, from Pembrokeshire</p> <p>With the Senedd, I quite like it. I don't know how I feel about Welsh independence, but I like that we have the devolution that we do. Uhm, and I quite like the changes that they proposed about, like, the 5p bag charge and stuff like that. Lily, 16, from Pembrokeshire</p>	<p>The Senedd is definitely remote from Wrexham. In fact, many young people wouldn't be able to describe what the Senedd is and why they exist. (...) People generally give less importance to Welsh Senedd and their work. I understand the pandemic shows that they affect us immediately, but people still give more attention to Westminster. Xenia, 17, from Wrexham</p> <p>I think especially being in Pembrokeshire, people don't feel as Welsh. Like the Welsh language isn't as prevalent and things like that, so people, yeah, don't feel such a connection to the Senedd, and I think, (...) they're just like, what am I doing with this vote? Rory, 17, from Pembrokeshire</p> <p>There's like a recent closure of leisure centres, I think, in like Merthyr. And my friend is like 'I don't know why you would vote. You know, the government haven't done anything in the past to help our town and help these places, so why does now make a difference?' Fflur, 17, from Torfaen</p>

In particular, for young people in and around Wrexham, everyday experiences of discrepancies between Welsh and English legislation made for a very different view of – and often more doubts about – Wales as a civic space. For a number of them, the Senedd felt remote and far away, and Welsh politics less relevant, especially when compared to decisions made in Westminster.

The Welsh language also made a difference in young people's evaluations of Wales as a civic space, but not in an exclusive and straightforward way. Links between Welsh as a language and perceptions of Wales as a civic space were strongest in more rural Welsh-speaking areas. Particularly for focus group participants in Gwynedd and Carmarthenshire speaking Welsh was an important feature of Welsh

government, with some participants saying that it should be a requirement for all Welsh elected representatives to speak Welsh. However, the Welsh language was also perceived as an important aspect of Welsh democracy among some young people in other areas, for example in South Wales and Cardiff. For them, bilingualism that was an important means of legitimising Welsh government and devolved powers.

How young people assign meaning to Wales as a civic space is directly related to how they engage in Welsh democracy and, ultimately, to their willingness to vote in Welsh elections. Young people who said it made more of a difference to their lives how Wales is governed and who trusted the Welsh government more than the UK government were more likely to turn out to vote

in the Senedd election than those who did not share these attitudes.

“

I reckon I'm more interested in Westminster. 'Cause I reckon it's like, don't know, that's like the final say really, isn't it? So, then it's more important. (...) Yeah, I reckon I would [be more keen to vote in a Westminster election than a Welsh election], 'cause it, like, more, like, affects, like, the whole, like UK more really.

Uncle Hank, 17, from Gwynedd

To motivate young people to vote in Welsh elections, Wales needs to become meaningful as a civic space for all young people, regardless of location and language. The lowering of the voting age in Wales alone does not achieve this for newly enfranchised young people; it is important that Votes-at-16 is seen as a larger investment in young people as citizens beyond Wales, and that a cultural change in favour of young people's views takes hold.

This includes advocating for a lowering of the voting age at the UK level, on behalf of Welsh young people. The disparity in the age of enfranchisement across the UK adds to confusion over the voting system, and to frustrations among young people with regard to their perceived roles as citizens. Across the focus groups, several young people remarked how it was confusing that they were allowed to vote at 16 and 17 in Welsh and local elections, but not in UK elections, for example when receiving different ballot papers than their parents and older siblings. A number of young people also spoke of feelings of frustration over not being able to vote in other relevant elections, such as the Police and Crime Commissioner elections that took place on the same day as the 2021 Senedd election.

Crucially, the differential in the ages of enfranchisement across the UK can also lessen the significance of Votes-at-16 for young people in Wales. Even though most of the focus group participants welcomed the lowering of the voting age in Wales, some also described how frustrations over not being allowed to vote in all elections led to them feeling conflicted about voting at 16 and 17 in Welsh and local elections. The fact that they were not allowed to vote in all elections made voting in Welsh and local elections seem less significant and, ultimately, less impactful.

“

I think in a way, 'cause you can vote at 16 in Wales and not the entire of the UK, it kind of makes it seem like the Welsh, like Welsh specific voting is less important, because it's not, 'cause it's the immature kids doing the voting, you know.

Ada, 17, from Vale of Glamorgan

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop education and communication strategies to emphasise Wales as a civic space, outlining where the Senedd and local government delivers meaningful outcomes that are directly relevant to young people's lives
- Recognise and engage with diverse understandings of Wales as a civic space of young people in different regions, and with those who do and do not speak Welsh
- Advocate for a lowering of the voting age at the UK level to alleviate current disparities and frustrations among young people in Wales

Conclusion: What next for Votes-at-16 in Wales?

In Wales, the lowering of the voting age was introduced with a particular view towards strengthening young people's representation in Welsh democracy. Whether the reform of the voting age does indeed have such positive effects on young people's political interest, engagement, and civic attitudes is not – as yet – clear and depends on how the policy is further implemented.

The 2021 Senedd election was the first experience of Votes-at-16 in Wales and came with a range of unique challenges, not the least because the election took place under exceptional circumstances in times of the coronavirus pandemic. Given these challenges young people participating in this research reported a range of barriers to turning out to vote: a widespread lack of awareness among young people and coverage of the election in the media, confusion around the timing of the voter registration deadline and the need to register to vote, insufficient engagement with young people and their views of political issues from political parties, and a poorly timed election day that conflicted with many young people's school assessments.

Among the range of initiatives that worked with young people to mobilise them to vote in the election, participants identified those as effective that were peer-led and made young people's political views visible and part of public debate, and those that combined information about how to vote with opportunities to form political opinions, for example election hustings or mock elections, such as Project Vote. While procedural information about the election and how to vote was seen as important, young people considered it equally key to find spaces in which they can meaningfully engage with political candidates and political standpoints and confidently form their own political opinions.

For Votes-at-16 to be considered successful in Wales in the future, it is vital that lessons are learnt from these experiences and acted upon for future Senedd and local elections to ensure the mobilisation of 16- and 17-year-olds to vote, especially those from usually underrepresented groups. This research shows that the experiences of engagement with the election varied considerably among young people from different societal groups and different parts of Wales. In particular, having supportive family members that encourage a young person to engage with an election is the number one factor remains the most important determinant of young people's political engagement in Wales.

To reduce inequalities in political engagement and, ultimately, political representation, in Wales requires systematic and coordinated efforts to mobilise young people to engage politically and to vote. Whilst removing immediate barriers to electoral registration and voting is important to bring more young people to the ballot box, e.g., by addressing confusion around eligibility, separate electoral rolls, and clashes with school assessments on election day, it is fundamentally important that young people in Wales are supported along each step of their voting journeys.

This support needs to be broad and delivered systematically, not just in the immediate run-up to an election. Timing is key and engaging young people as voters in future elections demands a holistic view of their voting journeys and engagement efforts that span cohorts, age groups, and election periods. This requires a long-term investment into political education and the support and coordinated delivery of educational measures in schools and colleges as well as maintaining and strengthening the uniquely Welsh networked approach to youth voter engagement.

Crucially, for young people to engage in future Welsh and local elections first-time voters need to be able to see themselves as legitimate citizens and as having a voice in Wales as a meaningful civic space. This requires young people and their views of political issues to become visible in national debates about political issues, in the media or in peer-to-peer campaigns on social media – not as young people’s issues, but as relevant views of political issues among young people. Similarly, political parties must be held to account to address young voters with relevant information and by engaging with political issues in ways that are relevant to young people.

The introduction of Votes-at-16 in Wales does not only have national implications; it

has further unbalanced the allocation of political rights to young people across the UK. This imbalance does not only impact young people in England and Northern Ireland. Our research has shown that it also affects how some young people in Wales view their roles as Welsh citizens. For all young people to perceive their participation in Welsh elections as meaningful, a longer-term investment into young people as voters in Welsh elections is just as important as including young people’s views in democratic decision making beyond Wales. Investments into young people as legitimate citizens thus do not only pay it forward to levelling up political rights for young people in England and Northern Ireland. They are also key to making Votes-at-16 for young people in Wales a success.

Recommendations

For Welsh Government and local authority policy makers

- Maintain and strengthen a networked approach to voter engagement work, by establishing and resourcing a national hub for youth voter engagement work. This network should include coordinated efforts on the generation, analysis, and sharing of evidence on long-term outcomes of Votes-at-16.
- Ensure civil society actors, the Electoral Commission, and electoral registration officers have time and resources to administer and collaborate on joint and coordinated voter registration and engagement programmes for 16- and 17-year-olds.
- Ensure all schools and colleges have dedicated time and space for political education and benefit from a systematic rollout of voter engagement work.
- Where possible, remove practical barriers for young people to turn out to vote, such as clashes of elections and school/college assessment periods. Make it easier for all young people to turn out to vote by incorporating voting into school or college schedules on election days.
- Make young people visible by bringing young people representatives into voter engagement networks and giving them responsibility to co-develop initiatives.
- Make a long-term investment into the political engagement of young people by introducing statutory political education, and by offering young people spaces to form political opinions in schools and colleges, through organised debates, mock elections, in-school debates with politicians.
- Communicate where Wales as a civic space is meaningful and where it delivers outcomes that are directly relevant to young people’s lives across different regions, and with those who do and do not speak Welsh.

For policymakers in the rest of the UK and internationally

- Engage in networks to collect and build on evidence from the introduction of Votes-at-16 in Wales.
- Understand the importance of timing in voting age reform and ensure that future policy reform includes sufficient preparation time for institutions and civic society organisations to design and rollout systematic support to young people.
- Learn from Welsh civic society actors how to adapt youth voter engagement work to online delivery modes to identify approaches that are useful outside a pandemic context.
- Learn from regional differences in Wales to adapt civic engagement efforts to the specific local contexts and understandings of the nation as a civic space.
- Contrast the experience of Votes-at-16 in Wales with that of other countries implementing voting age reform outside of the pandemic context to better understand what conditions might be particularly important for the successful implementation of voting age reform.

For politicians and political parties

- Start engaging with young people as voters early in an election cycle and release information on political policies and manifestoes well ahead of an election to allow young people and youth engagement workers time to engage and translate messages.
- Engage with young people and address political issues in ways that are relevant to them. This can include looking to ensure a more diverse age range of Senedd and local government candidates where possible.
- Support young people in their political decision making with relevant party-political information addressed specifically to young people, e.g., youth-specific party manifestos. Civic society can help collate this neutrally.
- Share learnings from Votes-at-16 in Wales with party members in other parts of the UK.
- Advocate for a lowering of the voting age to 16 for all UK elections, including local and devolved elections.

For youth organisations and youth engagement workers

- In the lead-up to and between elections, start youth voter engagement work early and ensure sufficient time and resources across stages of young people's voting journeys.
- Make young people visible in voter engagement campaigns, registration interventions, and in national debates and give them responsibility to co-develop campaigns.
- Maintain and strengthen collaborative and coordinated approaches across civic society organisations in the design, provision, rollout, and sharing of educational interventions and voter engagement resources, particularly on those offered to schools and colleges.
- Offer young people supported spaces to discuss and form political views, e.g., in youth centres and youth groups. This can also include supported peer-to-peer campaigns on social media.
- Explore links between families to support informal political socialisation, e.g., by introducing measures to encourage political conversations among family members.

For young people

- Discuss your views of political issues with other young people, and with adults. Even if you feel you don't yet know enough – that's ok and you are allowed to change your views!
- Encourage friends, peers, family members, and other young people to discuss their views of political issues with you and others and be tolerant of their views if they are different from your own.
- Support other young people, family members, and friends in their voting journeys by offering information about elections, helping them to register to vote, and pointing towards manifestos, hustings events, or other spaces to debate political issues. Have a look at [our interactive infographic](#) to find out how you can support other young people and which resources you can point them to!
- Engage in conversations with adults and other young people about young people as responsible and legitimate democratic citizens and ensure that views of young people, including your own, are visible and taken seriously.
- Speak to others about the lowering of the voting age in Wales, including to people who do not live in Wales, and explain what your experience (positive or negative) of it has been so far.

Further Reading

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Links to Initiatives and Resources

Educational initiatives and awareness raising campaigns

[Welcome to your vote](#) – Electoral Commission

[Voice2Vote](#) – Welsh Government

[Votes at 16 Week](#) – Senedd Cymru

[Prosiect Pleidlais 16/17](#) – Urdd Gobaith Cymru

[Democracy Box](#) – Omidaze

Peer-led campaigns

[Raise Your Voice](#) – Boys' and Girls' Clubs of Wales and Swansea MAD

[Make Your Mark '21](#) – Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team Wales

Youth manifestos

['Our Future' Manifesto](#) – Youth Cymru Llais Ifanc

[Youth Manifesto](#) – Welsh Liberal Democrats

Youth Hustings

['Power of Your Vote'](#) Youth-Led Hustings – Youth Cymru Llais Ifanc

[Not Your Usual Digital Hustings](#) – Boys' and Girls' Clubs of Wales and Swansea MAD

[Senedd 2021 Election Youth Hustings](#) – WalesOnline and Political Studies Association

Mock elections and debates

[Project Vote](#) – Children's Commissioner for Wales

[Power of your Vote](#) – Senedd Cymru

[Digital surgeries](#) – The Politics Project

Podcasts

[Youthpod](#) – Youth Cymru Llais Ifanc

[Votes at 16 Special Episode](#) – Young, Female, Opinionated x Raise Your Voice

[#Senedd21: Youth Engagement & Votes at 16](#) – Hiraeth/Welsh Politics

Research Team

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More information, data, and illustrations from the research are available on the project website: ukvotingage.co.uk

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Methods Note: Research and methodology

This report presents findings from a large-scale qualitative research project into young people's experiences of the 2021 Senedd election – the first-ever election in Wales in which 16- and 17-year-olds were enfranchised. The research was funded by the UK Democracy Fund, a pooled fund managed by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust. Following selected groups of young people across four areas in Wales over the course of the election period, the aims of the research were:

1. To gain in-depth insights into young people's experience of the election.
2. To identify successful strategies that educate and mobilise young people in Wales to vote, especially those from traditionally underrepresented groups.
3. To point to lessons that can be learnt for future Welsh elections and for long-term investments into youth political engagement in Wales.
4. To extend the evidence base on the impact of introducing 'Votes-at-16' in Wales, across the rest of the UK, and internationally.

With a view to working with a diverse group of young people from across Wales, 86 young people were recruited to participate in the research through secondary schools, further education colleges as well as through youth groups and youth workers in selected areas: Gwynedd and Anglesey, Pembrokeshire, Wrexham, South Wales Central, including Cardiff, and Carmarthenshire. Few young people joined the research from other areas after hearing about it from parents or friends. The participants represent diverse groups of young people – the majority aged 16 and 17, with few slightly younger or slightly older – from a mix of geographical locations across Wales, including young people from rural and coastal communities, from minority ethnic backgrounds, from Welsh-medium schools, and from predominantly Welsh-speaking areas (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Map showing the where in Wales focus group participants are from (by NUTS-3-level)

All young people participated in 60- to 120-minute-long facilitated focus group discussions between April and August 2021, in which they discussed their experience of the election and election campaign as well as their interest in and views of political issues, including of the lowering of the voting age, their attitudes to Welsh politics and governance. Where possible, focus group discussions were arranged with young people from the same area, school, youth or peer group. Some young people participated in two focus group discussions – one before and one directly after the election – while others just participated after the election. Due to restrictions on face-to-face research all group discussions took place virtually, with young people participating via video call and online chat. Some young people additionally kept election diaries, reacting to prompts from the research team in the leadup to the election and sharing an in-the-moment insight into their election experience. Diary entries were shared as pictures, text or voice messages or submitted through an online interface.

The research with young people is complemented by interviews with 34 stakeholders of youth voter engagement work in Wales, among which representatives of Welsh youth organisations, electoral registration officers, and youth workers. The interviews were conducted immediately after the election and stakeholders were asked to reflect on their work with young people in

the leadup to the election and on lessons learnt for future youth voter engagement work. All research was approved by the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Nottingham Trent University (approval number: 2021/145).

All data from focus group discussions, election diaries, and interviews were transcribed, and transcripts analysed independently by different members of the research team, focusing on recurrent experiences among young people and learnings about what works to mobilise young people to vote in future Welsh elections. This report details these recurring themes, using anonymised statements from young people and stakeholder interviews to illustrate the main recurring themes. Statements are anonymised and all young people have consented to and chosen their own pseudonym for inclusion in this report. Throughout this report, unless specified, the findings were common across participants in all locations. Where findings are unique to a particular group or demographic, this is made clear. Case studies were selected so as to highlight initiatives that stood out particularly positively for some young people.

This type of large-scale qualitative research is particularly suited to exploring people's experiences as well as problems, attitudes, and motivations from the perspective of different kinds of young people. While the research is limited in terms of making representative claims about the extent to which attitudes and perspectives are present among the population of all Welsh 16- and 17-year-olds at large, it gives detailed insights into how and – most importantly – why different kinds of young people from different societal groups and parts of Wales chose to engage with the election or not.

Table 3. Overview over key characteristics of the 86 participating young people

Characteristic		Number of participants	Per cent of total
Gender	Female	49	57
	Male	36	42
	Non-binary	1	1
Age	Under 16	2	2
	16-17	71	83
	Recently turned 18	7	8
	Over 18 ¹	6	7
Region	Gwynedd & Anglesey	24	28
	Pembrokeshire	19	22
	Wrexham	15	17
	Cardiff, Vale of Glamorgan, Bridgend	15	17
	Carmarthenshire	8	9
	Other ²	5	6
Ethnicity	White	77	90
	Minority ethnic groups	9	10
Main language spoken at home	English	67	78
	Welsh	18	21
	Other	1	1
Language of education	English-language	54	64
	Welsh-medium	32	38

¹ 19-22-year-olds

² Including South Wales Valleys, Monmouthshire, and those who chose to not disclose their region

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