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Making Votes-at-16 Work in Wales

Lessons for the Future



Summary and policy recommendations

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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 make 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.

About the research

The findings and policy recommendations reported in this publication are based on focus group discussions with 16- and 17- year-olds from across Wales before and after the 2021 Senedd election. In facilitated group discussions, 86 young people shared their experiences of the election and their views of Welsh politics and governance. Some young people also kept election diaries, sharing an in-the-moment insight into their election experience.

The young people who participated in the research represent diverse groups of young people from a mix of social groups and geographical locations across Wales. In addition to research with young people, we conducted interviews with 34 stakeholders of youth voter engagement in Wales: representatives of Welsh youth organisations and institutions, electoral registration officers, and youth workers. A detailed overview over the methods, the participants, how they were recruited, and how the discussions were facilitated and analysed can be found in our [full research report](#).

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The full report as well as more information and illustrations are available on the project website: ukvotingage.co.uk

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