

Article

How do young people perceive the impact of lowering the voting age to 16 on civic and political engagement? A systematic review

Norberto Ribeiro

CIIE - Centre for Research and Intervention in Education, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

Highlights:

- Lowering the voting age to 16 generally enhances civic and political engagement.
- Civic education and institutional support are crucial to long-term democratic participation.
- Political hesitancy reflects electoral and ideological calculations.
- Reforms require robust civic education to sustain democracy.

Purpose: This paper reviews empirical evidence on whether lowering the voting age to 16 enhances civic and political engagement and examines the factors mediating its effects.

Design/methodology/approach: Following PRISMA-P guidelines, 3,694 records from Web of Science and Scopus were screened. Eleven empirical studies (2015–2025) met the inclusion criteria, focusing on young people’s political perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours.

Findings: Most studies indicate that enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds promotes civic and political engagement, particularly when accompanied by civic education and institutional support. Early political socialisation and school-based opportunities emerge as key mediators, suggesting that political maturity depends more on educational context than on age. The review also discusses political hesitancy in implementing voting-age reform, often linked to electoral strategy and ideological concerns.

Research limitations/implications: The review primarily focuses on English-language, European studies. Longitudinal and cross-national research is necessary to evaluate the long-term and educational effects on youth engagement.

Practical implications: Voting-age reforms must be coupled with robust civic education policies to ensure informed and sustainable democratic participation.

Keywords: youth enfranchisement, political engagement, civic and political education, political socialisation, electoral participation, democracy

Corresponding author:

Norberto Ribeiro, Rua Alfredo Allen, s/n, 4200-135 Porto, Portugal.
E-Mail: norberto@fpce.up.pt

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1 INTRODUCTION

The question of whether lowering the voting age to 16 fosters greater civic and political engagement has been the subject of increasing debate among scholars and policymakers. This emphasis on engagement reflects a participatory understanding of democracy in which citizen involvement is closely linked to political responsiveness, representation, and the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Deželan, 2023). It is particularly relevant considering sustained evidence showing declining electoral turnout, weaker attachment to party politics, and lower levels of political literacy among younger citizens (e.g., Sloam, 2016; Sloam & Henn, 2019; Stockemer & Rocher, 2017; Van Biezen et al., 2012). In this context, youth participation has also become a strategic priority at the European level. The European Union Youth Strategy 2019–2027 recognises that providing pathways for young people’s participation in democratic life is vital for a functioning democracy, especially given their underrepresentation in political institutions and their more limited opportunities to influence decision-making processes, despite being those who will live longest with the consequences of decisions taken today (Council of the European Union, 2018). As democratic societies strive to promote political participation, particularly among younger citizens, understanding the impact of enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds is therefore crucial. Advocates argue that granting voting rights to younger citizens can stimulate early political socialisation, fostering lifelong engagement in democratic processes. Critics, however, raise concerns about the political maturity and readiness of this age group to participate meaningfully in the elections.

Although voting-age reform can also be examined through rights-based, critical, or transformative perspectives, this review adopts a primarily functionalist lens by focusing on civic and political engagement as indicators closely linked to the responsiveness, legitimacy, and long-term vitality of democratic systems. This choice reflects both the prominence of these outcomes in the empirical literature and the contemporary concern with declining youth participation. At the same time, the review recognises that broader questions of youth voice, representation, and democratic inclusion remain insufficiently addressed.

Despite a growing body of research on youth political engagement and voting behaviour, to the best of my knowledge, there is no systematic review that specifically addresses the question: *How do young people perceive the impact of lowering the voting age to 16 on civic and political engagement?* Recent research on this topic also reveals a tendency toward “adultsplaining” (Ribeiro et al., 2023), whereby young people are more often spoken about than listened to, leaving their perspectives largely absent from the literature. While existing studies examine related aspects – such as voting behaviour in countries that have lowered the voting age, political attitudes among younger citizens, and broader discussions of democratic participation – a comprehensive synthesis of young people’s own perspectives remains absent. This study seeks to fill this gap by systematically reviewing the literature to assess how enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds is perceived and experienced in relation to civic and political engagement.

Based on the existing literature, this review is expected to find that lowering the voting age, when accompanied by robust civic education and institutional support, can enhance civic and political engagement among younger voters (see Ribeiro et al., 2023). Evidence from countries that have implemented this reform, such as Austria, suggests that young voters can make informed electoral choices and that early enfranchisement can foster long-term political engagement (e.g., Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014). However, the discussion also aims to highlight the role of contextual factors – such

as the political climate, schools' role in political socialisation, and the extent of family influence – in shaping the effectiveness of youth enfranchisement. Rather than being an isolated policy change, political engagement is influenced by “multiple socialising agents” (Eichhorn, 2018, p. 369).

Moreover, this review anticipates that, despite the empirical arguments in favour of lowering the voting age, policymakers may still exhibit persistent political hesitancy. As will be explored in the discussion and conclusion, this reluctance could stem not only from concerns about youth political maturity but also from strategic political calculations. Drawing on Collier's (1999) and Gjermundsen's (2024) arguments that enfranchisement has been historically used as a tactical tool by political parties to shift electoral outcomes, this review will discuss whether parties fear that incorporating younger voters might alter electoral dynamics in unpredictable ways. Several studies indicate that younger voters have been increasingly supporting radical right-wing parties, raising concerns among some political actors about the implications of their early political integration (e.g., Birch & Dennison, 2019; Cox & Garbiras-Díaz, 2024; Muis et al., 2022). If this trend holds, resistance to lowering the voting age could be driven by broader ideological and electoral concerns rather than a straightforward assessment of youth civic competence. Importantly, this discussion does not endorse the view that democratic inclusion should depend on whether citizens make “desirable” political choices. On the contrary, it seeks to expose and critically interrogate the political assumptions that may underpin resistance to electoral reform.

By conducting this systematic review, the study aims to provide policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders with a clearer understanding of the impact of youth enfranchisement. The findings will contribute to ongoing discussions on electoral reforms and the potential benefits and challenges of expanding the electorate to include younger voters.

2 WHAT HAVE PREVIOUS REVIEWS OF THE EVIDENCE REVEALED ABOUT VOTING AT 16?

Debates surrounding voting rights have been a persistent feature of democratic societies, often framed within the broader context of social progress and inclusion. Historically, arguments against extending voting rights have focused on concerns about political competence, maturity, and civic responsibility. Similar objections were raised against enfranchising women, ‘people of colour’, and younger voters before the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 (e.g., Carleton, 2010; Oosterhoff, Wray-Lake & Hart, 2022). The question of whether to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds remains a contentious issue, with scholars divided on the political and developmental implications. This section examines the key arguments presented in previous research, analysing the evidence regarding political maturity, engagement, and the potential effects of lowering the voting age, while also addressing the broader implications for democratic inclusion. It does not aim to assess empirical evidence directly addressing the research question considered in the present study, which is examined in Section 6 (Findings of the Systematic Review).

2.1 Arguments against

One significant body of research suggests that lowering the voting age to 16 is problematic due to concerns about young people's political maturity, knowledge, and interest in politics. Scholars such as Bergh (2013) and Birch et al. (2015) have examined young voters in countries such as Norway and the UK, finding that at age 16, individuals often lack the necessary political knowledge and interest to make informed choices in elections. The concern over political maturity is echoed in studies that

show that young people at 16 are less politically interested, less likely to identify with political parties, and generally lack a deep understanding of political issues (e.g., Chan & Clayton, 2006).

Moreover, conferring the vote upon children who have little experience of life beyond family and school, and no memory of governments or public affairs going further back than two or three years at most, would fly in the face of majority opinion. (Cowley & Denver, 2004, p. 61)

These studies ultimately suggest that 16- and 17-year-olds are less likely to vote competently than older voters. Moreover, historical political theorists such as Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Rawls did not consider children to be part of the political community (see Wall, 2014).

Zeglovits and Aichholzer (2014) summarise this sceptical view by arguing that the main criticisms typically focus on the perceived lack of political maturity, interest, and knowledge among young voters, which could ultimately result in uninformed voting decisions. Furthermore, political theorists such as Habermas (1993) and Barber (1999) have argued that children lack essential political skills, particularly the core skill of ‘civility’ or communicative competence, necessary for meaningful participation in democratic processes.

2.2 Arguments in favour

The other major body of research challenges the assumption that 16-year-olds are politically immature or incapable of making informed voting choices. Proponents of lowering the voting age argue that political maturity is not inherently tied to age but rather to participation, experience, and engagement in the political process. Zeglovits and Aichholzer (2014), in their study on Austria, found that 16- and 17-year-olds who were eligible to vote exhibited higher turnout rates than older first-time voters, supporting the idea that the ‘first-time voter boost’ could be more pronounced among younger voters. They conclude that lowering the voting age can increase voter turnout, a goal shared by many democratic nations facing declining voter participation. This view is echoed by Birch (2014), who argues that reducing the voting age could address the growing issue of youth political exclusion. She suggests that first-time voting experiences are crucial in fostering long-term political engagement and that early participation could make young people more likely to vote in future elections. Hooghe and Dassonneville (2013) further support this claim, stating that young people’s willingness to vote does not stem from a lack of interest but from external barriers, such as administrative obstacles and political parties’ insufficient efforts to engage young people. In the same vein, Birch (2014) emphasises that the key to increasing long-term engagement is to provide young people with an early opportunity to participate in the democratic process.

Empirical evidence also suggests that early voting has a positive impact on the political attitudes and engagement of young people. A study by Sanhueza Petrarca (2019) in Latin American countries, including Brazil, Argentina, and Cuba, showed that young people who could vote at 16 were more supportive of democracy and had higher political trust than those who gained the right to vote later. Similarly, Gleaves (2019) found that young people believed that lowering the voting age would increase their interest in politics, suggesting a potential pathway to foster their political engagement.

Moreover, Eichhorn and Bergh (2020), in their analysis of several case studies, concluded that while it is challenging to make blanket statements, there is little evidence to suggest that implementing voting at 16 has detrimental effects on young people’s political behaviours. Instead, there is evidence that young voters are just as capable as older voters in making informed decisions, provided they are exposed to the right educational and institutional environments. In line with this, Tonge et al. (2021)

argue that adulthood is not a fixed concept, suggesting that the transition to political maturity is a gradual process that can be accelerated by early exposure to the electoral process.

2.3 In-between arguments

Although the arguments primarily present opposing views on this issue, some studies offer a more nuanced perspective. For instance, in Australia, McAllister (2014) found only partial support for lowering the voting age. He concluded that there was insufficient evidence to suggest that lowering the voting age would lead to greater political participation, nor did the data indicate that 16- and 17-year-olds were more politically mature than they had been in the past. This position aligns with the arguments of Berry and Kippin (2014), who acknowledge the potential benefits of lowering the voting age but caution that it may not resolve the broader issue of youth disengagement from democratic institutions. They note that other reforms are also needed to address the systemic causes of youth political exclusion.

In the same vein, Bergh (2013) observed that young voters in municipalities where the voting age was lowered showed higher levels of political interest. However, he cautioned that this difference might not stem from the reform itself, but rather from the specific context of the trial, since those municipalities had already demonstrated strong youth engagement in politics, suggesting a possible selection bias. As he notes,

overall interest-levels seem to be somewhat higher in the trial municipalities than in the rest of the country. (...) [but] it is therefore possible that the relatively high levels of interest in politics in these municipalities are a result of selection bias. (p. 95)

2.4 Societal implications and broader democratic inclusion

The issue of lowering the voting age is not solely about political maturity and voter turnout; it is also about broader democratic inclusion. Bowman (2021) argues that the question of voting at 16 should be viewed through a broader lens that goes beyond simply asking whether young people should have a say. He suggests that a more holistic approach to voting rights should be adopted, one that recognises the evolving nature of political socialisation and the complexity of democratic participation. This broader perspective emphasises that the age at which voting rights are granted may not be as important as ensuring that young people have the opportunities to engage in political processes, regardless of their age.

Furthermore, Loughran et al. (2022) raise a crucial point: reforms to the voting age may disproportionately empower those who are already politically engaged, such as university-educated young people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. This could risk deepening existing inequalities in political participation rather than promoting broader democratic inclusion. Eichhorn and Bergh (2021) similarly caution that, while the evidence suggests no negative effects on political engagement, significant gaps remain in knowledge about how the positive effects might unfold across different contexts and demographics.

In conclusion, the debate over lowering the voting age to 16 is multifaceted, with compelling arguments on both sides. Research indicates that while 16- and 17-year-olds may not possess the same level of political knowledge as older voters, they are not necessarily less capable of making informed decisions at the ballot box. Furthermore, evidence suggests that lowering the voting age may increase political engagement and turnout among young people, fostering a stronger

connection to democratic institutions in the long term. However, the impact of such a reform depends on various factors, including the political context, educational opportunities, and political parties' efforts to engage young voters. Moreover, broader considerations of democratic inclusion and the potential to reinforce existing inequalities should be part of the debate. Ultimately, the question of whether to lower the voting age requires careful consideration of both the potential benefits and challenges of such a reform. As research in this area continues to evolve, it is important to recognise the complexity of the issue and the need for a nuanced approach to democratic representation and participation.

3 METHODOLOGY

This review and analysis of the literature followed the guidelines outlined in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (PRISMA-P) by Moher et al. (2015). The PRISMA guidelines emphasise the importance of establishing a clear, comprehensive protocol that outlines procedures for gathering and organising relevant studies in accordance with predefined criteria. I opted for a Systematic Review over a Meta-Analysis to capture the full spectrum of intervention variability, allowing the review to go beyond the limitation of considering only studies based on comparable variables and the use of statistical methods.

The strategy adopted in the search process to collect studies to be included in the systematic review was: i) international online databases; ii) search conducted in Article title, Abstract and Keywords fields; iii) document type: Articles; iv) source type: Journal; and v) language: English. To consider the cross-disciplinary nature of the topic under analysis, I searched international databases spanning a wide range of scientific fields, including political science, education, psychology, and the social sciences. This search was executed in February 2025 and encompassed the following databases: Web of Science (WoS) (www.webofknowledge.com) and Scopus (www.scopus.com). Despite some biases and limitations, these databases are considered the 'Titans of Bibliographic Information in Today's Academic World' (Pranckutė, 2021), the "two major and most comprehensive sources of publication metadata and impact indicators" (p. 47).

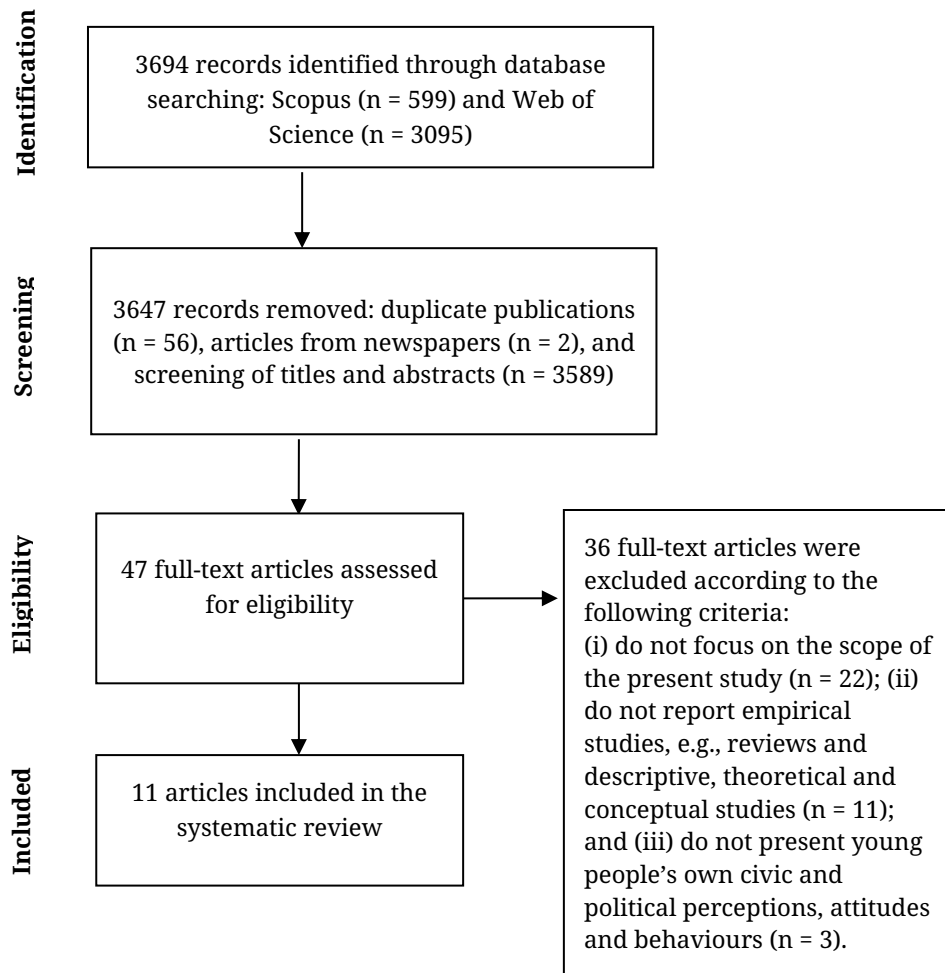
Regarding the analysis period, the search was limited to articles published between 2015 and 2025. The keywords used for the search were: 'Vote' OR 'Votes' OR 'Voting' OR 'Voting age' AND '16' OR 'sixteen'. I chose these keywords to cover, as much as possible, all published articles on voting at 16.

4 SEARCH AND SCREENING RESULTS

In total, 3,694 records were identified through database searches: WoS (3,095) and Scopus (599). The software EndNote 21 was used to identify and remove duplicate publications (56) and articles from newspapers (2). After screening the titles and abstracts of each article, 3,589 records were also removed, as they were clearly outside the study's scope and could be excluded without ambiguity. These included, for example, articles from fields such as medicine, economics, and engineering that appeared in the search results due to keyword overlap but did not address voting at 16 or youth civic and political participation. As a result of this process, 47 potentially relevant articles were selected for further examination. After a careful full paper reading, 36 articles were excluded according to the following criteria: (i) do not focus on the scope of the present study, (ii) do not report empirical studies, e.g., reviews and descriptive, theoretical and conceptual studies, (iii) and do not present young people's own civic and political perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. In

total, 11 studies met the inclusion criteria and have been included in this systematic review. The flow of studies through the search and screening process is summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Flow diagram of the selection procedure (adapted from the PRISMA statement)



Appendix A presents all the articles included in the systematic review organised by alphabetical order of the first author’s name and year of publication, journal, country, method and sample, measures and analysis, results and conclusions, and a final column answering the question: *How do young people perceive the impact of lowering the voting age to 16 on civic and political engagement?* Appendix B presents a complete list of articles excluded according to the four criteria mentioned above. This document could be helpful for future reviews to explore other dimensions of analysis on the topic, such as voting quality (Lang, 2023), public opinion (Birch et al., 2015; Loughran et al., 2022), sense of civic duty (Johann et al., 2022), political congruence between adolescents and their fathers (Okolikj & Hooghe, 2023), and adolescents’ cognitive capacity and political knowledge (Oosterhoff, Wray-Lake & Harden, 2022).

5 SYNTHESIS OF THE INCLUDED ARTICLES

As shown in Table 1, our search reveals a possible growing interest in the topic, with eight of 11 included articles published between 2020 and 2025. However, it still appears to be a relatively small number, suggesting that the research could further explore this issue. This limited number of studies also reflects, to a large extent, the eligibility criteria adopted in our review, which intentionally restricted inclusion to empirical studies that directly address young people's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. This approach aimed to ensure that the analysis was grounded in evidence emerging from young people's lived experiences, rather than mediated interpretations. Arguing the importance to continue fostering the research on the topic of Vote at 16, Eichhorn and Hübner (2023) point out that

there are gaps in what we know about the introduction of Votes at 16, (...) particularly through qualitative and quantitative longitudinal, experimental, and internationally comparative research: how sustainable first-time voter effects are in the long run; which groups of young people tend to participate more, and who tends to participate less; what is the absolute and relative effectiveness of formats of formal and informal civic education; and whether political decision-makers correctly assess young people's attitudes. (p. 5)

Regarding the country of publication, all of them are from the European Union (EU), where enfranchisement of young people at 16 was already possible at all or partial levels of elections (see Eichhorn & Hübner, 2023). Scotland (state/local elections only, since 2014/15) is the most represented country (n = 4), followed by Austria (all elections, since 2007; n = 2), Belgium (European election only, since 2022; n = 2), Germany (state/local & European elections, since 1996/2022; n = 2) and Malta (all elections, since 2014/2018; n = 1). These data raise a relevant question that can also be explored in future studies: Are there fewer non-EU published studies (e.g., from Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua) on voting at 16? If so, it would be interesting to increase awareness of research conducted in these countries, thereby gaining access to a more diverse database of cultural and political contexts. This would enable us to develop a more comprehensive and comparative perspective on this phenomenon.

The included articles were published in seven journals. The journals with the most articles are: *Electoral Studies* (n = 3), *Journal of Youth Studies* (n = 2), and *Parliamentary Affairs* (n = 2). Concerning the method, there is a clear predominance of quantitative studies (n = 8) over qualitative studies (n = 3), suggesting that qualitative data are lacking for a deeper understanding of young people's and adults' perspectives on this topic (see Eichhorn & Bergh, 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2023).

In terms of the number of participants involved, six studies have more than 500 participants, all of them presenting a quantitative design, i.e., Eichhorn (2018), Graf et al. (2024), Hooghe and Stiers (2022), Leininger et al. (2024), Rossteutscher et al. (2022), and Stiers et al. (2021). Three studies have between 101 and 500 participants: two with quantitative designs (Borg & Azzopardi, 2002; Bronner & Ifkovits, 2019) and one with qualitative (Sanghera et al., 2018). Finally, two studies have fewer than 100 participants, both of which are qualitative designs: Breeze et al. (2023) and Huebner (2021).

Table 1. Synthesis of the included articles

Characteristics	No. Of articles
YEAR	
2015–2019	3
2020–2025	8
COUNTRY	
Scotland	4
Austria	2
Belgium	2
Germany	2
Malta	1
JOURNAL	
Applied Developmental Science	1
Citizenship Studies	1
Electoral Studies	3
German Politics	1
Journal of Youth Studies	2
Parliamentary Affairs	2
Political Science Research and Methods	1
METHOD	
Quantitative	8
Qualitative	3
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	
< 100	2
101–500	3
> 500	6

6 FINDINGS OF THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Most studies (7 out of 11) support the idea that lowering the voting age to 16 increases civic and political engagement. Research by Borg and Azzopardi (2022), Breeze et al. (2023), Bronner and Ifkovits (2019), Eichhorn (2018), Hooghe and Stiers (2022), Leininger et al. (2024), and Sanghera et al. (2018) all provide evidence in favour of this claim. However, three studies present a more nuanced view. Rossteutscher et al. (2022) suggest that while lowering the voting age can increase engagement, the effect depends on certain conditions. Huebner (2021) presents mixed experiences, and Graf et al. (2024) argue that the question remains open. Notably, only one study (Stiers et al., 2021) explicitly concludes that lowering the voting age does not increase engagement (see Table 2).

Table 2. How do young people perceive the impact of lowering the voting age to 16 on civic and political engagement?

ANSWER	ARTICLES
Positive impact (n = 7)	Borg & Azzopardi (2022) Breeze et al. (2023) Bronner & Ifkovits (2019) Eichhorn (2018) Hooghe & Stiers (2022) Leininger et al. (2024) Sanghera et al. (2018)
Conditional positive impact (n = 1)	Rossteutscher et al. (2022)
Mixed perceptions (n = 1)	Huebner, C. (2021)
Inconclusive (n = 1)	Graf et al. (2024)
No impact (n = 1)	Stiers et al. (2021)

Overall, this systematic review provides strong empirical evidence of the positive impact of enfranchisement on young people's civic and political engagement. Before turning to the detailed discussion of the studies, Table 3 maps the principal evaluation criteria used in the literature and shows their distribution across the 11 included studies. In doing so, it also reveals important asymmetries in the evidence base, namely the predominance of functional and instrumental indicators over broader democratic concerns such as political voice, representation, and citizenship. In the following subsections, this paper will go deeper into more detail on context, main results, conclusion/discussion and limitations/recommendations for each of the articles supporting the answers 'Positive impact', 'Nuanced view', and 'No impact' to the research question: *How do young people perceive the impact of lowering the voting age to 16 on civic and political engagement?*

Table 3. Evaluation criteria used in the literature and their distribution across the included studies

EVALUATION CRITERIA	(N)	INCLUDED STUDIES
Electoral participation/ turnout/ voting intention	7	Borg & Azzopardi (2022); Bronner & Ifkovits (2019); Eichhorn (2018); Graf et al. (2024); Leininger et al. (2024); Rossteutscher et al. (2022); Stiers et al. (2021)
Civic and political engagement (general)	6	Borg & Azzopardi (2022); Breeze et al. (2023); Eichhorn (2018); Huebner (2021); Sanghera et al. (2018); Stiers et al. (2021)
Political interest	5	Borg & Azzopardi (2022); Eichhorn (2018); Leininger et al. (2024); Rossteutscher et al. (2022); Stiers et al. (2021)
Political discussion/ talk (family/ peers/ school)	5	Borg & Azzopardi (2022); Eichhorn (2018); Hooghe & Stiers (2022); Leininger et al. (2024); Rossteutscher et al. (2022)
Political efficacy/ empowerment/ confidence	4	Borg & Azzopardi (2022); Graf et al. (2024); Huebner (2021); Leininger et al. (2024)
Long-term effects/ habitual participation	3	Breeze et al. (2023); Graf et al. (2024); Bronner & Ifkovits (2019)
Educational outcomes/ political learning	2	Breeze et al. (2023); Eichhorn (2018)
Political knowledge/ literacy	2	Graf et al. (2024); Stiers et al. (2021)
Citizenship/ rights claims/ democratic inclusion	2	Huebner (2021); Sanghera et al. (2018)
Recognition/ acceptance of voting responsibility	1	Borg & Azzopardi (2022)

Note: Evaluation criteria presented are analytical and not mutually exclusive; individual studies may contribute to more than one criterion. Frequencies indicate the number of included studies in which each criterion was more explicitly addressed.

6.1 Studies supporting 'Positive impact'

Studies that support the 'Positive impact' answer analyse the impact of enfranchisement across various countries and political settings, including Malta, Scotland, Austria, Germany, and Belgium. These studies examine the impact of enfranchisement on political participation, interest, and engagement. Researchers also explore the role of education, family structures, and broader political environments in shaping youth participation. Borg and Azzopardi (2022) conducted a quantitative study in Malta, surveying 143 newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-old voters. Using a questionnaire, they measured political interest, recognition of voting responsibility, and electoral participation. Their results revealed that "participants predominantly maintained moderate levels of political interest and high levels of recognition and acceptance of voting responsibility. Moreover, the greater number of participants expressed intentions to vote in the upcoming general and European Parliamentary elections" (p. 487). The findings suggest that young voters were not only willing to participate but also recognised the significance of their voting rights. Their study concluded that the concerns about youth political apathy were unfounded and that the decline paradigm of political participation did not apply in Malta. However, they acknowledged that their cross-sectional research design limited the ability to determine whether political interest would persist in the long term. They recommended longitudinal studies to assess whether initial political enthusiasm translates into a lifelong pattern of civic engagement.

The study by Breeze et al. (2023) examined Scotland's experience following the 2014 independence referendum. Their study was based on longitudinal qualitative interviews with young voters aged 16–20 at the time of the referendum. A subsample was re-interviewed three years later to assess the long-term effects of political engagement. Their analysis demonstrated that participation in the referendum had significant educational and political consequences, as young people viewed their engagement as informing their future educational and career choices. The study found that

referendum engagement has three kinds of educational consequences. First, participants describe learning about politics through referendum participation and their subsequent reflection on it. Second, participants understood their political engagements as informing their trajectories into and through post-compulsory education, including subject choices. Third, participants discussed learning about themselves and their career aspirations, 'growing up' and developing 'mature' political attitudes, via ongoing, shifting political engagement. (Breeze et al., 2023, p. 61)

In sum, Breeze et al.'s (2023) study suggests that enfranchisement at 16 was a significant event in shaping long-term civic engagement. However, the authors acknowledged that their sample was small and consisted of individuals who were already politically active. They recommended further research to assess whether their findings apply to a broader population of young voters.

Bronner and Ifkovits (2019) studied Austria, where the national voting age was lowered in 2007. Their study used surveys to compare 300 young voters – 150 who were eligible to vote at 16 in 2008 and 150 who were not. Their findings highlighted a strong habituation effect, becoming more likely to vote in subsequent elections: "16-year-olds are subject to the same kind of habituation effect as older first-time voters, being 28 percentage points more likely to say they will vote in the following election than similarly-aged but previously ineligible voters" (p. 5). In addition, they also found that younger voters were more likely to position themselves at ideological extremes. The study

concludes that lowering the voting age could increase voter turnout over time, but warns that it could also intensify ideological polarisation. The authors recommended further research on why younger voters tend to gravitate toward political extremes and how this might influence long-term democratic stability.

Regarding this specific study, it is essential to note that Graf and colleagues (2024) recently revisited these findings and were unable to replicate the results reported by Bronner and Ifkovits (2024). In re-analysing the same dataset, the researchers identified “an error in recoding the birth date variable, specifically when matching the recoded birth date variable with the respondent whose birth date it was” (Graf et al., 2024, p. 4). This coding error invalidated the eligibility classification used in the original analysis. After correcting the dataset and conducting extended robustness checks, researchers found no evidence that voting eligibility at 16 increased either turnout intentions or ideological extremity, concluding that “the eligibility effects on intention to turn out found by Bronner and Ifkovits (2019) (...) were due to a coding error” and that their claim regarding ideological polarisation “does not withstand the correction” (p. 6). These replication results significantly temper earlier interpretations of the Austrian case, underscoring the importance of methodological transparency.

The study by Eichhorn (2018) consisted of a large-scale survey comparing 16- to 17-year-old Scottish students with their peers in the rest of the UK. Using a sample of 810 young respondents and regression analysis, he found that

there are significant differences between Scottish 16- to 17-year-olds and their peers in the rest of the UK. In particular, in terms of issues related to electoral and non-electoral participation and views on that, levels in Scotland are higher or more favourable even when considering educational experiences and personal interactions. (p. 387)

The author argues that the Scottish experience demonstrated the benefits of enfranchising younger voters, particularly when combined with strong civic education. However, he cautioned that further studies were needed to determine whether these effects would persist over time and whether similar results could be achieved in contexts without a high-profile referendum.

Hooghe and Stiers (2022) conducted a study in Ghent, Belgium, using a quasi-experimental design, in which 16- and 17-year-olds participated in a mock election. Their study surveyed 887 adolescents and their parents and used regression discontinuity analysis. They found that

both parents and adolescents report more intensive political discussion. Our assumption, therefore, is that at this age, children still turn to their parents to discuss political matters. More discussions, however, did not lead to more political congruence within the family. (p. 141).

Their findings highlight the role of family influence in political engagement but suggest that increased discussions do not necessarily change ideological positions. They recommend conducting further qualitative studies to gain a deeper understanding of the content and depth of these political discussions.

Leininger et al. (2024) analysed voting behaviour in Germany using a large-scale survey with over 10,000 respondents. Their regression discontinuity design shows that “those allowed to vote are more likely to discuss politics with their family and friends and to use a voting advice application. This effect appears to be stronger for voting age 16 than for 18” (p. 6). Their study suggests that enfranchisement stimulates political interest and information-seeking behaviour, reinforcing the argument that lowering the voting age increases engagement. However, they

caution that further studies are required to determine whether this effect is long-lasting and whether early voting rights influence lifelong political habits.

Lastly, the study by Sanghera et al. (2018) examined youth political engagement in Scotland, conducting interviews and focus groups with 382 young people. It found that

the referendum proved to be an important catalyst for young people to become involved in politics. Respondents talked about how they had become more knowledgeable about politics because they knew that they would be actively participating in the democratic process rather than being mere subjects of its outcomes and wanted to ensure that they were fully informed about the debates. (pp. 551–552)

This research supports the notion that enfranchisement empowers young people with a sense of political agency and enhances their motivation to participate in civic activities. However, it also notes that the referendum was a unique political event, and further research is needed to determine whether similar levels of engagement would be observed in routine elections.

In summary, these studies collectively suggest that granting voting rights at 16 fosters higher levels of political interest and engagement. Young voters participate in elections and civic activities, often sustaining this engagement into adulthood. The evidence challenges the perception that younger voters are politically apathetic, instead demonstrating that enfranchisement stimulates political learning and participation.

6.2 Studies presenting a ‘Nuanced view’

A second category of research presents a more nuanced view, suggesting that the effects of lowering the voting age depend on context, engagement mechanisms, and social networks. The study by Graf et al. (2024) examined the long-term effects of Austria’s voting age reform using data from three national elections (2013, 2017, and 2019). The regression discontinuity analysis found no clear effect: “While we do not find large effects of lowering the voting age on ‘positive’ outcomes such as turnout or knowledge, we also do not find large effects on more ‘negative’ outcomes such as ideological extremity” (p. 6). The study concluded that while lowering the voting age did not appear to harm democratic engagement, it also did not produce the large-scale benefits some proponents expected. The authors recommended further research using meta-analytic techniques to synthesise findings from multiple countries and electoral contexts.

Similarly, Huebner’s (2021) study, which conducted in-depth interviews with 20 young people in Scotland, found mixed experiences. While some participants reported feeling confident and empowered, others expressed frustration at being disenfranchised in national elections. The study concluded that the impact of lowering the voting age depended significantly on the political environment and how enfranchisement was integrated into broader democratic structures. The author emphasises the need for long-term research on how voting-related frustrations affect young people’s engagement with electoral politics. As one of its interviewees pointed out, “with ‘Votes-at-16’ in Scotland and Wales ‘the playing field is not level’ in the UK and this situation might end up being deeply dissatisfying and even alienating for some young people” (p. 577). Additionally, the study raises the question of whether lowering the voting age might inadvertently teach young people that voting is the only way to influence political institutions, potentially limiting their understanding of political engagement and citizenship.

In turn, Rossteutscher et al. (2022) found that in Germany, 16- and 17-year-olds were more politically engaged than 18-year-olds. However, they cautioned that lowering the voting age could deepen existing social inequalities, as political engagement was strongly influenced by parental interest and school type. Their study showed that younger voters displayed higher political interest and turnout than their slightly older peers, with no indication that lowering the voting age would lead to incompetent voting behaviour or significantly lower participation. Nonetheless, the authors argued that reducing the voting age is unlikely to enhance political equality and may instead exacerbate existing disparities driven by social networks. They recommended further research on a broader sample to gain a better understanding of these dynamics

6.3 Studies supporting ‘No impact’

On the other end of the spectrum, the study by Stiers et al. (2021) represents the ‘No impact’ perspective, arguing that lowering the voting age does not significantly increase political engagement. Examining youth enfranchisement through a quasi-experimental design in Belgium (involving a survey of 2,360 adolescents aged 15–20, they found no strong evidence that enfranchisement transformed political engagement. They stated that “[w]hile the results seem to suggest an increasing interest as a result of eligibility, overall, the conclusion needs to be that adolescents’ political engagement did not change as a result of the experiment” (p. 855). Nevertheless, the authors cautioned that these findings should be viewed with caution, as they stem from a mock election where adolescents were aware that their votes had no real impact. In addition, they emphasised that, despite efforts to ensure a representative sample, the study may not fully reflect the broader population, limiting its external validity and suggesting that potential effects on less politically interested youths remain unclear. The study concludes that future research should explore in greater depth the varying impacts of youth enfranchisement on political engagement.

Overall, most studies support the argument that lowering the voting age to 16 increases civic and political engagement, though some emphasise that effects are context-dependent. While one study found no transformative impact, the prevailing evidence suggests that enfranchisement encourages political learning, discussion, and sustained participation, especially when supported by civic education and socialisation processes. Future research should further explore long-term effects, contextual differences, and potential unintended consequences of youth enfranchisement. Findings emphasised that while voting at 16 can foster political engagement in many contexts, the effectiveness of this policy depends on a range of social, educational, and political factors.

7 LIMITATIONS

As with any systematic review, this analysis has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the scope of this review is limited to studies published in English, potentially excluding valuable research conducted in other languages and contexts. This limitation may lead to an incomplete understanding of the impact of lowering the voting age in non-English-speaking countries with different political cultures and institutional structures.

Second, the studies reviewed draw on research from Western democracies, particularly European nations (i.e., Austria, Scotland, Belgium, Germany, and Malta). While these cases provide important insights, the findings may not be generalisable to countries with different socio-political environments, electoral systems, and civic education frameworks. Future research should include

a broader range of geopolitical contexts to understand how the effects of enfranchising younger voters vary across the globe.

Third, much of the existing research relies on self-reported survey data, which is inherently subject to biases such as social desirability and recall inaccuracies. While surveys are useful in capturing attitudes and self-perceived political efficacy, they do not always provide an objective measure of actual political engagement and behaviour. Future studies should employ mixed-method approaches, incorporating experimental designs, longitudinal studies, and behavioural data from electoral commissions to provide a more comprehensive assessment of the impact of early enfranchisement.

Fourth, the debate on voting at 16 is often framed in terms of political knowledge and cognitive maturity. Yet, limited research examines how specific educational interventions and civic learning experiences influence young voters' competencies. While there is evidence suggesting that schools play a crucial role in fostering political engagement, further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches in preparing young people for electoral participation. Comparative studies examining variations in civic education curricula and their impact on voter turnout could provide policymakers with valuable insights.

Fifth, there is a notable gap in research addressing the long-term effects of early enfranchisement. While some studies suggest that voting at 16 can establish habitual voting behaviour, longitudinal research tracking young voters into adulthood is necessary to determine whether these effects persist over time and across different electoral cycles.

Finally, most studies focus on the immediate impact of lowering the voting age on turnout and political engagement, but fewer examine the broader social and democratic consequences. For instance, future research could explore how early enfranchisement affects political representation, policy responsiveness to youth issues, and intergenerational political dynamics. Additionally, qualitative research on young voters' lived experiences – how they perceive their role in democracy and how enfranchisement influences their civic identity – would provide a richer understanding of the implications of extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds.

Given these limitations, future research should adopt a more holistic approach, integrating diverse methodologies and perspectives to deepen our understanding of the relationship between early enfranchisement and democratic participation. By addressing these gaps, scholars and policymakers can more effectively assess the potential benefits and challenges of lowering the voting age, thereby ensuring that youth political engagement is effectively nurtured within democratic societies

8 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The debate over lowering the voting age to 16 remains deeply contested, with compelling arguments on both sides. While critics emphasise concerns over political maturity, cognitive development, and susceptibility to external influence, proponents counter with robust empirical evidence suggesting that enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds fosters long-term political engagement and strengthens democratic participation. This review highlights that lowering the voting age has yielded positive outcomes across various national contexts, particularly when accompanied by robust civic and political education and institutional support.

In fact, one crucial dimension that should be further explored in these debates concerns the broader educational and literacy context within which citizens – young or adult – exercise their

political rights. For instance, according to the *OECD Education at a Glance 2025* report, despite overall gains in educational attainment across member countries, adult literacy and numeracy skills have largely stagnated or even declined over the past decade:

Among adults without upper secondary education, 61% scored at or below Level 1 in literacy in the OECD Survey of Adult Skills, meaning they could understand, at most, short texts on familiar topics. Among those with upper secondary attainment, 30% do not exceed Level 1, and even among adults with tertiary attainment, 13% score at or below this level. These results underscore that simply expanding educational opportunities is not enough; education systems must also ensure that learners develop the skills they need to thrive. (OECD, 2025, p. 19)

Consequently, this reality casts doubt on one of the main objections to youth enfranchisement, i.e., the alleged lack of critical capacity or maturity among 16-year-olds. If a substantial share of the adult population performs at very low levels of proficiency in literacy and numeracy, it becomes inconsistent to use this criterion to exclude adolescents from political participation.

Thus, this perspective also highlights a deeper structural challenge we should confront: the quality and scope of civic and political education within the public education system. Research consistently shows that many young people feel insufficiently prepared to vote, not because of a lack of interest, but due to the scarcity of opportunities for political learning and debate in schools (e.g., Gleaves, 2019; Hill et al., 2017; Huebner, 2021; Ross, 2020). Studies of the Portuguese educational system echo this concern, noting that controversial political issues are rarely discussed in classrooms, thereby limiting students' political reasoning and deliberative competence (e.g., Piedade et al., 2018; Ribeiro et al., 2023). These findings suggest that adolescents' perceived immaturity is, in large part, a reflection of educational shortcomings rather than individual incapacity.

In this sense, the discussion on lowering the voting age cannot be separated from the broader issue of educational equity and democratic preparedness. Political participation is inseparable from the educational and qualification conditions of a society. Strengthening civic and political education and literacy across all age groups is therefore a precondition for the effective exercise of democratic rights, not a justification for their restriction. As several authors have argued, schools should play a central role as structured, unbiased spaces for political socialisation, i.e., places where young people can learn to deliberate, recognise ideological diversity, and engage critically with public life (e.g., Malafaia et al., 2021; Menezes et al., 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2017).

Despite this empirical and pedagogical support, policymakers have been hesitant to implement voting-age reform, raising the question: If research demonstrates that lowering the voting age contributes to sustained civic and political engagement, why is legislative change so slow to occur? Gjermundsen (2024) argues that enfranchisement is often a tactical political move rather than a purely democratic decision. Political parties may strategically support or oppose lowering the voting age depending on how they perceive it will affect their electoral success. Historically, as Collier (1999) noted, enfranchisement has been used by political actors to boost their own support, a pattern seen in Norway's early democratisation and in other nations. Thus, rather than being solely about democratic inclusion, debates over voting-age reforms are often shaped by considerations of political advantage.

A further dimension to this political calculus is the evolving ideological landscape of young voters. Valentim (2024) warns of the 'end of shame', a phenomenon wherein radical right-wing ideologies have become increasingly normalised in public discourse. He argues that this shift is not necessarily due to a change in political preferences but rather a reduction in the stigma attached

to far-right positions (see also Selvanathan & Leidner, 2021; Valentim, 2021; Wodak et al., 2020). This trend, coupled with recent studies suggesting that younger voters are increasingly supporting radical right-wing parties (e.g., Birch & Dennison, 2019; Cox & Garbiras-Díaz, 2024; Muis et al., 2022), has raised concerns about the broader implications of youth enfranchisement. If younger voters increasingly align with anti-establishment and populist ideologies, some policymakers may perceive lowering the voting age as a gamble that could undermine the stability of democratic institutions.

Notwithstanding, recent surveys such as the *UK Youth Poll 2025* (Barnes & Loose, 2025) and *Do Gen Z really want a dictatorship?* (Duffy & Morini, 2025) point in a different direction, providing additional nuance to this debate. While alarming headlines disseminated on social media have suggested that rising authoritarian sympathies are prevalent among British youth – a Channel 4-commissioned poll implied that more than half of young respondents labelled as Gen Z would like a dictatorship – both studies, in fact, offer a more balanced picture. Barnes and Loose find that young people are deeply concerned about the state of democracy but overwhelmingly support democratic ideals, desiring practical solutions to economic insecurity and political disillusionment. Similarly, Duffy and Morini (2025) show that claims of Gen Z's preference for dictatorship are clearly exaggerated and that most young people want more effective democratic leadership, not authoritarianism: “only 6% think the UK would be a better place if a dictator was in charge who did not face control from MPs or hold any national elections” (p. 24).

These insights reinforce the argument that expanding suffrage should be accompanied by comprehensive civic education policies that promote political literacy, critical thinking, and trust in democratic institutions. The debate over the voting age thus becomes inseparable from the challenge of building an education system capable of forming reflective, informed citizens. As Valentim (2021) argues, rather than resisting the expansion of suffrage, governments should focus on improving the democratic infrastructure that sustains informed participation. After all, as Malafaia et al. (2021) highlight, young people attribute an “unexpected relevance” to voting, suggesting that the gap between youth and politics should be filled by “normative equipment, with the school indicated as a fundamental, structured and unbiased locus of political education” (p. 437).

Future research should further examine the ideological positions of political parties worldwide on youth enfranchisement. A comparative analysis of party strategies and electoral incentives in different national contexts would help clarify whether resistance to lowering the voting age stems primarily from concerns over youth political maturity or from deeper fears about shifting political allegiances. Additionally, studies should investigate how to cultivate more resilient democratic institutions that can integrate younger voters without exacerbating existing political divides.

Beyond these considerations, the reviewed literature also pays comparatively limited attention to a core democratic dimension of electoral reform: the opportunity for young people to articulate their own interests politically and make their voices heard through voting at an earlier age. Most studies focus on turnout, civic engagement, political attitudes, or educational effects, while giving less emphasis to enfranchisement as a matter of political voice, representation, and democratic inclusion. As Wall (2014) compellingly argues, calling for ‘democracy’s democratisation’, if democracy is founded on the principle of including ‘the people’ in governance, “then it is undemocratic to exclude the third of the people who happen to be under 18 years of age” (p. 118). Likewise, Bessant (2020) shows that debates on voting age reform should also be understood as debates about citizenship, particularly in relation to how minors are often misrecognised and misrepresented in a context characterised as a crisis of democracy. From this perspective, lowering

the voting age is not only about increasing participation rates, but also about acknowledging young people as legitimate political actors whose interests deserve representation. Addressing this gap requires closer attention to how young people themselves understand the meaning of earlier suffrage, political recognition, and participation in collective decision-making, alongside the development of broader proposals to strengthen youth political engagement more effectively (e.g., Bowman, 2021; Loughran et al., 2022)

In sum, while the empirical case for lowering the voting age is strong, political hesitancy and evolving ideological trends continue to shape the debate. The challenge moving forward is not only to address concerns about youth political engagement but also to ensure that democratic institutions remain robust amid shifting electoral dynamics. Policymakers and scholars alike must engage in a nuanced discussion of how best to balance democratic inclusivity with the long-term stability of democratic systems – recognising that this balance ultimately depends on the depth and quality of the political education that precedes voting.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Norberto Ribeiro is a Principal Researcher at the Centre for Research and Intervention in Education (CIIE) in Porto, Portugal. He holds a PhD in Educational Sciences from the University of Porto. He has been conducting research on youth civic and political participation, as well as citizenship/political education, including several inter/national research projects.