

A Lower Voting Age in the Low Countries? Potential Effects of Voting Age at 16 for the Low Countries*

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1 Introduction

Is lowering the voting age to 16 years a genuine breakthrough in reigniting the youth's enthusiasm for traditional politics in the long run? This remains a matter of uncertainty and, as such, forms the central inquiry of this exploration into the potential implications of extending voting rights to non-adults for Belgium and the Netherlands. The democratic landscape of the Low Countries stands at a transformative juncture, with Belgium marking a historic milestone by granting voting rights to non-adults for the first time in its political history. On the 9th of June 2024, adolescents aged 16 and 17, residing in Belgium and holding one of the EU nationalities, have the privilege to participate in the European elections. In the Netherlands, adolescents are not eligible to vote in the forthcoming EU elections. Nevertheless, the discourse surrounding the reduction of the voting age gained momentum leading up to the Dutch national elections

in November 2023. These electoral reforms and on-going discussions represent pivotal moments for democracy in the Low Countries, holding particular relevance within the broader European and Western contexts characterised by a discernible decline in traditional political interest and participation among young adults (Dalton, 2007; Mindich, 2005; Wattenberg, 2020). Subsequently, political representatives and institutions, among others in the Low Countries, have been engaged in constant reflection, seeking remedies to counteract or prevent the emergence of political disenchantment among the upcoming generations. The Belgian legal text that lowered the voting age for the European elections explicitly states that the aim of the electoral reform is to reverse the trend of disengagement from democratic processes (Calvo & Defossé, 2021). On a similar note, the Dutch *Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur* (Council of Public Administration) also claims that lowering the voting age to 16 years can be an important factor to counter the problematic decline in political interest among younger people in the country (ROB, 2019).

In this literature exploration on the plausible long-term impacts of extending voting rights to non-adults in the Low Countries, the analysis is struc-

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tured across several key sections. Section 2 delves into the political participation of young people in the Low Countries and other European states with a lower voting age, assessing whether such reforms effectively translate into increased, sustained political engagement among young people aged 16 and 17. Section 3 scrutinises the political maturity and knowledge a lower voting age is potentially providing to young people, examining the role of civic education in shaping the informed participation of the youth. Section 4 examines the benefits associated with a lower voting age, considering disparities in political involvement and the potential perpetuation of existing social inequalities. Finally, Section 5 analyses the possible repercussions of a lower voting age for the party landscape in the Low Countries.

2 A Lower Voting Age and Youth Political Interest and Participation

In examining youth political participation in the Low Countries, we observe a disparity in political interest between the youth in the Netherlands and those in Flanders. According to the European Social Survey, 54.7% of Dutch youth exhibit genuine political interest, whereas only 31.3% of young people in Flanders demonstrate a similar level of interest in politics (Spruyt et al., 2024). However, no discernible difference is found with regard to conventional political activities among the overall Low Countries' youth. Only 22.3% of Belgian youth engage in institutional political activities, such as joining a political party or attending local council committees (Waeterloos et al., 2021).

This figure is just slightly higher in the Netherlands, where 26.4% of Dutch young adults participate in traditional political action (Schmeets, 2017).

With regard to the electoral voting motivation in both countries, one might observe a downward trend and a potential for perpetuated lower participation in elections. In Belgium, despite the country's mandatory voting rule and high voter turnout rates, only half of Belgians express a willingness to cast a vote if the obligation were to be lifted (Reuchamps et al., 2015). In the last federal elections of 2019, 15 % – or 1 out of 6 Belgians – of the eligible voters in Belgium did not vote or voted blank or invalid (Meeusen & Abts, 2024). With regard to youth, a recent study showed that 5.8% of the young Flemings between 18 and 25 indicated they would not vote in the European, national and regional elections on the 9th of June 2024. More importantly, 33.35% of these young Flemish adults remain undecided whether to cast a ballot or not (Spruyt et al., 2024). In the latest Dutch parliamentary elections, the voter turnout among young people aged 18 to 35 decreased by 7%, reaching 73%, compared to the 80% turnout in the previous parliamentary elections of 2021 (NOS, 2023). In essence, the Low Countries' youth also bear a propensity for decreased electoral participation.

The political advocates of voting at 16 years across the Low Countries view a lower voting age as a potential solution to address the overall decline in participation rates observed in their respective nation's elections. This expectation is based on the rationale that early initiation of voting habits during one's formative years contributes positively to the cultivation of enduring and constructive voting practices

throughout the subsequent stages of one's life (Dinas, 2012; Plutzer, 2002). The Belgian federal legal text that lowered the voting age to 16 for the European elections states that:

many studies show that citizens are losing confidence in politics and are turning away from the democratic process. Granting the right to vote to young people from the age of 16 can counterbalance this phenomenon and ensure that the youth will be more engaged in politics, including in the long term (Calvo & Defossé, 2021, p. 9).

In the Netherlands, a 2019 report by the *Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur* indicates a problematic decline in political interest among young people and recommends addressing this growing disinterest by lowering the voting age to 16 years (ROB, 2019). It is crucial to note, however, that addressing declining election participation rates among the youngest eligible voters – for instance, through an increased interest in traditional politics – requires more than simply lowering the voting age as demonstrated in the Austrian case below.

2.1 *The Imperative of Comprehensive Civic Education for Sustained Youth Political Participation*

In 2007, Austria lowered the voting age from 18 to 16 years for all elections in the country as part of a broader electoral reform (Karlhofer, 2007). Antecedently, in 2003, four federal provinces, including Vienna, had already undertaken this electoral transformation. Subsequent to this nationwide policy change, Austrian elections featuring 16- and 17-year-old voters have yielded

noteworthy outcomes. The voter turnout among the non-adult voters seems to align quite well or to be just slightly lower than the overall voter turnout in the general population of electors. For instance, during the regional elections in Vienna in 2005, 59% of new young voters between 16 and 18 participated in the electoral process, while the general voter turnout stood at 61% (Kozeluh et al., 2005). Similarly, in the national elections of 2008, immediately following the nationwide implementation of the electoral reform to lower the voting age to 16 years, 77% of voters aged 16 and 17 engaged in the election process, representing a mere 1.8 percentage point deviation from the overall turnout of 78.8% (Schwarzer et al., 2009). This trend persisted in subsequent regional elections, such as those in Vienna in 2010 and Krems in 2012 (Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014). In other words, since the 16- and 17-year-olds obtained the right to vote, there is no evident disproportionate reduction in voter turnout among this group; rather, they exhibit a notable alignment with the overall turnout and voting motivation in Austrian elections.

A more intriguing phenomenon in these different elections emerges among the older adult first-time voters. Young people aged 18 to 21, experiencing their first voting opportunity, displayed a markedly lower election participation. For instance, during the regional elections in Vienna, 56.3% of eligible voters between 18 and 20 years old cast their votes, in contrast to the average overall turnout of 67.6% (Figure 1). Similarly, in Krems, only 46.3% of this age group participated in the electoral/voting process, as opposed to the national turnout of 62.6% (Figure 2). In essence, Austria witnessed a

'first-time voter boost' within the age group of 16- to 17-year-olds. However, this effect diminishes significantly once first-time voters surpass the age of 18. Comparable observations have been documented for voter turnout between the 18 to 19 and 20 to 21 age groups in Germany and Denmark. The 20-21 age group notably displays a substantially lower voter turnout rate during their first voting opportunity (Bhatti & Hansen 2012; Konzelmann et al., 2012). This underscores the inverse relationship between the age of first-time voters and the likelihood of voting at one's first elections, with older first-time voters displaying a lower probability of engaging in the electoral process. Thus, experiencing the first chance to vote during adolescence appears to boost the probability of participation in one's first elections.

A potential cause for these age discrepancies may concern the civic education courses at school. In Austria, for instance, this electoral reform did not happen in a policy vacuum but was part of a comprehensive electoral restructuring characterised by various initiatives specifically targeting 16- and 17-year-olds. These initiatives, implemented both at schools and through dedicated communication campaigns, sought to inform and motivate adolescents to actively participate in the electoral process. For example, during the initial elections with the lowered voting age in the federal province of Vienna, collaborative efforts between the city of Vienna and school authorities resulted in numerous projects. These initiatives included organising mock elections within schools and providing opportunities for politicians to engage with young people who would soon be exercising their voting rights. Additionally,

extensive awareness campaigns were implemented (Karlhofer, 2007). Also at the national level, in preparation for the federal elections in 2008, the state authorities aimed to intensify their efforts, building on the successes observed in the regional elections of the four pioneer federal provinces. Therefore, they decided to introduce a genuine civic and citizenship education into all school programmes and made it mandatory in 2015 (BMUKK & BMWF, 2007).

Therefore, the older first-time voters in Austria during the years 2010 and 2012, by way of illustration, did not experience the complete civic education courses as did the adolescent first-time voters by the time. At that moment, the nationwide civics education curriculum was just starting to grow in the Austrian secondary schools (BMUKK & BMWF, 2007). Consequently, they were not exposed to the requisite prolonged educational stimuli necessary to generate a 'first-time voter boost' after one's school period. This is further supported by the fact that younger adolescents who left formal education earlier than the standard school track also displayed a lower voting propensity than young people who fully completed their secondary education, notwithstanding their social background (Kritzing & Zeglovits, 2013). This highlights that, in the case of non-adult youth exiting formal education without the benefit of an extensive civic education programme tailored to enhance electoral participation, the time period preceding their first ballot-casting opportunity is positively correlated with a diminished likelihood of their voting at elections as full-fledged adult first-time voters.

Figure 1 *Turnout rate by age in Vienna using the maximum turnout estimator, relative to average turnout (67.6%). (Zeglovitis & Aichholzer, 2014, p. 357)*

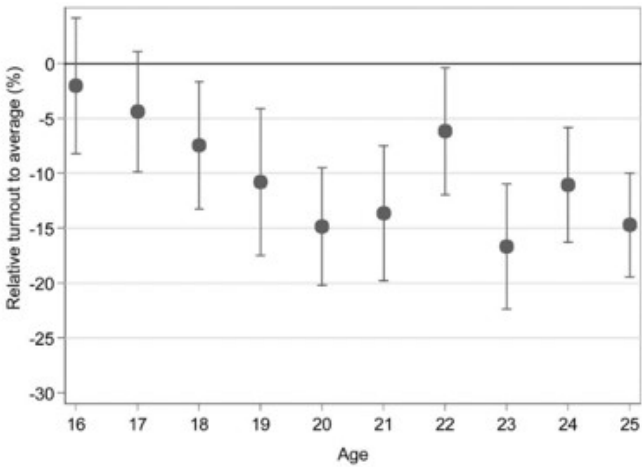
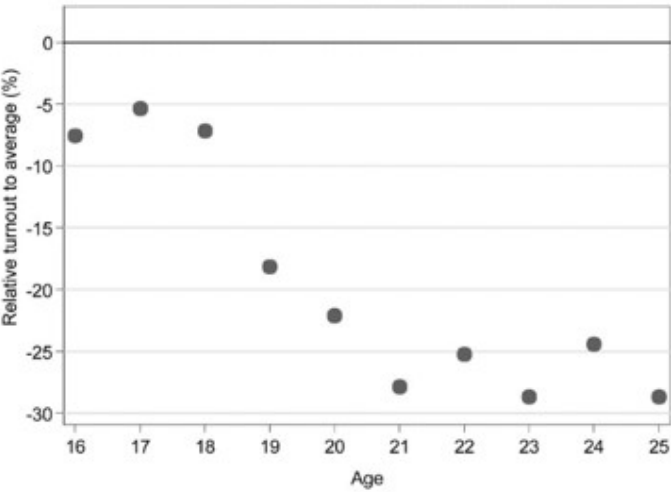


Figure 2 *Turnout rate by age in Krems using the maximum turnout estimator, relative to average turnout (62.6%). (Zeglovitis & Aichholzer, 2014, p. 357)*



2.2 *Youth Political Participation after Civics Education*

Are political literacy education programmes also sustaining the political participation after the school period? Adolescents who had benefitted from the civics education policies demonstrated a propensity to increase the voter turnout in the +20 years category in subsequent elections. The voting-age gap between older adolescents and young adults in Austria began to decrease over the years. The young adults – who were the older adolescents of the years before – seemed to be closing the gap at every new election. In the legislative elections of 2013, the gap decreased to only 5%, and to 4.2% in the regional elections of Vienna in 2015 (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2020). It was found that an overall higher voter turnout prevailed among both groups, at 70.2% among the youngest voters and 66% among the young adult voters in comparison with previous elections. The trajectory of diminishing voting-age gaps over successive elections underscores the enduring impact of political education on the sustained voting motivation of young people. This suggests that, at least for some years after leaving school, political education is still having an impact on young adults' voting motivation. This observation is also noted in the Scottish study conducted within the age cohort of individuals aged 16 to 31 (Eichhorn & Hübner, 2021). The authors found that political literacy courses had a lasting positive impact on those who completed their schooling several years ago, particularly within the younger segments of that age range:

Those who had taken classes in school in which political issues

were discussed, were more likely to vote in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, more likely to engage with political issues in ways other than voting, and more likely to use different information sources to keep up to date with political issues (p. 17).

However, the study acknowledges that this positive impact is less pronounced among the older cohorts within the same age group, nevertheless still significant. Consequently, it could be argued that while the effect remains robust, its long-term implications are still open to question.

From this perspective, the reduction of the voting age to 16 years primarily centres on extending the opportunity for young people to vote at elections at an earlier life stage than would be feasible with a voting age set at 18. In contexts where a country's political mandate spans five years, certain people may only engage in voting activities at the age of 23 – a full five years after their exit from formal education. Conversely, lowering the voting age to 16 years could potentially enable younger individuals – in the most extreme cases – to cast their first votes at the age of 20, a mere two years post-schooling. The significance of the timing of young people's first voting experience should not be underestimated. Each year that passes without voting after leaving education decreases the likelihood that an individual will participate in their first election. This delay also results in a missed opportunity to cultivate a consistent voting habit (Plutzer, 2002). When coupled with robust and a comprehensive civic education curriculum focusing on political matters and electoral processes, a

lower voting age holds the promise of serving as a catalyst for heightened voter turnout among the younger generations. Furthermore, this increase in civic engagement could even extend well beyond the years of mandatory education.

3 Voting Coherence, Political Knowledge and Late Adolescents

Political knowledge relates to various types of information concerning political affairs, policy issues, government structures and political life. In other words, political knowledge constitutes “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory” (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997, p. 10). Notably, political knowledge is intricately linked to voter turnout, as an increase in political knowledge is associated with higher participation rates in elections, constituting a primary effect (Dow, 2011). Additionally, political knowledge demonstrates a clear positive correlation with political participation (Galston, 2004). Therefore, assessing whether a lower voting age also leads to more longstanding political curiosity and information-seeking becomes of utmost relevance if the ultimate policy goal of such an electoral reform is to increase the voting motivation of younger generations for the rest of their lifetime.

A study by Hooghe and Dassonneville (2011) in the Belgian French and Dutch school systems revealed that a small majority of school-attending youth, aged around 15 to 16 years, demonstrated limited knowledge or provided incorrect answers to questions concerning the names of Belgian Prime Minister, the European Commis-

sion President, and the Minister of Justice, and similar topics. In another study with Belgian adolescents with very similar questions, 52% of participants correctly answered the questions (Verhaegen & Boonen, 2018). In addition, a longitudinal comparative study between Canadian and Dutch young adults shows that the knowledge gap between the younger and older generations has widened over 20 years between the 1970s and 1990s. The younger generations appear to be increasingly less politically knowledgeable, and, through cohort effects, lower political knowledge is shifting to older generations aged above 30 years (Howe, 2006). This suggests that political knowledge is not necessarily acquired with age and that developing a sustained political curiosity among the younger generations is deemed necessary for them to boost their political knowledge over the years.

3.1 *Civics Education and Sustained Political Knowledge*

The academic debate concerning the impact of a lower voting age on political knowledge primarily centres on the potential effects before the actual act of voting. In other words, the central question is whether extending the voting right to 16- and 17-year-olds will enhance their political knowledge before elections, enabling them to cast an ‘informed and coherent vote’ for the years to come. The existing literature reveals a debate between proponents who believe that individuals under 18 can make well-informed voting decisions and sceptics who harbour reservations about the voting capacities of non-adults. Drawing on a UK study based on nationally representative surveys from 1991 and 2001, Chan and

Clayton (2006) vehemently oppose lowering the voting age to 16 years. They argue that 16-year-olds in the UK exhibit lower political maturity and interest and possess less political knowledge than their 18-year-old counterparts. According to their perspective, it is entirely justifiable for a society to abstain from conferring voting rights upon late adolescents, as they are perceived as lacking the requisite competence to exercise suffrage and potentially exert a negative influence on the lives of eligible voters.

Wagner et al. (2012), on the contrary, state that older adolescents are perfectly able to cast a well-thought-of vote. Their empirical work on the 2009 European elections in Austria does not show a drastically lower knowledge level prior to the elections among people under the age of 18 years. In fact, they assert that regarding voting abilities the age group of 18- to 21-year-olds poses more challenges. This is comparable to the lower turnout rates also observed among older adults in the country prior to or at the beginning of the electoral and educational reforms. In other words, the young voters in Austria would be more 'politically mature' than their British counterparts of the same age. Wagner et al. (2012) posit that this notable difference can be explained for an important part by the fact that Austrian 16- and 17-year-olds are aware of their voting rights, fostering a higher inclination to inform themselves about political affairs compared to their British counterparts. Important to note here, the authors omit to take into account the civic educational reforms targeted at adolescents prior to the elections in Austria. This is an important difference with the UK, where no similar well-developed meas-

ures were taken for secondary school pupils. Plutzer (2002) already underscored the importance to develop a political habit as soon as possible in his work "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adults". He argues that the establishment of a political routine early in life engenders a lasting predisposition towards seeking out political information throughout one's lifespan. In the context of fostering an enduring and sustained political engagement among future generations, the electoral and educational reforms in Austria also emerge as notable catalysts for augmenting long-term political interest and knowledge.

With regard to this debate, the local elections of 2018 in Ghent provided an insight into the voting coherence of late adolescents in a context without extensive supportive civics education measures in secondary schools. All the young people in the age range of 16 to 17 years were invited through a formal and official letter of invitation by the city administration to cast their vote on the same date as the real elections for adults. Although it was emphasised that their votes wouldn't impact the official results, the conditions mimicked a real voting experience. Stiers et al. (2020) examined the political maturity of the adolescents who participated in the mock election through voting coherence, comparing it to that of their parents. This is in a context in which Flanders (the education policy in Belgium lies with the regional authorities) did not have a well-developed civic education policy aimed at bringing as much young people as possible to the polling stations. While these results may provide additional support for proponents of lowering the voting age to 16, it's

crucial to consider several significant reservations very well detailed by the authors. Firstly, the turnout rate was notably low, with only 17.77% of eligible adolescents participating. Secondly, it is therefore quite plausible that primarily those adolescents with pre-existing interest in politics participated in the mock election. The participants tended to lean slightly more left-wing and predominantly came from financially well-off families. Lastly, the schools in Ghent actively promoted and disseminated information about the mock election, potentially influencing the motivation of adolescents who decided to vote. This may have had an influence on the enthusiasm to inform oneself among these young voters. In other words, this experiment does not provide a strong argument to state that solely lowering the voting age to 16 years – without accompanying educational measures – genuinely and naturally increases the propensity for younger voters to look for information and increase their political knowledge in the long run.

4 A Lower Voting Age and Lasting Social Inequalities

Lowering the voting age entails potential risks concerning the sustainment and reinforcement of longstanding societal and social inequalities. Specifically, a considerable risk emerges wherein a significant segment of eligible adolescents may exhibit diminished voting motivation or be inadequately targeted by governmental policies aimed at facilitating their exercise of voting rights at the age of 16 or 17. This could result in an even greater social gap in political participation in the future. These in-

stances underscore a notable concern for policymakers and governments contemplating the implementation of a lower voting age. In the Ghent mock elections, participation was predominantly observed among adolescents from well-off families (Stiers et al., 2020). Van der Meer and Dekker (2011) also illustrate a clear disparity in political participation based on education and income levels in the Netherlands. People with higher education and better income show a significantly greater inclination towards different forms of political participation in comparison to their more modestly educated and lower-income counterparts. This can be highly problematic according to the authors since “an unequal level of political participation easily leads to a systematic distortion (bias) in the preferences of policymakers and, consequently, in government policy” (p. 214). Furthermore, on a gender level, lowering the voting age to 16 years could reinforce a gender gap in terms of less popular elections. Young women in Europe display a more or less equal participation rate in first-order elections. In some countries, they even seem to possess a higher voting motivation than men (Deželan, 2023). Nevertheless, when it comes to second-order elections, women still tend to be less motivated and show a lower propensity to look for information prior to voting (Kostelka et al., 2019).

In the Austrian example, young people 16 to 17 years old who left school earlier to start their working career were discernibly less influenced by the educational efforts of the Austrian authorities (Kozeluh et al., 2005; Perlot & Zandonella, 2009; Schwarzer & Zeglövits, 2013). This resulted in a noticeable discrepancy in voting motivation

between adolescents still enrolled in formal education and those who had prematurely left school. The enfranchised adolescents still attending school at the age of 16 to 18 years, however, demonstrated a higher propensity to vote and showed higher levels of political interest regardless of their families' social class background (Kritzinger & Zeglovits, 2013; Zeglovits & Zandonella, 2013). In the same vein, the Scottish results on voting motivation among different social classes and between gender are very insightful. Since the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, 16- and 17-year-olds have been granted the right to vote in all Scottish elections, including Scottish parliament elections and the second-order, that is, local council elections. Similar to the findings in Austria, Scottish adolescents, regardless of their social class and gender, exhibited a 'first-time voting boost'. They participated more actively in elections than their older mid-20s counterparts (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2020; Reid et al., 2019). Especially since the independence referendum – and therefore the first-time non-adults were allowed to vote – Scotland undertook important educational efforts to increase the political literacy of pupils at school. However, the nature and extent of civic education varied across different schools and authorities in Scotland. This diversity in efforts resulted in unequal educational preparation for elections, with some individuals benefiting from better and more comprehensive civic education. Consequently, those who received enhanced civic education demonstrated a higher voting participation and engaged more readily in political activities (Eichhorn & Hübner, 2021). Recognising this, the Scottish parliamentary committee of

'Devolution' demanded qualitative and extensive education for political literacy for all Scottish pupils: "you will be aware that in our evidence to the committee, we put forward the proposal to develop national guidance for political education and literacy" (Devolution (Further Powers) Committee, 2015, p. 11). Nevertheless, despite these differences in educational efforts on a nationwide scale, positive effects of civic education can still be seen among the Scottish youth. Since the lowering of the voting age during the Scottish independence referendum, the socioeconomic disparities and the gender gap in voting motivation among 16- and 17-year-olds have been notably lower than those in the broader population of the UK. The discrepancies in voting motivation, political participation and information-seeking behaviour observed between different social classes and between genders in the broader society are not seen among older adolescents attending school in Scotland (Eichhorn & Hübner, 2021; Huebner & Eichhorn, 2022).

As a consequence, Scotland and, again, Austria serve as compelling examples, illustrating the potential of educational efforts, even when not perfectly aligned nationally like the Scottish case, which can still significantly mitigate political participation inequalities. Investing in well-developed political literacy education can, at least in the short term, benefit the most vulnerable young individuals, stimulating and enhancing their political internal efficacy. Over time, however, disparities in political involvement appear to resurge in Scotland as young adults do not spend time in the formal educational track anymore (Eichhorn & Hübner, 2021). This highlights still ex-

isting uncertainties over the long-term educational effects on equal political participation among the general population. The new nationwide-developed Scottish political education and literacy policy might perhaps be fruitful in reinforcing the effect of education in the long term. Similarly, in Austria, a significant effect persists several years after young adults leave school, albeit with a slight decline in voting motivation observed over time (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2020). Therefore, more longitudinal research is necessary for researchers to have a genuine understanding of the long-term effects stemming from comprehensive national efforts of political education within schools. Post-school political education campaigns might be deemed necessary initiatives to mitigate potential declines in the effectiveness of school education over the years.

5 The Marginal Impact of Lowering the Voting Age on the Political Landscape

This section delves into the possible implications of reducing the voting age, particularly focusing on its long-term potential to reconfigure the political dynamics within the Low Countries. An understanding of how this alteration may disrupt party affiliations is imperative for policymakers and scholars, offering valuable insights into potential shifts in political representation. The following figures illustrate the voting tendencies of both the youngest enfranchised cohort and the disenfranchised youth.

5.1 Belgium

Academic research by Meeusen et al. (2023) about the electorates of the Flemish parties at the Belgian federal elections of 2019 reveals that the youngest cohort of voters aged 18 to 24 – predominantly composed of first-time voters in national elections – exhibited a diverse array of party preferences, with three parties closely aligned in terms of votes. Notably, the Greens of Groen emerged as the most popular, followed closely by the extreme-right Flemish nationalists of Vlaams Belang and the liberal party Open Vld. There were also many blank votes within this age group. Similar patterns were observed in subsequent age cohorts, with the Greens maintaining popularity and other parties gaining traction in later age groups (e.g., the socialists of Vooruit, the right-conservative Flemish nationalists of N-VA and the Christian democrats of CD&V). In Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region, first-time voters in the 18 to 24 age category overwhelmingly supported the green party Ecolo, securing almost 42% of the votes within this age group. The liberals of MR (Mouvement Réformateur) and the socialist PS (Parti Socialiste) lag far behind. The extreme-left party PTB (Parti du Travail de Belgique) and the Christian democrats of CdH (today Les Engagés) showed to be less popular. A notable 11.1% of the newest French-speaking voters opted to abstain or vote blank or cast an invalid vote. In the Belgian context, the overall political party preferences in the northern and southern regions of the country are reflected in the youngest and already enfranchised age cohort, with a larger right-wing bloc in Flanders and a clear majority for left-leaning parties in Brussels and Wallonia.

Regarding the voting intentions of adolescents, very few studies have been undertaken in Belgium to genuinely grasp the party preferences of not-yet-enfranchised young people. Hooghe and Boonen (2015) shed light on the party preferences of Flemish 15-year-olds in 2012, revealing a significant alignment with the overall election results of the 2010 federal elections among the adult, enfranchised public. Just as in the general elections, a substantial proportion of adolescent votes went to the Flemish right-wing nationalists of the N-VA and the Christian democrats of CD&V. The Greens of Groen and the extreme-right Vlaams Belang held less popularity among this age cohort. Today, the political context is completely reversed in the north of Belgium, with an extreme-right party that made a breakthrough as second biggest party in Flanders in 2019 and is now battling to become the first Flemish party. A more recent report on the Flemish youth voting intention just before the federal elections of 2019, based on the study conducted by Desmet and Verhoogen (2019), seems to reflect that new political reality among younger people between 12 and 24 years old. The Greens emerged as the most popular single party. However, the right and extreme-right parties of N-VA and Vlaams Belang also secured a significant part of the Flemish youth's voting intentions. The other two left parties, the socialists of Vooruit and the extreme-left PVDA, were clearly less popular among young voters. Interestingly, the extreme-right Vlaams Belang seems to be the most popular party when only the age cohort of 15 to 18 years old is taken into account. This is also confirmed by the more recent work done by the Flemish *Jeugd Onderzoeksplat-*

form in 2023, in which young Flemings between 16 and 25 years old showed a clear preference for Vlaams Belang, followed by the N-VA and Groen (Spruyt et al., 2024). In Wallonia and Brussels, a study from 2006 on the voting intentions of 16-year-olds shows the same dynamic as in the north of the country with voting preferences remaining rather close to that of the general election (Claes et al., 2006). The left-wing Parti Socialiste (PS) was the most popular party with the liberal MR and the Greens from Ecolo trailing far behind. Conversely, the Christian democrats of CdH and the extreme-left PTB exhibited notably lower levels of popularity among adolescents during that period. These voting proclivities largely mirror the electoral outcomes of the federal elections in 2003 in French-speaking Belgium, albeit with the liberals of MR achieving a discernibly stronger performance relative to their standing among 16-year-olds.

Drawing insights from these existing academic works and reports it can be argued that lowering the voting age in Belgium may yield distinct election results in the north and the south of the country and, therefore, aligning with the general electoral results. Moreover, opening the voting age to 16- and 17-year-olds is likely to have varying (marginal) effects on different political parties. In Flanders, the lowering of the voting age is anticipated to provide a small boost to three parties – Groen, the N-VA and Vlaams Belang. While there is insufficient research for Wallonia and Brussels to make a definitive prediction, based on the electoral cohort of 2019, one could posit that the green party Ecolo would likely be the small beneficiary of a lowered voting age in that part of the country. Overall,

these Flemish and French-speaking adolescent voting preferences do not show a radical longstanding shift in the political landscape of Belgium and its three regions if the voting age were to be lowered. The 16- and 17-year-olds tend to closely follow the election preferences of the general enfranchised public with just some minor deviations in favour of certain parties.

5.2 *The Netherlands*

The parliamentary elections held in the Netherlands on the 22nd of November 2023 offer an intriguing view into the voting intentions of young voters. The party preferences of 18- to 34-year-olds closely align with the general election results. The extreme-right PVV (Partij van de Vrijheid) holds its first position and is even slightly more popular among younger voters. The other moderately more popular parties are the GreenLeft party of GroenLinks-PvdA and the liberal democrats of D66. The liberals of VVD and the new centre party Nieuw Sociaal Contract (NSC) both lose support in the younger age group (NOS, 2023). This is particularly interesting as it highlights how a political context can significantly alter voting intentions, making it challenging to predict future results, especially if the voting age is to be opened to 16- and 17-year-olds. This challenge is amplified in a fragmented and volatile party landscape like the Netherlands. In the elections of 2017, just seven years ago, GroenLinks as a single party held massive popularity among the youngest voters, securing 43% of their votes. D66 (38%), the Partij van de Dieren (Animals Party, 33%) and the populist-right party Forum voor Democratie (31%) were other popular parties. The extreme-right PVV, back then, gathered

only 20% of the young electorate's votes (van Dalen, 2021). In other words, the younger Dutch electorate often shows minor differences with the general result and more or less follows the general political trend. Yet, currently, the extreme-right is clearly dominating that part of the Dutch population slightly more than in the overall population.

To measure the voting preferences of not-yet-enfranchised youth, the Dutch organised the so-called 'Scholierenverkiezingen'. This nonofficial election precedes the real general elections and takes place in schools that have applied for it, offering a glimpse into how youth between the ages of 12 and 18 years would vote if they had voting rights. The November 2023 edition, with 143,991 participants, revealed a clear shift to the right side of the political spectrum with the three parties the PVV, Forum voor Democratie and the liberal VVD finishing, respectively, on the first three places. Groenlinks is the first left party on a fourth place followed by D66 and the new farmers' party of BBB (BoerBurgerBeweging) (ProDemos, 2023). In this sense, the current Dutch adolescents seem to have a strong preference for right-wing, extreme-right and populist parties, which tends to confirm the results from Rekker et al. (2015) positing that adolescents have slightly more extreme positions in comparison to the general population.

Lowering the voting age to 16 in the Netherlands will probably not totally reshape the political landscape, given the observed preferences of the youth in the 'Scholierenverkiezingen'. And as stated by the organiser ProDemos on its website: "Often, the results of the Scholierenverkiezingen are very similar

to the actual election results.”¹ Nevertheless, the data suggest a leaning towards right-wing and populist parties, indicating that if these younger individuals were granted voting rights, these parties might see a small increase in support. However, as seen in the Belgian case as well, it is essential to consider the dynamic nature of political preferences and the impact of changing circumstances. Therefore, while a preference for certain parties is evident, predicting the exact political outcomes of lowering the voting age requires careful reflection and a certain intellectual restraint. The literature only allows to state that it appears probable that the Low Countries would not undergo a significant alteration in their general election outcomes should they opt to lower the voting age to 16 years for national elections.

5.3 *Next to the Low Countries?*

Predicting the voting preferences of 16- and 17-year-olds in countries is a challenging task, as previously outlined. Various factors play a crucial role, and these factors can vary significantly across different countries. Authorities implement the electoral reform of a lower voting age in various ways. For instance, Austria adopted a rather centralised approach, while Scotland experienced notable variations in the educational support provided by schools prior to elections. Furthermore, academic research is still in the process of fully revealing the impact of educational measures on the party preferences of older adolescents. Although limited, existing academic works on this subject tend to align with observations in Belgium and the Netherlands, indicating that adolescent and older voters are mostly aligned with general voting

preferences, with a slight inclination towards more radical parties (van der Kolk & Aarts, 2010).

On a political party preference level, the Austrian case confirms the previous understanding of political preferences among adolescents. The latter’s voting choice generally mirrors the overall electoral trend with occasional deviations to the right or the left. The youngest Austrian voters indeed tend to position themselves slightly more on the left or on the right of the political spectrum. Additionally, adolescent voters do not exhibit a significant difference in political attitudes compared to older young voters above the age of 18 years (Aichholzer & Kritzing, 2020). This alignment was further affirmed in an American study conducted by Hart and Atkins (2011, p. 214), demonstrating that 16- to 17-year-olds closely align on the political interests of the older cohort of 18- to 24 year-olds. In other words, the voting preferences of adult first-time voters serve as a potential reference for the party preferences of adolescents. However, this assertion should be approached with caution, considering Austria’s substantial efforts in political education, which may have impacted the voting preferences of the youngest voters.

To illustrate the challenges to interpret and extrapolate results across countries, the Estonian case is an additional notable example. Estonia granted voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds in 2015, exclusively for local elections. The parties that slightly outperformed – namely, the liberal Reform Party and the Social Democrats – were the same parties advocating for a lowering of voting rights age and actively motivating the youngest voters to cast their ballots on election day (Eichhorn &

Bergh, 2020). This suggests that the Reform Party's and Social Democrat Party's young voters were more targeted by these specific parties than the youngest voters of other parties. Consequently, these efforts resulted in a slightly better outcome for these two parties among the newest enfranchised age cohort. In essence, the strategies and initiatives that political parties choose to employ for the youngest voters significantly impact their political outcomes among adolescents. Since not every ideological party aligns uniformly on the issue of lowering the voting age across Europe, predicting which specific party might gain votes in general by lowering the voting age becomes extremely difficult. The varying stances and readiness to push for electoral efforts focusing on 16- to 17-year-olds are very different from country to country, making it challenging to pinpoint a singular party that would universally benefit from lowering the voting age.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of literature surrounding the proposal to lower the voting age to 16 in the Low Countries reveals multifaceted implications for long-term democratic engagement. A comprehensive understanding of this reform requires a nuanced assessment of its lasting impact on various aspects, including voter turnout, political knowledge and maturity, social inequalities, and consequences for the political party landscape.

Regarding voter turnout and political knowledge, studies present a complex relationship. While a positive short-term effect is observed, empha-

sising the importance of political education, caution is advised against overestimating the potential for prolonged impact. Civic education emerges as a crucial component, with political literacy courses showing promise in promoting sustained political engagement among younger people. However, more research on the effects of civics education is necessary to provide a better view on its implications for political participation in the long run. Educational measures in schools show positive short-term impacts, suggesting a potential for a lifelong voter reflex. Yet, lasting increased political participation over decades poses challenges, highlighting the need for on-going efforts to retain older adults' attention to politics after their schooling years. Social inequalities persist as a challenge, and lowering the voting age alone may prove insufficient in addressing disparities in political participation for a longer period of time. While educational efforts may temporarily mitigate these inequalities, sustained interventions beyond the school period are also deemed necessary here. Turning to the lasting consequences for the political party landscape and political attitudes in the Low Countries, it has been found that young voters in Belgium and the Netherlands under the age of 18 often align with the overall political preferences of the general population. Their party preferences evolve quite equally to the trends in the broader society, showing therefore no clear discrepancy in voting coherence with young enfranchised adults. However, adolescents can in some cases display a slightly higher preference for the extremes of the political spectrum. In other words, lowering the voting age in the Low Countries will neither normally nor dramatically

alter future political preferences in both countries.

In essence, the discussions about lowering the voting age to 16 in the Low Countries mark a significant stride towards engaging younger generations in democratic processes, if possible, for the rest of their life. However, the true effectiveness of this reform hinges on the implementation of complementary measures, particularly in the realm of civic education. Political authorities must demonstrate a comprehensive and sustained commitment to fostering civic education and political engagement throughout the life course of young citizens, recognising both the opportunities and challenges associated with such a transformation. While the potential for increased political participation among the youth is promising, social inequalities persist as a formidable challenge that requires broader societal interventions to ensure lasting impacts. This nuanced interplay between these various elements underscores the need for careful consideration and on-going evaluation of the broader long-term societal consequences of such electoral reforms.

Note

- 1 scholierenverkiezingen.nl/over-ons/faq/

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