

A False Start

Votes-at-16 in Wales in the 2021 Welsh
Parliament | Senedd Cymru election

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Welsh Election Study

The Welsh Election Study is an independent academic study of Welsh politics, elections and voting behaviour in the Senedd elections in 2021. The 2021 Study is supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [Grant Number ES/V009559/1].

JANUARY 2025

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Executive Summary and Recommendations

The 2021 Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament election saw a significant change to the electoral franchise in Wales, with 16-and-17-year-olds allowed to vote for the first time.

Supporters argued that, if accompanied by a comprehensive and coordinated education programme aimed at these newly enfranchised voters, votes-at-16 would improve political engagement in Wales. Unfortunately, however, the introduction of votes-at-16 coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only caused severe disruption to the education system but also impacted on the conduct of the election itself. In this context, this first experience of votes-at-16 in Wales is best characterised as something of a ‘false start.’

Bearing these uniquely difficult circumstances in mind, this report uses original survey data collected by the 2021 Welsh Election Study to consider what can be learnt from Wales’ first experience of votes-at-16.

Overall, we find that:

- **Levels of political engagement and knowledge among 16-and-17-year-olds are broadly comparable with other age groups under 55.**
- **While some of the differences that characterise political engagement among older cohorts were replicated among 16-and-17-year-olds** (e.g. young Welsh-speakers tended to be more politically engaged) **others were not** (e.g. gender gaps in political knowledge were smallest among 16-and-17-year-olds).
- Just 28 percent of 16- and 17-year-olds who participated in the Welsh Election Study reported that they had discussed votes-at-16 with someone at school, or in a youth club or society. But **young people given an opportunity to discuss votes-at-16 expressed both a higher likelihood to vote and greater interest in the 2021 election than those who did not** (although we cannot discount the possibility that the former were already more politically engaged).
- **There remain significant challenges in researching the impact of votes-at-16.** In particular, we find that the method of recruitment to our survey had a significant impact on our findings, with those 16-and-17-year-olds recruited via their parents proving to be significantly less engaged than those who joined the YouGov panel independently.

Given the circumstances of the 2021 Senedd election, our study is best considered as a baseline for future studies into the impact of votes-at-16 on Welsh politics. Nonetheless, based on our findings, we make the following five recommendations:

Recommendations

1. It is vital that the 2026 election is treated as **a fresh start for votes-at-16**, particularly in terms of the promotion of a coordinated education programme to ensure that potential benefits for political participation of votes-at-16 are maximised.
2. **Work to improve political literacy about devolved politics in Wales remains a high priority.** Our findings indicate that knowledge of the electoral system and party politics is relatively low across all age groups. These findings are particularly concerning given the significant changes to the electoral system for the Senedd set to be introduced in 2026.
3. Even entering all necessary caveats, the evidence of **lower engagement in devolved politics among those do not speak Welsh and those who attend English-medium schools is a cause for concern.** More positively, however, it should also be recognised that it is among these young people in particular that the potential benefits of a coordinated education programme associated with votes-at-16 is most obvious.
4. Our findings underline not only that more **research into political engagement among young people in Wales is required**, but that this research needs to be **maintained over the longer-term**, not least in order to determine whether or not the introduction of votes-at-16 is having the desired effect over time.
5. Survey-based research into the perspectives and experiences of younger people is indispensable if we are to understand the impact of votes-at-16. As such, **more work is required to ensure the existence of accurate and reliable samples of those 16- and 17-year-olds enfranchised to vote in Senedd and local elections** but not (at present, at least) in UK general elections.

1 Introduction

The 2021 Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament election saw a significant change to the franchise for devolved elections in Wales with 16-and-17-year-olds allowed to vote for the first time. Introducing votes-at-16 represented a landmark for Welsh politics not least because this was the first significant reform of the electoral process to have been conceived of and enacted at the Welsh level based on powers devolved to the Senedd by the 2017 Wales Act (Loughran et al., 2021a).

Franchise reform was motivated by the belief that lowering the voting age would improve levels of political engagement among young people, including increasing their propensity to vote in elections over time (Loughran et al., 2021b). These ambitions were articulated clearly by the 2017 Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform, which recommended votes-at-16 as a “powerful way to raise political awareness and participation among young people” (McAllister et al., 2017, p217), if it was accompanied by a coordinated education programme in schools and colleges.

In the event, however, the 2021 election was overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which served to undermine the introduction of votes-at-16 in at least two ways. First, the education system in general, and schools in particular, were heavily disrupted for over a year prior to election day. Schools and colleges were closed for extended periods leaving students struggling to cope with a lack of resources and support (Chapman et al., 2022; Waters-Davies et al., 2022). Unsurprisingly in a context in which teachers, despite their best efforts, were often failing to cover the existing curriculum (Lucas et al., 2020; Nelson et al., 2021), there was very little capacity to deliver the additional civic-political education that the Expert Panel had envisaged as accompanying the move to votes-at-16.

Second, the pandemic had a direct impact on the conduct of the 2021 Senedd election campaign itself. Owing to a lockdown in early 2021, uncertainty arose about the feasibility of conducting the election on the intended date (May 6th) (BBC, 2021). Although the election date was ultimately confirmed there remained restrictions on in-person campaigning, which in turn almost certainly served to limited wider public engagement in the immediate run-up to the vote.

Given all of this, the first experience of lowering the voting age in Wales is best understood as a false start. For reasons beyond the control of any of those involved, it was simply impossible to ally franchise reform at the 2021 election to the proposed programme of civic and political education which proponents had argued was necessary to secure the wider benefits of increased political engagement that were the ultimate aim of the votes-at-16 policy.

Yet even if we must regard the introduction of votes-at-16 in the 2021 Senedd election as representing a false start for the policy, there nonetheless remain lessons that can be learnt from the experience. In this report, we utilise data from the 2021 Welsh Election Study (WES) – a survey that included a boosted sample of 16-and-17-year-olds (195 in total) – to consider electoral turnout and broader political engagement among those voters targeted by franchise reform.¹

We proceed in four steps. First, we provide a brief overview of the decision to introduce of votes-at-16 for Senedd elections – including the arguments advanced for and against the proposed change – as well as the difficulties experienced in implementing the reform in the specific circumstances of the 2021 election specifically. This is followed by two sections that draw on survey data to examine, in turn, how the 16–17-year-old cohort compares to other age cohorts within the Welsh electorate, as well as differences within the 16–17-year-old cohort itself. As a fourth step, we draw attention to large differences in the responses of 16-and-17-year-olds depending on the way in which they were recruited into the survey, and the wider implications of this for our findings.

In our concluding remarks we draw on the findings outlined in the previous sections in order to set out a series of recommendations. These are aimed not only at those involved in organising the 2026 Senedd election – an election that, it is to be fervently hoped, will be held in very different circumstances to those that pertained in 2021 – but also those interested in continuing to research the impact of votes-at-16 in the Welsh context as well as further afield.

¹ The Welsh Election Study 2021 was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [Award ES/V009559/1].

2 Votes at 16 in Wales

In introducing votes-at-16, Wales became part of what appears to be a broader trend in European and global politics (see McAllister et al., 2017). In Europe, Austria paved the way by becoming the first country to lower the voting age to 16 in 2007 (Bergh, 2013). In the UK, Scotland has been the pioneer, extending the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum (Electoral Commission, 2014).

It was the passage of the Wales Act in 2017 that gave the Senedd (then called the National Assembly for Wales) the power to potentially follow suit and extend the franchise in both Senedd and local elections in Wales – the UK parliament retains control of the franchise of the UK general elections (Huebner et al., 2021). As Loughran and colleagues note, “a broad consensus was built in support...between Welsh Labour, Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Liberal Democrats” (Loughran et al., 2021b: 4), ensuring the required two thirds super-majority to introduce votes-at-16. Indeed, while the Conservative party at the Westminster level² was hostile to the change (Loughran et al., 2019), there was in fact little coordinated opposition from the Welsh Conservatives in Cardiff Bay³ (Loughran et al., 2021; Tonge et al., 2021). In truth, the introduction of votes-at-16 in Wales was to prove a (perhaps surprisingly?) uncontroversial reform.

2.1. Why did the Senedd introduce votes-at-16?

Support for votes-at-16 in Wales is underpinned by the belief that it will increase youth political engagement and (eventually) turnout in elections. First propounded by Franklin (2004), this argument was central to the 2017 Expert Panel’s recommendation that Wales should introduce votes-at-16 (McAllister et al., 2017). It is an argument that has found its echoes across Welsh politics. Thus, for example, Lisa James (Deputy Director of Local Government in the Welsh Government) regarded votes-at-16 as part of a broader suite of measures “to make young people aware of the government in Wales” (Loughran et al., 2021b: 4), while Labour MS Julie Morgan claimed that “lowering the voting age would help engage our young people” in politics, which then “should also set a pattern for greater participation in elections later in life” (BBC 2012).

² At Westminster, Labour and the Scottish/Welsh nationalist parties have tended to support votes-at-16, whereas the Conservatives and the Democratic Unionist Party have been vocal opponents (Loughran et al., 2019). There is some evidence that the views of Conservative supporters across Britain echo the opposition of the Westminster party (Loughran et al., 2022).

³ There is some evidence that the Welsh Conservatives were divided internally on the issue. David Melding, for example, was a strong supporter of the votes-at-16 (see Tonge et al., 2021), whereas Darren Millar was a vocal opponent (see Millar, 2016).

The proposition that votes-at-16 will increase engagement is certainly not without its critics. Opponents of lowering the voting age point out that those young people who can already vote (i.e., those 18+) have some of the lowest levels of political interest and turnout (see Cowley and Denver, 2004; Chan and Clayton, 2006; Denver, 2013). Or in the words of Welsh Conservative politician, Darren Millar (MS): “those young people who are eligible, 18–25-year-olds, are actually the least likely age group to cast their vote” (Millar, 2016). The implication would appear to be that, by lowering the voting age, all that would be achieved is to introduce even more disinterested people into the electorate.

Empirical studies focused specifically on 16-and-17-year-olds suggest that lowering the voting age at least does not damage political engagement.⁴ More positively, scholars studying voting behaviour in Austria and Scotland have found that (when included in the franchise) turnout rates and political interest are higher among 16-and-17-year-olds than among other younger age cohorts within the electorate (Zeglovits and Zandonella, 2013; Electoral Commission, 2014; Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014; Huebner and Eichhorn, 2020). There is also some evidence from Scotland that – as predicted by Franklin (2004) – lowering the voting age has instilled a habit of voting among those that had their first experience of voting as 16- or 17-year-olds (see Eichhorn and Hübner, 2023). In short, there is growing evidence that lowering the voting age can improve political engagement over time.

2.2. Votes-at-16 and the COVID-19 Pandemic

When proposing votes-at-16 for Wales, the 2017 Expert Panel argued that the success of the policy rested on the associated introduction of a complementary education programme in schools and colleges (McAllister et al., 2017). Such a programme was required because young people frequently cite a perceived lack of knowledge as a “key barrier” to their participation in politics (McAllister et al., 2020). The aim was to establish a programme that would give students the opportunity to receive (and be graded on) information in class (Franklin 2004)⁵ and to participate in regular (informal) discussions about politics with their peers and teachers – something that has been found to increase engagement elsewhere (see Zeglovits and Zandonella, 2013; Eichhorn, 2014; 2018; Eichhorn and Hübner 2023).

Unfortunately, however, the provision of any education in the run-up to the 2021 election was rendered deeply problematic by the COVID-19 pandemic, a pandemic whose impact included – inter alia – very widespread school closures, large-scale absences among both pupils and teachers alike, and a very patchy and uneven switch to online/hybrid learning environments (Weale and Davis, 2021). In such circumstances, teachers struggled to support their students

⁴ Some scholars find that there is little difference in the political engagement of 16-and-17-year-olds and 18-year-olds in locations like Austria, Scotland, and the United States (e.g., Hart and Atkins, 2011; Wagner et al. 2012; Eichhorn 2018). However, the takeaway from these studies is that lowering the voting age (at a minimum) is unlikely to have a negative effect on political engagement.

⁵ Again, this is disputed by opponents of votes-at-16 argue that ‘civic’ education has had no impact on political literacy in the United States (e.g., Cowley and Denver, 2004; Denver, 2013).

(Waters-Davies et al., 2022) and many failed to cover the entire formal curriculum (Lucas et al., 2020; Nelson et al., 2021). Furthermore, the regular removal of students from the school setting deprived them of the opportunity for informal social interactions with their teachers and peers (Chapman et al., 2022). These difficulties were at their most acute among the already underprivileged, either because they lacked educational resources, were from a disadvantaged background, and/or because did not receive support from their families (Huebner et al., 2021; Chapman et al., 2022; Waters-Davies et al., 2022). It is hard to conceive of less propitious circumstances in which to introduce and promote the programme of civic education – both formal and informal – that had been envisaged as accompanying the extension of the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds in Wales in May 2021.

3 The experience of votes-at-16 in 2021

Having made clear how hopelessly unpromising the circumstances surrounding the 2021 election were for those who had hoped that the introduction of votes-at-16 would serve to increase political participation, we now move to review some of the data collected by the Welsh Election Study. In this section we will compare general levels of political engagement among 16- and 17-year-olds with those found among other parts of the Welsh electorate. We do this by comparing, first, likelihood to turn out and vote, secondly, levels of political interest, and, finally, levels of political knowledge. Our key finding is that, in all three cases, the attitudes, behaviours and knowledge levels of 16- and 17-year-olds are very similar to those of other age cohorts below the age of 55. Voters over the age of 55 are more politically engaged on every measure.

3.1. Turnout

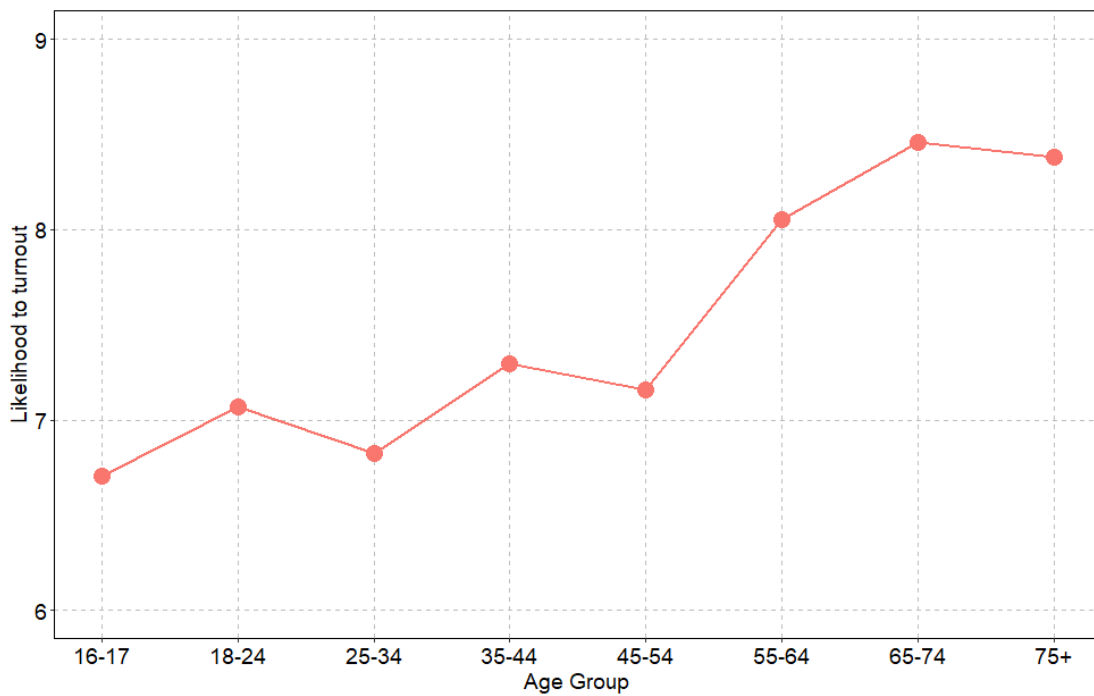
To measure turnout, we draw on data from a pre-election question that asked respondents to indicate how likely they were to vote in the upcoming election. While imperfect, we prefer this measure to asking respondents post hoc whether they had voted, as the latter responses tend to be particularly fraught with biases (see Wagner et al., 2012 for a summary of the literature on this subject).

The pre-election wave of the WES asked respondents how likely they are to vote using a scale ranging from 0 (Certain NOT to vote) to 10 (Absolutely certain to vote). Having excluded non-respondents, we compare the mean likelihood to turnout across eight age groups (16-17, 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-74, 75+) reporting these results in Figure 1.

Overall, likelihood to vote is relatively low among 16-and-17-year-olds, but – as can be seen – not only is it very similar to that of those aged 25-34, but it is broadly analogous to that found among all other age groups below 55. It is not until we reach those 55+ that we see a dramatic rise in turnout intention. These results are consistent with the Electoral Commission’s (2021) claim that the actual turnout among 16-and-17-year-olds in the 2021 Senedd election was “largely in line with other younger age groups and notably lower than turnout among the over 55s.” Thus, while critics may rightly claim that 16- and 17-year-olds are less likely to vote than some others age groups, the same point is true for a large part of the already enfranchised Welsh public.

Figure 1

Mean likelihood to vote in the 2021 Senedd election by age



Source: Welsh Election Study 2021 (N=4,229) ● 0 = Certain NOT to vote; 10 = Absolutely certain to vote.

3.2. Political Interest

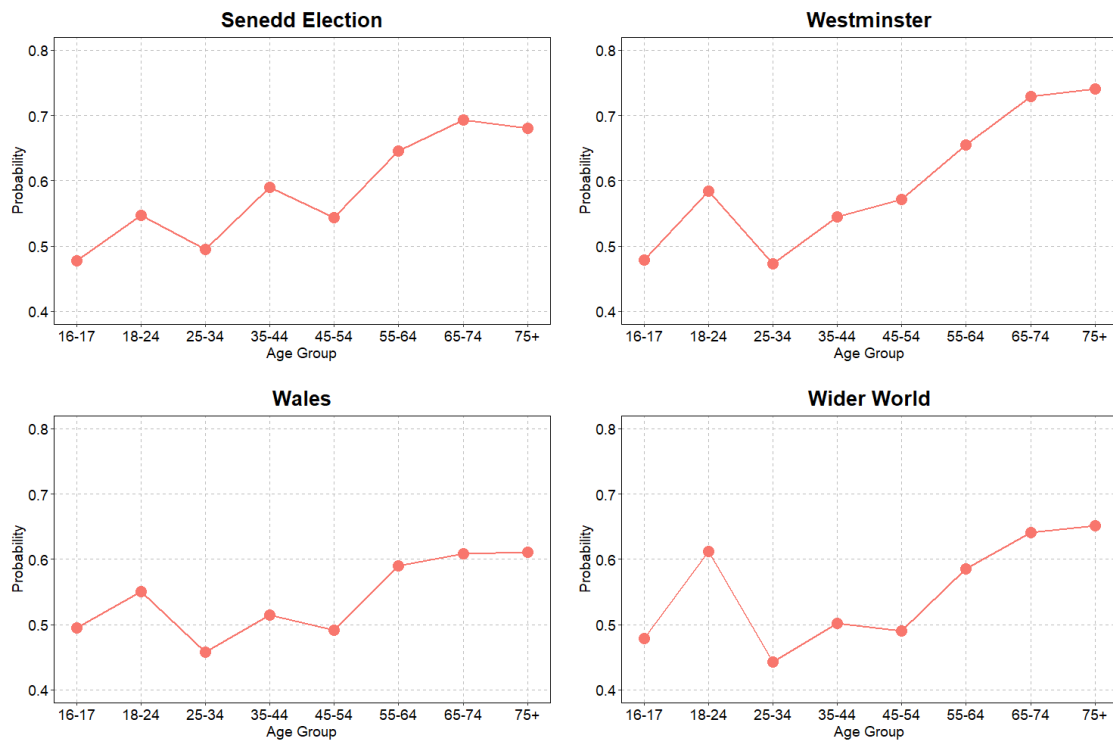
While turnout is, of course, crucial, it is important to stress that proponents of votes-at-16 do not believe that extending the franchise will lead to an immediate increase in turnout. Rather, they expect the impact of the reform to be more gradual; inducting younger people into the electorate at a time when it is easier to engage them in politics should help develop a habit of voting that persists over the long term (Franklin, 2004; McAllister et al., 2017).⁶

So, how interested are the newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds in politics in general, and the Senedd Election in particular, compared to other age groups in Wales? To answer this question, we examine responses to four questions (again from the pre-election wave of the WES) which asked respondents to indicate their levels of interest in: the 2021 Senedd election: politics in Westminster: politics in the Welsh Parliament/Senedd Cymru in general: and the wider world. They were given four response options: not at all interested, not very interested, fairly interested, and very interested. We combine the latter two options to indicate whether

⁶ Given the long-term nature of this argument, it is of course impossible to test its validity solely on the basis this initial experience of votes-at-16 – this would remain the case notwithstanding the context of the pandemic.

a respondent in each age group is either fairly or very interested in that dimension of politics, and we then report these results in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Probability of being (fairly/very) interested in politics



Source: Welsh Election Study 2021 (N=4,229)

Overall, the pattern of responses is strikingly similar to the one we have examined with regards to intended turnout. The level of political interest among 16 and 17 year olds is very similar to that found among those aged 25-34, and not too dissimilar to that found among those aged between 35 and 54. True, in this case, we find that 18-24-year-olds exhibit consistently higher levels of political interest, particularly in the politics of the wider world – a fascinating finding that is beyond the scope of this report to explore. That said, the main conclusion to draw here is that the very youngest cohort among the electorate display similar levels and, indeed, patterns of political interest to those found among most other younger and indeed middle-aged members of the Welsh electorate.

3.3. Political knowledge

Political knowledge and political engagement are clearly related, if in inevitably complex ways. Thus, high levels of political knowledge would tend to suggest – or be linked to – high levels of political engagement. Indeed, high levels of political knowledge may also be regarded as a pre-requisite for at least some forms of political engagement. Conversely, low levels of political knowledge are likely to be associated with low levels of political engagement and render some forms of political engagement almost completely impossible.

Data from the Welsh Election Survey allow us to compare levels of political knowledge among different age cohorts within the Welsh electorate. We focus, first, on survey respondents perceptions of their own levels of political knowledge. This is significant when we recall that a perceived lack of knowledge has been cited as a barrier to youth participation in the political system (McAllister, 2020). But side by side with this subjective measure of political knowledge it is also important to consider actual levels of political knowledge. Given that other studies have identified what might be termed a lack of procedural knowledge of devolved politics among young people in Wales (see McAllister et al., 2020; Huebner et al., 2021; Loughran et al., 2021b), we investigate knowledge in three areas: knowledge of the electoral system, knowledge of devolved competencies, and knowledge of political party leaders.

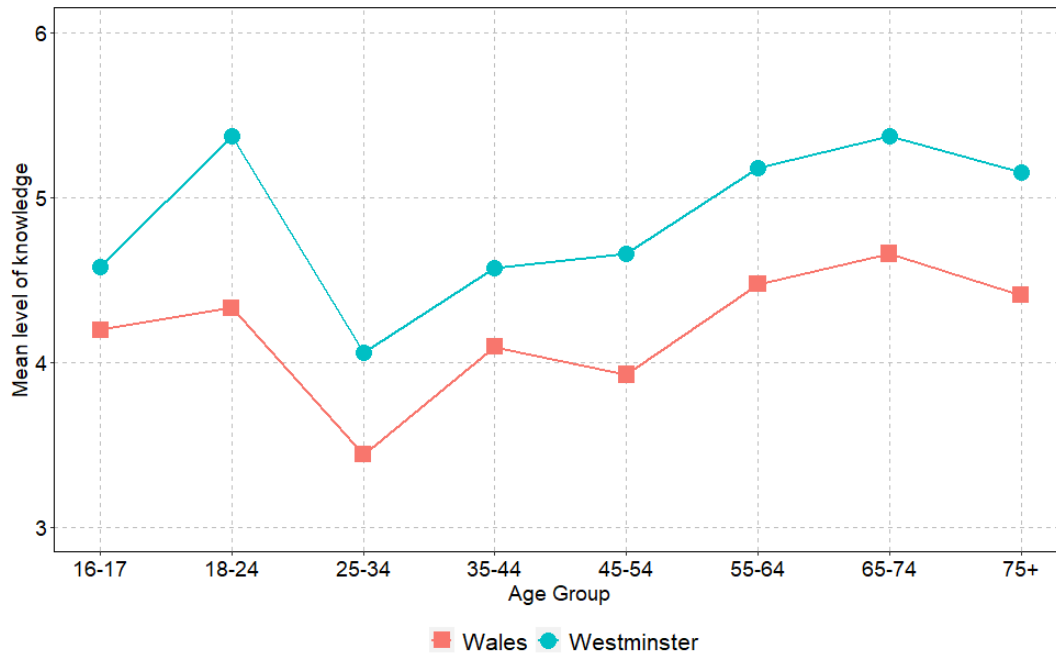
3.3.1. Perceived knowledge

To capture levels of perceived knowledge, the WES asks respondents to rate their own knowledge of Westminster and Welsh politics on a scale from 0 (very little knowledge) to 10 (a very large amount of knowledge). It is important to underline that, as a self-reported measure, there is no necessary connection between any given respondent's reported perceived knowledge and their actual knowledge of politics at either level. Evaluation of knowledge might well reflect misplaced confidence or, indeed, an equally mistaken lack of confidence. Nonetheless, given that – as already mentioned – a perceived lack of knowledge has been cited as a barrier for youth participation, so it remains important to consider how patterns of perceived knowledge relate to age.

We report the mean results across our age groups in Figure 3. There are two key points to note. First, perceived knowledge of Westminster politics is consistently higher than knowledge of Welsh politics. Beyond that, however – our second point – differences between the age cohorts are less linear than our previous findings might have led us to expect. Indeed, it is respondents between the ages of 18 and 24 who are most confident of all about their knowledge of UK politics! Once again, however, and returning to our particular focus 16- and 17-year-olds, it is clear that their levels of perceived knowledge are akin to those of most voters aged below 54. Indeed, as far as knowledge of Welsh politics is concerned, mean levels of knowledge among the very youngest cohort in our sample are not too dissimilar to those of the very oldest.

Figure 3

Perceived knowledge in UK and Welsh politics in Wales by age



Source: Welsh Election Study 2021 ((N=4,019 [Welsh]; N=4,031 [Westminster]) • 0: Very little knowledge; 10: Very large amount of knowledge

3.3.2. Knowledge of the electoral system

Moving to more objective measures of political knowledge, we shall start by exploring knowledge of the electoral system that was used in the 2021 Senedd election (sic). To do this, we will examine the responses of our survey respondents to three statements about the electoral system:

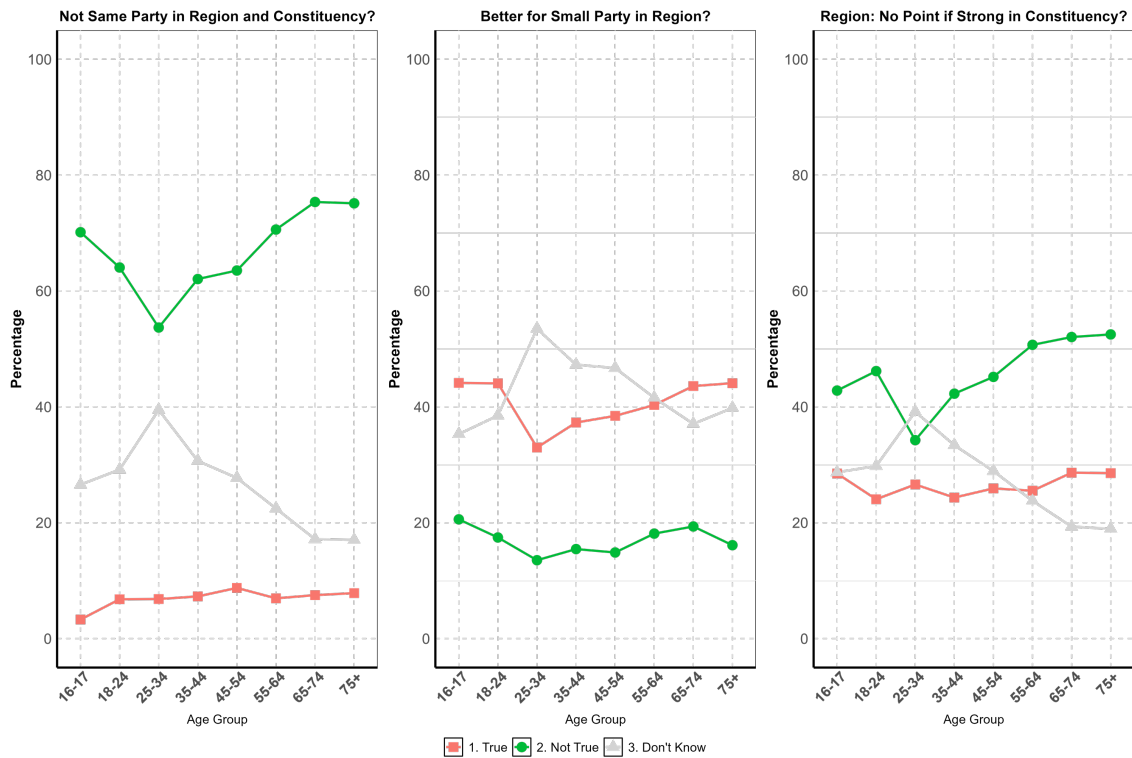
“You can’t vote for the same party in both the constituency and the regional list vote”

“If you’re going to vote for a small party, you’re better off choosing it in the regional list vote than in the constituency vote”

“Where a party is very strong in a constituency, there isn’t much point voting for it on the regional list.”

The possible response options were (probably or definitely) true or (probably or definitely) not true, or ‘don’t know’. Figure 4 sets out the result.

Figure 4
Knowledge of the electoral system in Wales



Source: Welsh Election Study 2021 (N=4,087)

Some caution is required before we place too much weight on the responses to these statements. In only one of the three cases – “You can’t vote for the same party in both the constituency and the regional list vote” – is there a definitively correct answer (in this case ‘not true’). The other two statements, focused on the interplay between constituency and regional ballots and the relative strength of the different parties, admit to more nuanced responses. Thus, while smaller parties do indeed tend to perform better on the regional lists, there are examples where smaller parties have won constituency seats despite a lack of wider regional support (e.g. in 2003 devolved election the candidate for the ‘John Marek Independent Party’ – John Marek! – triumphed in the Wrexham constituency.) Moreover, while in three of the five electoral regions in Wales, the strength of Labour party at the constituency level means that it is nigh-on impossible for it to win regional list seats no matter how many votes it receives on the regional ballot, this is not the case in the other two regions. Meanwhile the other parties can and do win both constituency and regional list seats across the country.

With this caveating in mind, it is comforting that at least a majority of the Welsh electorate in each age-group are indeed aware that it was possible to vote for the same party in the constituency and regional ballots. Perhaps unsurprisingly, responses to the statements focused on the likely inter-relationship between each ballot in Wales’ (then) version of the Alternative Member electoral system are less definitive. Nonetheless, what is striking from our

current perspective that 16- and 17-year-olds are among the most knowledgeable of all age groups about the operation of the voting system at the devolved level as well as the regional ballot tending to be the most favourable context for smaller parties.

3.3.3. Knowledge of devolved competences

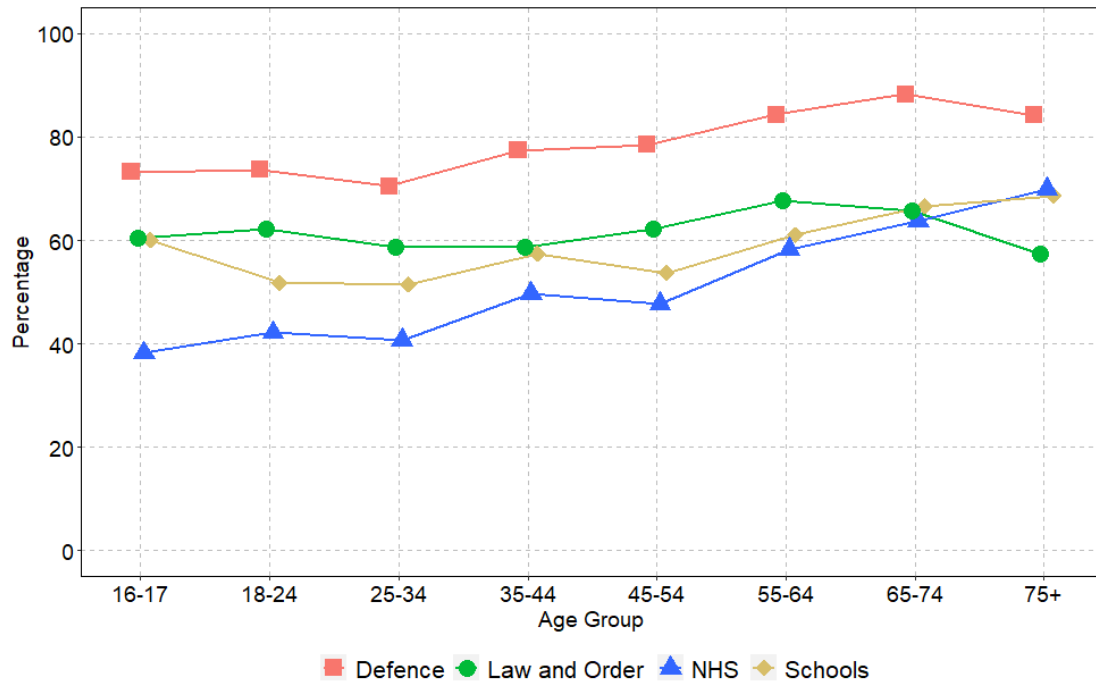
We also find that knowledge of devolved competences among 16- and 17-year-olds compares favourably (for the most part) with other age groups. Here, respondents were asked to indicate the level of government that they felt had the most influence on the NHS, schools, law and order, and defence and foreign policy in Wales. In each case, respondents were given four options: the Welsh Government, the UK Government at Westminster, Local councils in Wales, or don't know. We present these results in Figure 5.

Across three items (education, defence, and law and order), we observe few differences between 16-and-17-year-olds and the middle-aged cohorts. Most 16- and 17-year-olds can correctly identify that the Welsh Government is responsible for education, while the UK Government is responsible for law and order and defence. As with our previous results, the levels of knowledge in these areas compare favourably with the response rates for those under 55.

The only area where 16- and 17-year-olds are obviously less knowledgeable is with regards the NHS. Health policy is devolved in Wales with responsibility for the NHS falling under the remit of the Welsh Government. Huebner et al. (2021) argue that this became clear to some young people due to the implementation of different restrictions to tackle COVID-19 in Wales and England. However, we find that most younger people are either unsure or incorrect in their beliefs of who controls the NHS in Wales. By contrast most of those aged over 55 correctly attribute responsibility for the NHS to the Welsh Government. Yet, despite the age gradient in knowledge of the NHS here, it is important to emphasise that 16-and-17-year-olds are still not uniquely unsure or ignorant: their responses are very similar to those aged 34 and below.

Figure 5

Percentage of respondents correctly identifying the level of government responsible for each policy area



Source: Welsh Election Study 2021 (N=4,229)

3.3.4 Knowledge of party leaders

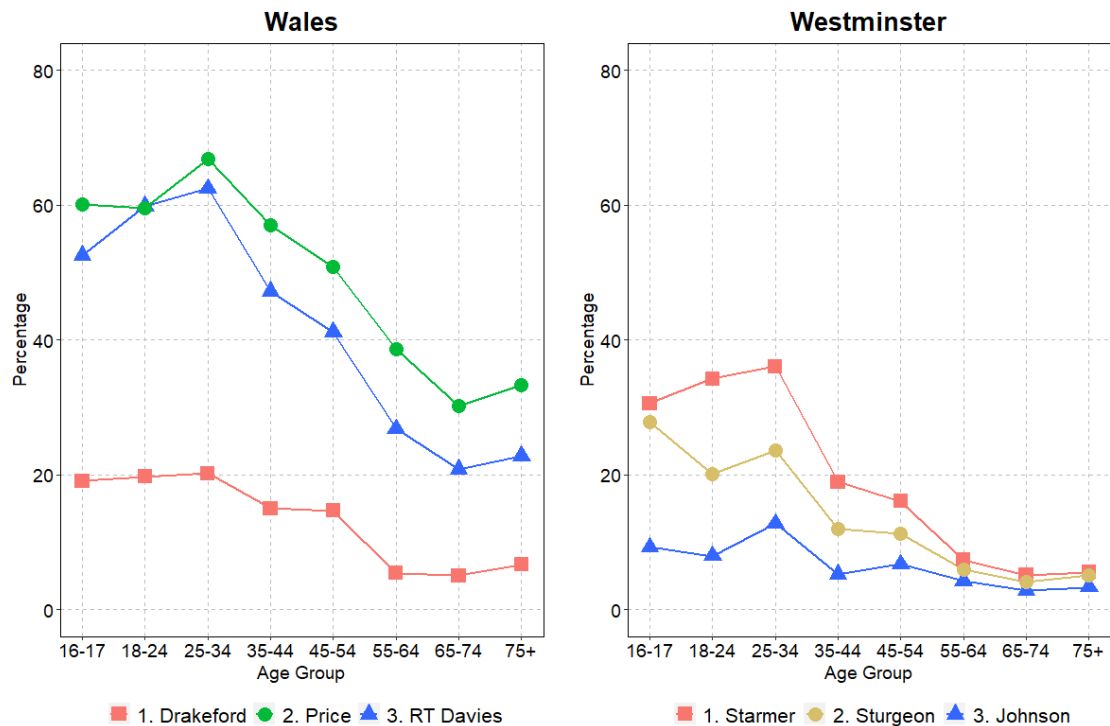
To explore knowledge of party politics in Wales, we turn to a question in the Welsh Election Study focused on attitudes towards the main political actors. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate whether they liked the then leaders of Welsh Labour (Mark Drakeford), the Welsh Conservatives (Andrew RT Davies), and Plaid Cymru (Adam Price), as well as the then leaders of the UK Conservatives (Boris Johnson), the UK Labour party (Keir Starmer), and the Scottish National Party (Nicola Sturgeon), by locating themselves on a scale from 0 (strongly dislike) to 10 (strongly like), or they could respond “don’t know.” As a proxy for knowledge about the party leaders, we report the levels of “don’t know” responses by age in Figure 6.

As is clear, even if broadly comparable to that of the other younger age groups, knowledge of party leaders is relatively low among 16- and 17-year-olds. The proportion of an age group responding “don’t know” only starts to decline once we reach those aged 35 and above. Knowledge is lowest for the devolved leaders, with a majority of 16- and 17-year-olds reporting that they didn’t know what they thought about Adam Price or Andrew RT Davies. It is beyond the scope of this report to address why this is the case, but these results are clearly

consistent with the lower perceived knowledge of Welsh politics (compared to Westminster) that was reported above. In 2021, Mark Drakeford was an exception, reflecting his very high profile during the pandemic (see Larner et al., 2022).

Figure 6

Percentage reporting “don’t know” when asked whether they like/dislike a party leader in Wales



Source: Welsh Election Study 2021 (N=4,229)

Having reported responses by age group to a number of different measures of political knowledge, how are we to assess the position of 16- and 17-year-olds? Clearly, there is considerable room for improvement! Knowledge of party leaders is, for example, disappointing. That said, it is equally clearly the case that this newly enfranchised group are far from being uniquely disinterested in or unknowledgeable about our political system. Rather they look very similar to other younger – and on some measures, even middle aged – members of the electorate. In fact, on some measures, they are among the most knowledgeable. To repeat: there is clearly no place for complacency here. That said these results should give some comfort to those who supported the introduction of votes-at-16. After all, the data we have reported reflect the situation as it pertained without the effective education programme that supporters of voting reform had advocated. Our results should act as both a baseline – and a challenge – for assessing the effect of votes-at-16 in future elections.

4 Key differences among 16- and 17-year-olds

Thus far we have focused on 16- and 17-year-olds as a single collective group in order to compare their levels of political engagement with that of other age cohorts at the time of the 2021 election. In the following section, we will explore differences within this group by focusing on three areas that we might expect to be associated with different levels of political engagement, namely involvement in the discussion of politics, gender, and the Welsh language.

4.1. Discussing politics

Informal discussions have been identified as one of the key mechanisms for increasing youth political engagement (see Zeglovits and Zandonella 2013; Eichhorn 2014; 2018; Eichhorn and Hübner 2023). One of the hopes of those who advocated votes-at-16 in Wales was that the extension of franchise and the development of an associated education programme would encourage more discussions of this kind. In the event, the impact of the pandemic almost certainly made it more far more difficult for informal conversations about politics – including the Senedd election to take place than might otherwise have been the case. Indeed, only just over a quarter (28 percent) of those 16- and 17-year-olds who participated in the Welsh Election Study reported that they had discussed votes-at-16 with someone at school, or in a youth club or society.

However limited opportunities for political discussions turned out to be, is there any evidence that discussing votes-at-16 was associated with greater political engagement? We address this question by comparing interest and likelihood to vote in the 2021 Senedd election among those that did and did not discuss votes-at-16 (see Figure 7). Overall, the 16- and 17-year-olds that discussed votes-at-16 were more politically engaged than those who did not, both in terms of their levels of interest and likelihood to vote. Indeed, in both cases, the results for those that discussed politics are comparable to those aged 55-64, with only the oldest age groups reporting higher levels of engagement.⁷

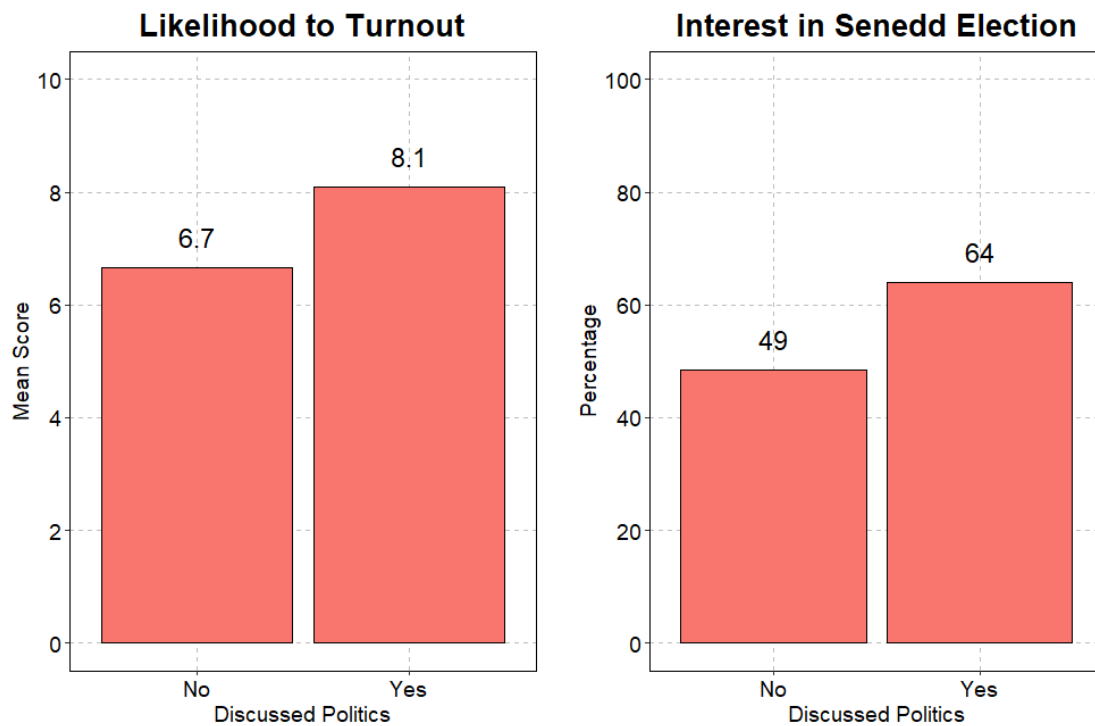
It is important to stress that we cannot conclude from these data that there existed some straightforward causal link between discussing politics and becoming more engaged in politics and the political process. The data that we are using is cross-sectional (i.e., taken from one point in time), so we cannot rule out the possibility that those that who reported that they had discussed vote-at-16 were already more politically engaged beforehand. This is certainly the implication of existing research that appears to suggest that efforts to engage young

⁷ See Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

people in 2021 failed to reach beyond those who were already engaged (Loughran et al., 2021a; Huebner et al., 2021). Nonetheless, our findings will serve as a baseline for studies of the impact of votes-at-16 in elections held in – hopefully – very different circumstances to those of the 2021 Senedd election.

Figure 7

Political engagement among 16-and-17-year-olds who discussed votes-at-16 and those who did not in Wales



Source: Welsh Election Study 2021 (N=195)

4.1. Differences in gender

Historically, women have been more likely to vote than men (see Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010). On the other hand, there is some evidence that women have lower levels of political knowledge than men (Verba et al. 1997; Delli Carpini and Keeter 2000), although subsequent research by Wolak (2020) has shown that, in this case, this gender-gap originates in from the fact the men are more willing than women to guess when they are not completely sure of the answer.

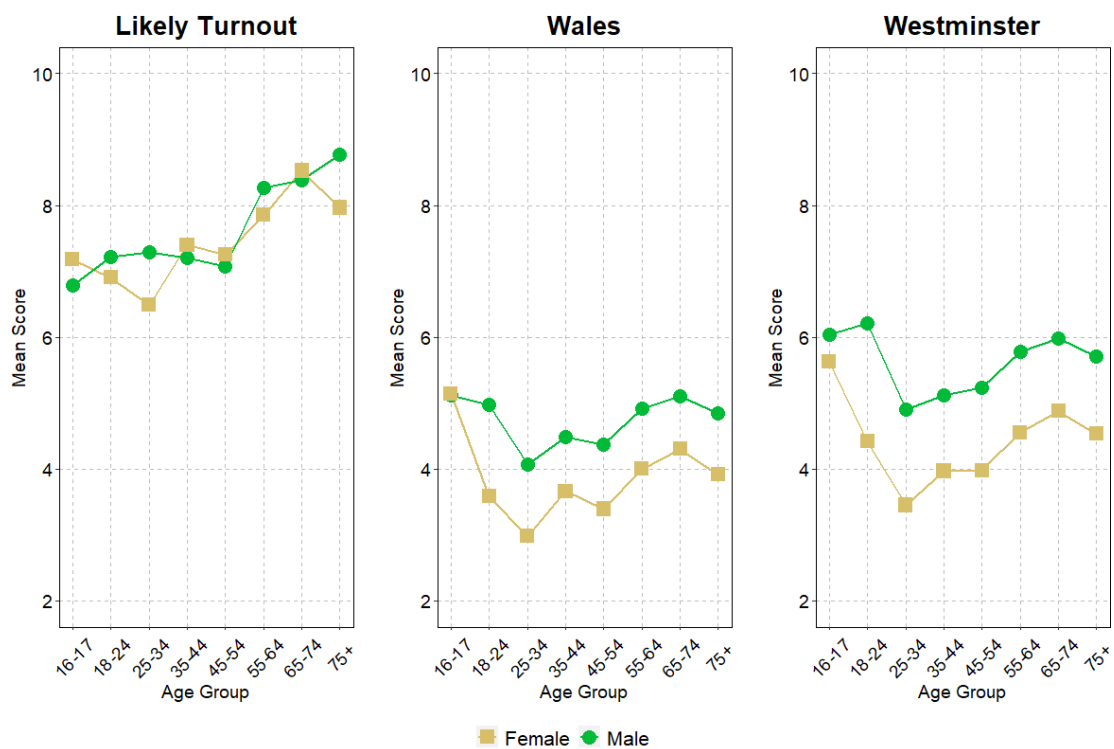
In Figure 8 we compare likelihood to vote and perceived knowledge (in Welsh and Westminster politics) among men and women across all age groups. Overall, we find

considerable gaps in perceived knowledge between men and women across all age groups except among 16- and 17-year-olds. These results are consistent with previous research arguing that the gender gap in perceived knowledge emerges when women enter university i.e., after they turn 18 (Fox and Lawless, 2014). In the case of likelihood vote, there does not appear to be a consistent pattern of difference between males and females across the age groups. While female 16 and 17 years were more likely declare their intention to vote than their male equivalents, the difference was slight.

Again, given both the unique circumstances of the 2021 election as well as the fact that these data represent no more than a single snapshot, it would be unwise to read too much into our findings. Again, their main utility is a baseline for future studies. But clearly, if – over time – the introduction of votes-at-16 can contribute to closing the gender gap in perceived knowledge, then this would represent a very positive development.

Figure 8

Perceived knowledge in UK and Welsh politics in Wales by age and gender



Source: Welsh Election Study 2021 (N=4,019 [Welsh], N=4,031 [Westminster]).

4.1. Differences in language and medium of education

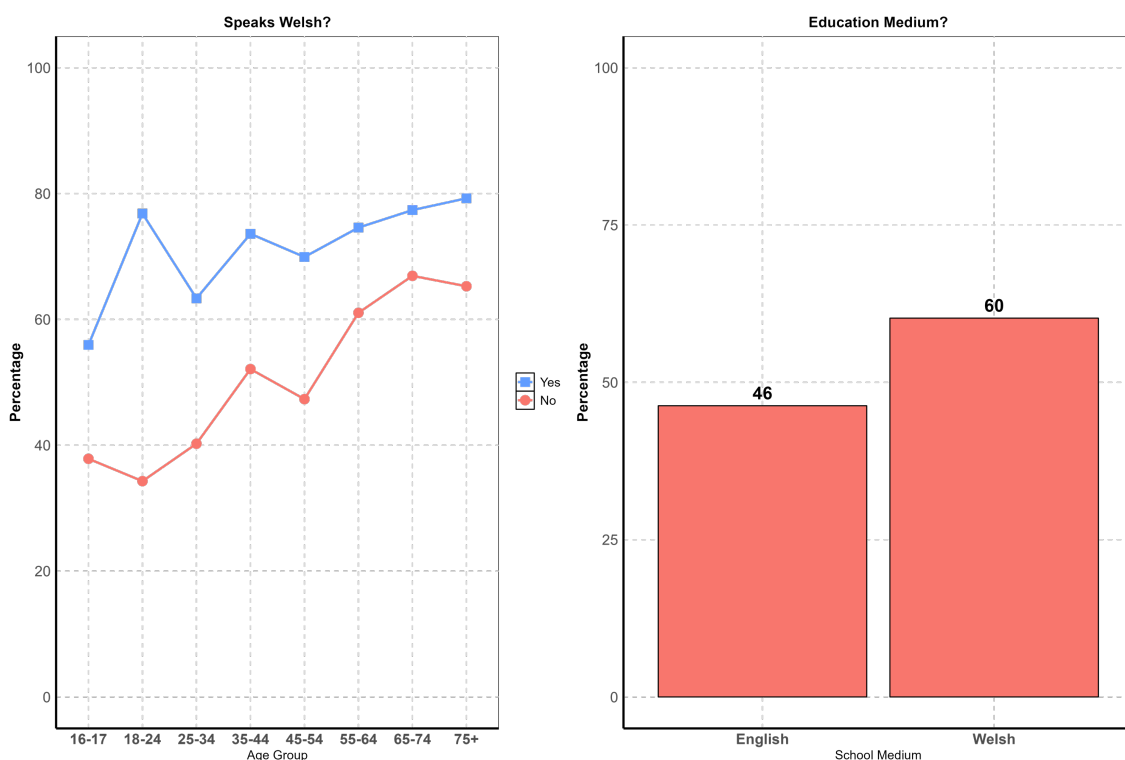
There is reason to expect those young people who speak Welsh to be more engaged in Welsh politics, this because they are more likely to regard Wales as a civic space (see Huebner et al.,

2021). Differences might well have been particularly pronounced in 2021 because of impact of the pandemic on the educational programme that had been intended to accompany the extension of the franchise to 16 and 17 years olds – a programme, which (had it been in place) might have served to raise levels of engagement among those who don’t speak Welsh and attend in English-medium schools.

Here we use data from the Welsh Election Study to examine both the relationship between the ability to speak Welsh and interest in the 2021 Senedd election across all age group as well as – among 16- and 17-year-olds – the relationship between the medium of education and interest in the devolved election (Figure 9). It should be noted that the WES asks respondents whether they speak Welsh fluently, speak some Welsh, or speak none at all. In order to facilitate analysis in relatively small subgroups of the overall sample, we recode those with any Welsh language ability into a single category of Welsh speakers. With regards medium of education, the WES asked 16- and 17-year-olds whether they (or any of their family) attend Welsh-medium (18 percent) or English-medium schools (75 percent).⁸

Figure 9

Interest in the 2021 Senedd election by age and Welsh language and by school medium



Source: Welsh Election Study 2021 (Language, N=4,229; School Medium, N=195) • Note: Political interest includes those who say they were either fairly or very interested in the 2021 Senedd election.

⁸ Seven percent of our 16 and 17 year old sample chose not to disclose this information.

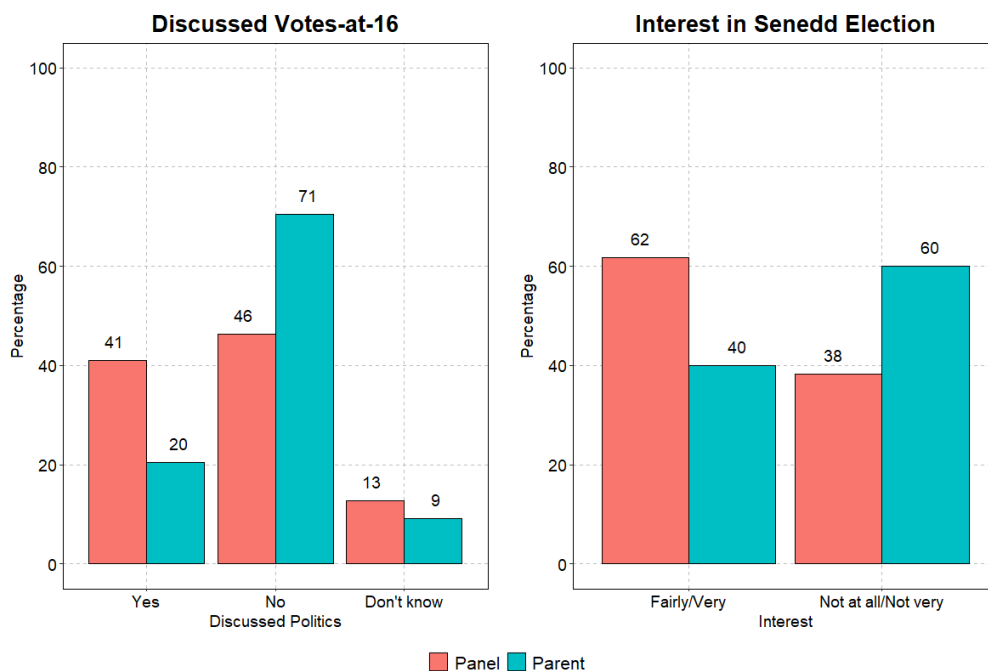
Overall, there is a clear association between language and engagement with the Senedd election across all age groups, including among 16 and 17-year-olds (Figure 9). Similarly, those that attended a Welsh-medium school were also more interested in the 2021 Senedd election than those that attended an English-medium school. While we again must caution against reading too much into these findings (for reasons already adduced), they nonetheless suggest that efforts to improve youth political engagement ahead of the next 2026 need to pay particular attention those who do not speak Welsh.

5 Differences in Sampling Methods

This report represents the first and, so far, only attempt to examine the impact of votes-at-16 in Wales using quantitative methods. While previous studies (e.g., Huebner et al., 2021) have examined votes-at-16 in Wales via qualitative methods like focus groups, this report has been able to draw on survey data including a (relatively) large sub-sample of 16 and 17-year-olds. When samples are representative, quantitative studies are particularly useful because their findings can often be generalised to the whole population of interest. In this case, however, it is important that we acknowledge some of limitations arising from ways in which our data collected.

As already mentioned, our study captures 16- and 17-year-olds via two sampling methods. While around a third (36 percent) were recruited directly to the YouGov panel, the remainder (64 percent) were recruited indirectly to the panel via their parents who themselves were already panel members. In order understand the potential effects of these sampling methods, Figure 10 compares the responses of both of these groups to questions probing whether or not they had discussed votes-at-16 and their relative levels of interest in the Senedd election.

Figure 10
Political engagement among 16-and-17-year-olds who were recruited directly to the YouGov panel or via their parents



Source: Welsh Election Study 2021 (N=195)

As can be clearly seen, there are considerable differences in the response patterns observed depending on the method of recruitment into the sample. Those recruited directly into the panel were far more likely to have discussed votes-at-16 prior to the 2021 Senedd election and were also far more likely to say that they were interested in the Senedd election itself, than those who were recruited into the panel indirectly, via their parent(s). It is likely that this indicates a selection effect: those who sign up to the YouGov panel are more likely to be politically engaged than those who participated at the behest of their parent(s). Given that this was the first time that anyone has sought to explore the views of 16- and 17-year-olds in the context of an election survey conducted in Wales – and, indeed, that most analogous work e.g. polling UK level voting intentions, continues to focus on the those who are 18+ years old – it is perhaps to be expected that constructing a suitable sample proved challenging. That said, future quantitative research in this area will clearly need to refine and improve the methods of recruiting younger people into surveys.

6 Conclusion

We have stressed time and again during this report that the first experience of votes-at-16 in Wales must be understood in the context of a global pandemic with no modern precedent. Supporters of franchise reform were always clear that an allied education programme would be required in order to reap what they regarded as its potential benefits. In the event, however, the catastrophic impact of Covid-19 on the education system meant that any efforts to encourage engagement – at best – only reached those who were already interested. As such, any judgements on the overall impact of the extension of the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds will inevitably have to be postponed. Indeed, given that proponents of votes-at-16 argue that the policy will influence engagement in the long-term, some of the impacts may only become noticeable over the course of several electoral cycles. As such more research – over an extended period – will be required before any definitive judgement can be entered. The present study should be considered a baseline for future work.

That said, whatever the inevitable limitations, our findings nonetheless offer a number of important pointers for those interested in the votes-at-16 policy. First our analysis provides further evidence that knowledge of devolved politics remains relatively limited in Wales. Across all age groups, people in Wales tend to believe that they know more about politics at Westminster than they do about politics in Wales; our data also suggest that there are significant gaps in actual knowledge, for example with regards political leaders at the devolved level (with the significant exception – in 2021 – of Mark Drakeford.)

Second, within this overall context, we find that levels of engagement and knowledge among 16- and 17-year-olds are rather similar to those of other younger age cohorts (and, on occasion, some middle-aged members of the electorate.) Likelihood to vote, levels political interest, and levels of political knowledge are broadly similarly similar among all voters under 55, including 16- and 17-year-olds. The latter are certainly not somehow uniquely disinterested or ignorant. In this context it is perhaps worth bearing in mind (Labour MP) Cat Smith’s argument that “there are many people in their thirties and forties who don’t know enough about politics to vote...but we don’t deny them the vote because of it” (cited in Tonge et al. 2021: 534). This may not perhaps be the most resounding argument in favour of votes-at-16, but empirically at least, the point stands.

Thirdly, focusing on differences in levels of political engagement within the 16- and 17-year-old cohort, we find that gender-based differences are, in fact, at their smallest within this age group. We also find, however, that the association between the ability to speak Welsh and interest in devolved politics that we find across the broader electorate – with Welsh-speakers being far more likely to be interested in Welsh politics – is also reproduced among the

youngest age cohort. Furthermore, we identify an association between the medium of education (Welsh or English) and political interest and engagement at the devolved level.

Fourth, in the context of previous research that argues that discussing politics encourages political participation among young people (Eichhorn, 2014; Eichhorn and Hübner, 2023), we also find that discussing votes-at-16 was associated with being more interested in – and being more likely to participate in – devolved politics among 16- and 17-year-olds. It remains the case, however, that this may simply reflect a greater propensity to talk about politics among those who are already interested in the subject as opposed to be a consequence of the votes-at-16. While ‘more research is needed’ may well be something of a cliché in academic reports, in nonetheless remains that case that we are simply not in a position do more than note this relationship and encourage future researchers to dig deeper! In doing so, future researchers will also need to find ways of overcoming problems with data collection among 16- and 17-year-olds whose consequences we have also outlined here.

As we have noted, given the circumstances of the 2021 Senedd election, our study is best considered as a baseline for future studies into the impact of votes-at-16 on Welsh politics. Nonetheless, even if any conclusions are necessarily tentative, we believe that they have significant implications for those charged with preparing for the 2026 devolved election, as well as other researchers interested in the impact of extending the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds.

Based on our findings we, therefore, make the following five recommendations.

1. It is vital that the 2026 election is treated as **a fresh start for votes-at-16**, particularly in terms of the promotion of a coordinated education programme to ensure that potential benefits for political participation of votes-at-16 are maximised.
2. **Work to improve political literacy about devolved politics in Wales remains a high priority.** Our findings indicate that knowledge of the electoral system and party politics is relatively low across all age groups. These findings are particularly concerning given the significant changes to the electoral system for the Senedd set to be introduced in 2026.
3. Even entering all necessary caveats, the evidence of **lower engagement in devolved politics among those do not speak Welsh and those who attend English-medium schools is a cause of concern.** More positively, however, it should also be recognised that it is among these young people in particular that the potential benefits of a coordinated education programme associated with votes-at-16 is most obvious.
4. Our findings underline not only that more **research into political engagement among young people in Wales is required**, but that this research needs to be **maintained over the longer-term**, not least in order to determine whether or not the introduction of votes-at-16 is having the desired effect over time.

5. Survey-based research into the perspectives and experiences of younger people is indispensable if we are to understand the impact of votes-at-16. As such, **more work is required to ensure the existence of accurate and reliable samples of those 16- and 17-year-olds enfranchised to vote in Senedd and local elections** but not (at present, at least) in UK general elections.

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