

DEBATE/DEBATE: A LOOK AT ADOLESCENCE FROM THREE PERSPECTIVES/
UNA MIRADA HACIA LA ADOLESCENCIA DESDE TRES PERSPECTIVAS

Arguments and Evidence in the Debate on Lowering the Voting Age to 16

Argumentaciones y evidencias en el debate sobre rebajar a 16 años la edad mínima para votar

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ABSTRACT

This article explores some of the arguments and empirical evidence surrounding the debate over lowering the voting age to 16. Drawing on political philosophy and the sociology of childhood, it combines a narrative review of studies from countries where this electoral right has been fully or partially recognised with a statistical analysis of political attitudes in Spain, and makes the case for reducing the voting age further. Empirical research suggests that adolescents are capable of making informed political decisions and extending suffrage to this group could increase their interest in politics, boost electoral participation in the medium term and strengthen trust in democratic institutions. Nevertheless, both adult and young populations in Spain remain reluctant to support an extension of the right to vote.

KEYWORDS: political participation; adolescence; childhood; voting age reform; electoral behaviour; youth political engagement; democracy; enfranchisement at 16.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo explora algunas de las argumentaciones y evidencias empíricas acerca de cuestiones que circulan en el debate sobre rebajar a 16 años la edad mínima para votar. Se ha llevado a cabo una revisión bibliográfica narrativa de ensayos e investigaciones realizadas en países donde está reconocido total o parcialmente este derecho electoral y se ha complementado con un análisis estadístico de opiniones políticas en España. Desde la filosofía política o la sociología de la infancia se argumenta en favor de reducir aún más la edad del voto. De la investigación empírica se concluye que las personas adolescentes son capaces de tomar decisiones políticas y que esta medida electoral podría aumentar su interés por la política, la participación electoral a medio plazo o la confianza en la democracia. Sin embargo, la población española adulta y joven sigue mostrándose reacia a la ampliación del derecho al voto.

PALABRAS CLAVE: participación política; adolescencia; infancia; rebaja edad del voto; elecciones; participación juvenil; democracia; 16 años.

1. The political participation of children and adolescents

The participation of persons under the age of 18 is a right recognised in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and elaborated in General Comment No. 20 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the realisation of the rights of the child during adolescence (2016). Article 12 of the Convention addresses the right to express opinions on matters that affect children, Article 13 covers freedom of expression and information, Article 14 addresses freedom of thought and conscience, Article 15 covers freedom of association and assembly and Article 31 recognises the right to participate in cultural, recreational and leisure activities.

Despite this international recognition of the right to participation, children and adolescents are rarely identified as political agents – a further instance of adultcentrism, or adultism, in various contemporary societies (Liebel, 2022; Morales, 2024). Adultism refers to the asymmetry of power between age groups and its explicit legitimisation, which entails the separation or exclusion of children and adolescents from various areas of social life, such that they are no longer considered full subjects (Rodríguez Pascual, 2025). Political adultism may therefore be defined as discrimination against these groups in political affairs – at the structural, institutional and interpersonal levels – on the grounds of their age (Preclik, 2024). It is underpinned by social representations of childhood: the notion that children are the property of the family, which therefore has the right to determine what they may do or learn; the belief that they are still developing and consequently have a reduced capacity for reflection or the assumption of responsibilities; and the idea that they are the citizens of tomorrow, whose participation may therefore be deferred (Casas, 2010).

Within political adulthood, two phases may be distinguished: an initial period of disenfranchisement and electoral exclusion affecting those under the age of 18 (or 16 in some countries), and a subsequent phase in which the right to vote has been granted but the political capacity to represent or govern is not yet recognised (Preclik, 2024). During the period of electoral exclusion, children and adolescents can participate politically through other institutionalised mechanisms and bodies – most commonly councils (Trillo and Novella, 2011). These operate primarily at the local level, although they also exist at the provincial, regional, national and supranational levels.¹

There are also forms of non-institutionalised, or grassroots, political participation in which the agency of children and adolescents is undeniable: in social movements such as Fridays for Future (Wahlström *et al.*, 2019), in organisations of working children and adolescents (Liebel, 2019) and in student mobilisations.

Those under the age of 18 are affected by the decisions of elected representatives and, as members of democratic societies, should be able to have a say in who occupies such positions (Runciman, 2021). Their needs and interests must be reflected in the regulations and policies that concern them; they should therefore have the right to influence these directly, and not only through mobilisations or protests – which may entail risks to their physical integrity or their freedom (UNICEF, 2025) – or through advisory bodies, which have been criticised for their lack of autonomy, their limited capacity for political influence, and, ultimately, for diverting attention from the claim for the right to vote (Liebel, 2022).

2. Vote at 16: facts and intentions

The first country in the Americas to lower the voting age to 16 was Cuba in 1976, followed by Nicaragua in 1984, Brazil in 1988, Ecuador in 2008 and Argentina in 2012 (Sanhueza, 2020). In the United States, 16-year-olds may vote in certain municipal elections in Maryland (National Youth Rights Association, 2025).

In Europe, Austria was the first country to lower the voting age to 16 across all types of election – municipal, regional, state, national and European – in 2007, followed by Malta in 2018. In Germany, the United Kingdom, Estonia and Switzerland, 16-year-olds may vote only in certain territories or in specific types of elections (Huebner and Sanhueza, 2024; World Population Review, 2025). In Germany, 16-year-olds voted for the first time in a state election in 1996; most German states now recognise this right in municipal and state elections², though the minimum voting age for general elections remains 18 (Leininger *et al.*, 2023). In the United Kingdom, residents of Scotland have been able to vote at 16 since the 2014 independence referendum, and those in Wales since 2020, though this right is currently limited to local elections and elections to their respective parliaments (Eichhorn, 2018); it is anticipated that 16- and 17-year-olds will be eligible to vote in the next UK general election (Johnston,

2025). In Switzerland, 16-year-olds have been able to vote in cantonal and municipal elections in the canton of Glarus since 2007, though not elsewhere in the country (Gut *et al.*, 2025). In Estonia, 16-year-olds voted for the first time in the municipal elections of 2017.³

In 2006, the European Youth Forum adopted a resolution on the right to vote at 16, invoking arguments including the promotion of democratic participation among adolescents, the influence such a measure would have on the development of robust youth policies, the need to achieve a degree of democratic balance between younger and older generations in the context of demographic ageing, and the importance of recognising the rights – and not only the responsibilities – of adolescents who are already able to work and pay taxes (Youth Forum Jeunesse, 2006).

In 2011, Resolution 1826 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe made the case for recognising the right to vote from the age of 16 as a means of increasing electoral participation and broadening democratic engagement. It argued that the measure would foster awareness of social responsibilities among adolescents, and called for the integration of democratic citizenship education into school curricula and for greater adolescent participation in school governance (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2011).

In 2022, the European Parliament adopted a legislative resolution recommending that the minimum voting age across the European Union be unified at 16 (European Parliament, 2022). In 2024, 16- and 17-year-olds in Germany, Belgium, Austria and Malta, as well as 17-year-olds in Greece, were eligible to vote in the European Parliament elections (European Parliament, 2023).

In Spain, the proposal to lower the voting age to 16 is included in the Youth Strategy 2030 (Ministry of Social Rights and 2030 Agenda, 2022), which, alongside measures to promote participatory education and renew the democratic system, advances this electoral reform as a means of addressing the socio-economic disadvantage faced by young people in Spain.

3. Questions and answers, arguments and evidence

Voting at 16 is already a reality in a number of countries, and a body of research and scientific evidence has accumulated in relation to several of the arguments circulating in the debate over lowering the voting age. Approaching the subject from an interdisciplinary standpoint, this article reviews the findings of that research and explores a range of theoretical reflections in order to address questions that commonly arise in this debate.

In methodological terms, the article draws on two complementary approaches. The first is a narrative bibliographic review conducted using the databases and search tools provided by ProQuest, Elicit and Scopus, among others. The second is a bivariate

statistical analysis of data from the May 2025 barometer of the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS, 2025) and the 2023 Youth Survey by the Youth Institute (INJUVE, 2025), employing cross-tabulation, Pearson's chi-square (χ^2) and the contingency coefficient (c) for categorical variables, and Spearman's rho (rs) for associations between quantitative and ordinal variables. Each statistic is accompanied by a single asterisk (*) where the significance level was below 0.05, or a double asterisk (**) where it was equal to or below 0.01.

The studies reviewed were conducted predominantly in countries where the right to vote at 16 exists in full, partial or experimental form (Bergh, 2013; Eichhorn, 2018; Eichhorn and Huebner, 2025; Franklin, 2020; Godli, 2015; Hooghe and Stiers, 2020; Huebner and Sanhueza, 2024; Johann *et al.*, 2022; Lang, 2023; Leininger *et al.*, 2023, 2024; Okolikj and Hooghe, 2023; Sanhueza, 2020; Stiers *et al.*, 2020; Toots and Idnurm, 2020; Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014; Zeglovits and Zandonella, 2013), and have been published chiefly in political science or psychology journals. They address a range of issues: the cognitive capacity of adolescents; their political maturity; the congruence of their voting choices; their trust in democracy; their ideological preferences and intergenerational political alignment; their long-term political and electoral participation; and their views on lowering the voting age.

The review of sociological and political philosophy essays and publications (Gaitán, 2009; Liebel, 2022; Moral, 2009; Munn, 2021; O'Neill, 2022; Runciman, 2021, 2023; Silbaugh, 2020; Wall, 2022; Weinstock, 2020) has served to enrich the article with reflections that challenge received wisdom regarding the right to vote in adolescence and expand the boundaries of what is considered possible.

Finally, the bivariate statistical analysis of data from the May 2025 barometer of the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS, 2025) and the 2023 Youth Survey by the Youth Institute (INJUVE, 2025) has made it possible to explore the political opinions and attitudes of adolescents, young people and adults in Spain – a country in which the right to vote at 16 is not yet recognised.

The findings of this review are structured as responses to questions arising from arguments for and against lowering the voting age to 16, as well as from the wider literature on the subject: Why 16 and not younger? What do citizens think about lowering the voting age? Are adolescents capable of making mature political decisions? Are there gaps in their political knowledge? Are they more susceptible to manipulation? Are they more likely to hold extreme or inconsistent views? Will being able to vote increase their interest in politics? Will it strengthen their trust in democracy and boost electoral participation? Can lowering the voting age contribute to democratic renewal? Will the interests of children and adolescents be better represented as a result?

3.1. Why 16 and not younger?

While practical efforts focus on lowering the voting age to 16, theoretical and philosophical arguments are more expansive, proposing minimum ages of 6 (Runciman, 2021), 12 (O'Neill, 2022) or 14, or even the abolition of age limits altogether (Wall, 2022; Weinstock, 2020), advocating a model of voluntary universal suffrage in which children may vote whenever they feel inclined to do so and wish to exercise that right (Munn, 2021).

With a view to reducing intergenerational inequalities and injustices, O'Neill (2022) proposes lowering the voting age to 12, which would redistribute power towards those who will be affected for longer by the economic and political decisions taken today. Guaranteeing their right to vote, he argues, would bring the interests of this age group more fully onto political agendas. O'Neill also contends that it is preferable for young people to cast their first vote while still within the educational system, where they receive training in political participation that supports the development of their capacities and political maturity. The case for 12 as the threshold rests on the view that preparation for democracy is a role of secondary rather than primary education, and on the significance that this stage has traditionally held in rites of passage to adulthood.

O'Neill (2022) raises another argument worth considering: the burden that would be placed on younger children to engage with political issues, when the 'best interests of the child' might instead call for freedom from civic responsibilities. For Weinstock (2020), there is little doubt that the votes of children benefit democracy; what is less clear is whether voting benefits the children themselves, insofar as it may undermine their right to be shielded from difficult decisions and electoral responsibilities. Yet, given that children and adolescents are not insulated from society, information and misinformation, he asks whether it is not worse for them to be aware of social problems while feeling that they cannot – or are not permitted to – do anything about them.

3.2. What do citizens think about lowering the voting age?

According to the May 2025 CIS barometer, 40.5% of the adult Spanish population disagrees with lowering the voting age to 16, and 38.8% strongly disagrees. Only 18.4% agree or strongly agree with the measure.

Analysis of the barometer database reveals weak but statistically significant associations between opinions on this issue and age ($r_s: -0.216^{**}$), educational attainment ($c: 0.211^{**}$), subjective social class ($c: 0.234^{**}$), and very weak associations with household income ($r_s: -0.150^{**}$), political ideology ($r_s: 0.180^{**}$) and gender ($c: 0.102^{**}$). Agreement with lowering the voting age to 16 is higher among older respondents and decreases with educational attainment and household income. There is also a somewhat higher degree of agreement among those on the left and those who identify as lower class, working class or poor. By contrast, the proportion of women who disagree with the measure is slightly higher than that of men.

The resistance of the adult Spanish population to lowering the voting age is clear; however, majority opinion could shift considerably, as has occurred in other contexts where this electoral reform has been implemented. Following the Scottish independence referendum, in which 16- and 17-year-olds were able to vote, support for lowering the voting age in all UK elections increased markedly (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021).

It might be expected that young people would be more favourably disposed towards lowering the voting age than adults. Although the most recent Youth Survey in 2023 (INJUVE, 2025) does not address this question, data from two decades ago show that 62% of people aged 15–17 in Spain viewed the measure favourably or very favourably (Moral, 2009), as did 50.4% of those aged 15–19, 33.7% of those aged 20–24 and 27.2% of those aged 25–29. In terms of gender, 37.2% of males aged 15–29 and 34.6% of females agreed with the measure. At the same time, most young people were inclined to agree that 16- to 18-year-olds do not have sufficient maturity to vote – a view more prevalent among girls (62.4%) than boys (55.8%) and less common among those aged 15–19 (45.5%). Among those aged 15–19, 53.6% considered that granting the vote at 16 would stimulate interest in politics and 44.5% that it would represent a significant advance for democracy; considerably lower proportions were recorded among those aged 20–29 (INJUVE, 2005).

In a recent survey of students aged 12 to 18 in state schools in the Metropolitan Area of Porto, Portugal, 40.4% fully agreed with lowering the voting age to 16 and 18.3% agreed. Agreement was higher among those aged 12 to 14 than among those aged 15 to 18. Among those in favour, the principal arguments centred on the maturity, awareness and sense of responsibility of adolescents, and, to a lesser extent, their right to have a say in their own future. Among those who opposed, immaturity was by far the most commonly cited objection (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023).

A study by Ooterhoff *et al.* (2022) in the United States surveyed a sample of respondents aged 16 and over on whether 16- and 17-year-olds should be able to vote. Among 16- and 17-year-olds, one third were in favour, one third were opposed and one third were unsure. The contrast with the adult population was stark: two thirds of adults were opposed and only 16% were in favour.

It is perhaps surprising that fewer than half of the adolescents surveyed agreed that their right to vote should be recognised. Hooghe and Stiers (2020) ask whether family political congruence may be one of the factors behind the limited advocacy for this electoral measure among adolescents – perhaps their political voices are not so far removed from those of their parents.

3.3. Are adolescents capable of making mature political decisions?

In the debate on lowering the voting age, arguments invoking the immaturity of children and adolescents or their inability to make political decisions are commonplace. Authors such as Wall (2022) argue that the electoral competence of children is better defined by the desire to vote than by maturity, knowledge or the ability to understand complex political issues. Adult voters, after all, are not required to demonstrate political ability or understanding. In Spain, for example, Organic Law 2/2018 extended the right to vote to all persons with intellectual disabilities, including those deprived of legal capacity and those in institutional care.

In the case of 16- and 17-year-olds, arguments about political immaturity have served as the starting hypothesis for a number of studies.

In 2011, a trial was conducted in 21 municipalities in Norway in which voting from the age of 16 was provisionally permitted. According to Godli (2015), levels of political maturity were lower among 16- and 17-year-olds than among 18-year-olds, despite the fact that turnout among the younger group was higher. By contrast, Icenogle *et al.* (2019), drawing on a sample from 11 countries, conclude that cognitive ability and logical thinking reach maturity at around the age of 16, while psychosocial maturity – or the capacity to regulate responses to emotional stimuli – may not be achieved until after the age of 18. According to these authors, 16-year-olds are sufficiently mature to make deliberative decisions in non-emotionally charged conditions.

Analysis of a Swiss survey of 16- to 25-year-olds on political participation finds that adolescents display levels of maturity comparable to those of young adults, greater willingness to vote in future elections and higher consumption of political information than those aged 24 to 25 (Gut *et al.*, 2025).

In the context of the 2021 German federal elections, Lang (2023) conducted an experiment comparing a sample of 16- and 17-year-olds with one of 18- to 75-year-olds to assess voting competence – defined as the quality or congruence of voting choices relative to political preferences. Excluding undecided voters from the analysis, the results show that the voting decisions of 16- and 17-year-olds are as consistent with their political preferences as those of the adult population, regardless of age.

In a similar vein, Stiers *et al.* (2020) analysed the ideological congruence of voting behaviour in a mock municipal election held in Ghent, Belgium, in 2018, involving adolescents aged 16 and 17 and using their parents as a comparison group. No differences were found in ideological congruence between adolescents and their parents. Nor was there a clear influence of socioeconomic position: adolescents with more books at home showed greater political knowledge, but those from more affluent family backgrounds did not.

In the US context, Ooterhoff *et al.* (2022) identify the main arguments against lowering the voting age to 16 as insufficient political knowledge, inadequate

cognitive ability, lack of political independence, limited political interest and insufficient life experience. The arguments in favour centre on adequate levels of political information, sufficient maturity, the social contract – the principle that those affected by political decisions should have a say in them – and the benefits for democracy in terms of increased participation and political interest. These authors find that 16- and 17-year-olds display greater elaboration of reasoning – drawing on multiple arguments – and greater complexity in integrating different perspectives for and against lowering the voting age than adults, perhaps because the measure concerns them directly.

3.4. Are there gaps in their political knowledge? Are they more susceptible to manipulation?

In the US context, Silbaugh (2020) argues that lowering the voting age to 16 would increase adolescents' exposure to political communication campaigns and could undermine institutional safeguards, parental oversight and supervision of their contacts with adults.⁴ Concern about the susceptibility of teenagers to manipulation is frequently anchored in their use of social media as sources of political information (Sanhueza, 2020). Yet this concern extends beyond vulnerability to political advertising; manipulation may also occur within the family. According to Weinstock (2020), democracy has its own mechanisms to offset the negative effects of voter ignorance, regardless of age. Regulation of the veracity and emotional manipulation of advertising directed at children already exists; polling stations could additionally be located in schools to help reduce susceptibility to parental influence.

Moreover, increasing turnout by lowering the voting age need not mean an increase in the uninformed electorate. On the contrary, mobilisation for electoral participation can itself motivate people to become informed about politics (Shineman, 2018). Leininger *et al.* (2024) find that German teenagers who are eligible to vote discuss politics more with their families and make greater use of a voting advice application, with this effect being more pronounced at 16 than at 18. They conclude that access to political information about an election is itself a function of having the right to vote in it.

Hooghe and Stiers (2020) find that 16- and 17-year-olds who participated in a mock local election in Ghent, Belgium, in 2018 discussed politics more with their families, in part because they were the subject of an experimental electoral mobilisation campaign. Frequent family discussions did not, however, increase ideological alignment within families, which was already considerable. The influence of families on adolescent participation is undeniable, whether through their level of political interest, their own electoral participation or the practical support they can provide in electoral registration processes (Huebner and Sanhueza, 2024). In the same context, Okolikj and Hooghe (2022) observe that children tend to share their parents' ideological orientations, particularly when they discuss politics regularly, and that this holds regardless of age

or whether they voted in the mock election. Family influence on voting is not confined to adolescence (Hooghe and Stiers, 2020), and family congruence is not always strong: in the Scottish referendum, more than 40% of adolescents voted differently from their parents (UNICEF, 2024).

Several studies have examined the role schools might play in counteracting misinformation and undue family or other political influence. Ribeiro *et al.* (2023) conclude that political education must be integrated into the school curriculum so that young people can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to exercise the right to vote in an informed and aware manner. According to Menezes *et al.* (2023), mock elections in schools are a useful pedagogical tool in this regard, though they do not appear to influence subsequent electoral participation.

3.5. Are they more likely to hold extreme or inconsistent views?

The political preferences of adolescents are also a source of concern for those who oppose lowering the voting age. Fears that young people would vote for extremist parties were already present in the debate preceding Austria's electoral reform (Wintersberger, 2007), and in Spain today the growing sympathy of young people for the far right has raised similar concerns (García *et al.*, 2020).

The results of the Ghent mock election do point to 16- and 17-year-olds having voted for more extremist parties than their parents, both on the right and on the left (Stiers *et al.*, 2020).

Historically, left-wing and centre-left parties have played a prominent role in campaigns to lower the voting age (Sanhueza, 2020), although this has not always benefited them electorally (Huebner and Sanhueza, 2024). In practice, adolescents have opted for the Green Party in several German elections, while in Austria they supported the right in the 2019 general election (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021).

Franklin's (2020) comparative analysis identifies greater political volatility among the adolescent population, as was evident in the Scottish independence referendum, where 16- and 17-year-olds, who had previously been less pro-independence than the general population, ultimately voted for independence in greater proportion (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021).

This volatility is in some respects connected to indecision. The experiment conducted by Lang (2023) during the 2021 German federal elections found a higher proportion of adolescents than adults who did not wish to vote and who did not know which party to vote for.

To examine the ideological preferences of adolescents in Spain, the 2023 Youth Survey (INJUVE, 2025) database was analysed. No correlation was found between age and ideological self-placement. However, when respondents are grouped into minors and adults, statistically significant differences (χ^2) of weak intensity emerge (c: 0.247**) in ideological self-placement, the most notable of which is the proportion who say they are unable to place themselves ideologically: 25.6% of those aged 15–17, compared with 5.2% of those aged 18–34.

3.6. Will being able to vote increase their interest in politics?

Lack of political interest among teenagers is another argument commonly invoked in the debate on lowering the voting age. One cannot help but ask to what extent this disinterest is genuine, at least in the Spanish context. Analysis of the 2023 Youth Survey database (INJUVE, 2025) reveals a striking disparity between the proportions of adolescents (43.3%) and young adults (16.3%) who report no interest whatsoever in politics – a statistically significant difference (χ^2) of weak intensity (c: 0.213**). Deeper analysis reveals further differences – though less pronounced – in the importance that adolescents and young people attach to certain democratic practices and in the trust they place in various institutions (Mann–Whitney U test). On average, 15- to 17-year-olds place less value on always voting in elections**,⁵ staying informed about government actions** and participating in political or social associations**. They also express greater trust in the security forces**, the European Union*, the United Nations* and the monarchy** than those aged 18 to 34.

In terms of political participation, adolescents are more likely than young adults never to have expressed their opinions to politicians or public officials; worn campaign badges or stickers; signed a petition; attended a strike, demonstration or protest; boycotted products for political reasons; made a donation to a political cause; or engaged in political debate online – differences that are statistically significant, though of very weak intensity. A higher proportion of adolescents have also never been active members of a political party (98.9%), nor participated in environmental, territorial defence or animal protection groups (94.6%), NGOs (93.3%) or student organisations (89.8%).

These findings raise the question of whether the limited interest among many adolescents in practices such as voting or following government affairs reflects, at least in part, their exclusion from electoral participation and other political rights, alongside other constraining factors such as family, economic and social dependence, which limit their freedom of action and political decision-making. Disinterest may be a consequence of the absence of meaningful opportunities to participate politically on equal terms. As Lourdes Gaitán puts it, ‘children’s disinterest in politics is explained by the fact that it is something they know is off limits to them’ (2009, p. 14).

Šerek *et al.* (2017) conclude that it is participation that drives political interest and efficacy, not the other way around. Their longitudinal study in the Czech Republic shows that participation in protests during adolescence predicts greater internal political efficacy – understood as interest in politics and belief in one’s capacity to participate – while participation in volunteering predicts greater external political efficacy, understood as confidence in the political system’s responsiveness to citizen demands. Participation in activities closer to representative democracy, however, does not predict political interest, commitment or confidence in one’s political capacity.

In Austria, Zeglovits and Zandonella (2013) analysed the political interest of a sample of adolescents in 2004 and 2008. In 2004, when they did not yet have the right to vote, political interest was more strongly shaped by the family environment and by gender, with boys showing greater interest. By 2008, after they had voted for the first time, political interest was significantly influenced by school, which also contributed to an increase in political knowledge. Gender differences in political knowledge persisted, with girls more likely to select the ‘don’t know’ option. The authors conclude that lowering the voting age fosters political interest in adolescence, both situational and individual – a result that was not replicated in the Norwegian trial, in which the right to vote was a one-off, experimental measure confined to the municipal level (Bergh, 2013).

Austria’s 2007 electoral reform, which lowered the voting age to 16 across all elections (presidential, federal, local and European) and was accompanied by civic awareness and citizenship education measures in secondary schools, led to an increase in political interest among adolescents (Zeglovits and Zandonella, 2014).

3.7. Will it strengthen their trust in democracy and boost electoral participation?

Several studies conclude that the electoral turnout of 16- and 17-year-olds is higher than that of 18- and 19-year-olds in their first elections (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021). Authors such as Franklin (2020) argue that voting for the first time at 16 can help consolidate electoral participation over the course of a lifetime, on the grounds that adolescents are more likely to be living with their families and still in education – conditions conducive to receiving political information and turning out to vote. The rising age of emancipation means, however, that research such as that of Mahéo and Bélanger (2020) in the Canadian context finds few meaningful differences between those aged 16–17 and those aged 18–20 in terms of political interest or family and school support.

In Latin American countries, Austria and Scotland, those who were able to vote at 16 or 17 maintain higher levels of electoral participation than those who first voted at 18 (Huebner and Sanhueza, 2024). Adults who had cast their first vote at 16 or 17 rather than at 18 turned out in greater numbers in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections (Eichhorn and Huebner, 2025).

Those who voted at 16 or 17 also appear to have greater trust in democracy, both in Latin American countries and in Austria (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021). Drawing on a 2015 survey, Eichhorn (2018) analyses the political participation – actual and intended – trust in democracy, political understanding, sources of information and the importance attached to elections and government among 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Scottish respondents scored higher on trust in democracy, sources of political information and the importance attached to elections and government, and were particularly supportive of voting at 16. The author concludes that, following the independence referendum, political participation among 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland – including non-electoral forms – increased markedly, and that, while they discuss political issues more in schools, with their families and with friends, school and parental socialisation only partially explains the differences in actual political behaviour.

Jonnah *et al.* (2020), however, find that 16- and 17-year-olds in Austria have a weaker sense of civic duty to vote than those over 21, associating this with lower levels of political interest and knowledge and more limited participation in political discussion networks.

A further question worth considering is what effect the temporary withdrawal of the right to vote may have on trust in democracy among young people who voted at 16 in some elections but are unable to do so in others until they turn 18. In Germany, Leininger *et al.* (2023) conclude that this temporary deprivation is associated with reduced satisfaction and a diminished belief in democratic functioning – effects that partly persist over time – though these individuals do not lose political interest or capacity; on the contrary, their participation in protests and other non-electoral political activities increases in the short term.

3.8. Can lowering the voting age contribute to democratic renewal?

In the European context, extending the right to vote is seen by some as a means of reinvigorating democracy. Allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote, it is argued, would bring a degree of renewal to an electorate that is ageing as a result of demographic trends (Moral, 2007).

The concept of gerontocratic government has been invoked in Germany (Preklik, 2024), and the situation in Spain is not markedly different. In 2024, those aged 18 to 29 accounted for 14% of registered voters with Spanish nationality, while those aged 60 and over accounted for 35%. Were this reform to be implemented in Spain, the 16- to 17-year-old population would represent approximately 2.6% of the expanded electoral roll – that is, the roll extended to include those aged 16 and over – with Spanish nationality, and 2.9% of the electoral roll in Andalusia (National Institute of Statistics, 2025).⁶ On these figures, lowering the voting age to 16 seems insufficient if the aim is to rejuvenate democratic systems; this might call for consideration of a minimum voting age of 12, or even an assessment of proposals in favour of child suffrage.

Democratic renewal, however, is surely more than a demographic question. As Wall (2022) observes, previous extensions of the franchise have historically benefited not only the newly enfranchised group: ‘Children’s suffrage would systematically benefit children, children’s rights, adults, social institutions, and democratic processes’ (p. 78).

3.9. Will the interests of children and adolescents be better represented as a result?

Lowering the voting age to 16 might be expected to give greater weight to the needs of adolescents on the public agenda (Moral, 2009) and to raise the profile of their interests in political programmes (O’Neill, 2022).

Granting the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds does not, however, guarantee an end to political adulthood. For Preclik (2024), it could even prove counterproductive: bringing 16- and 17-year-olds closer to the threshold of legal adulthood might distance them from the population group defined as ‘childhood’, thereby weakening the broader claim for an extension of voting rights to younger children.

This argument gains weight in light of the data: in Spain, the proportion of 18- to 29-year-olds who agree with lowering the voting age to 16 (10.4%) is lower than the corresponding figure for the general population (18.4%) (CIS, 2025).

4. Conclusion

This article has sought to address, with varying degrees of success, the questions commonly raised in the debate on lowering the voting age to 16. Several conclusions emerge: that political maturity in adolescence is demonstrable, and that this electoral measure has the potential to increase political interest, sustain electoral participation over time and strengthen trust in democracy. It has also become clear that further research is needed on questions such as access to political information and vulnerability to manipulation (UNICEF, 2024) – though such gaps do not, in themselves, justify denying young people the right to participate in elections.

In countries where the right to vote at 16 is recognised and data are available, no known negative consequences have been recorded (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021). Were the measure to be implemented in Spain, the evidence suggests it would be advisable to do so across all elections simultaneously – as in Austria – rather than gradually, so as to preserve confidence in democracy (Leininger *et al.*, 2023). Given the resistance among both adult and young populations in Spain, it would also be valuable to examine what the implementation of such a top-down reform might entail, as was the case in Ecuador and Argentina (Sanhueza, 2020).

The views of children and adolescents on this issue should be given greater consideration; to exercise their political and participatory rights, they need information and training (UNICEF, 2024). Adolescents themselves (Ribeiro *et al.*,

2023) and researchers in the field (O'Neill, 2022) stress the need for the involvement of the educational system; the role of the media and other institutions is equally important, through programmes that encourage learning about politics and electoral participation and that support informed decision-making (Jonah *et al.*, 2020).

Future research should engage more deeply with arguments in favour of further reductions to the minimum voting age and with mechanisms of political representation for early childhood (Wall, 2022), and should broaden the geographical scope of inquiry beyond the predominantly Eurocentric perspective that currently characterises the literature.

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Notes

1 In Andalusia there are around a hundred municipal councils for childhood and adolescence (Ministry of Social Inclusion, Youth, Families and Equality, 2024). In Spain there is the State Council for Child and Adolescent Participation; at the supranational level, examples include the Adolescent and Young People Action Board of the UNICEF Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean.

2 In Germany, 16-year-olds may vote in state elections in Baden-Württemberg, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Schleswig-Holstein, and in municipal elections in Baden-Württemberg, Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein and Thuringia (World Population Review, 2025).

3 In several European countries, including Serbia, Bosnia and Slovenia, 16-year-olds have been permitted to vote provided they are in employment (World Population Review, 2025).

4 This would also call into question the legal status of 16- and 17-year-olds as minors.

5 Where the significance level was below 0.05, results are marked with a single asterisk (*); where it was equal to or below 0.01, with a double asterisk (**).

6 Estimating the proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds in the electoral roll expanded to include those aged 16 and over would require subtracting from the denominator the number of persons subject to a penalty entailing deprivation of voting rights – data that have not been available for this study. For municipal elections, it would also be necessary to include nationals of Bolivia, Cape Verde, Chile, Colombia, South Korea, Ecuador, Iceland, Norway, New Zealand, Paraguay, Peru, the United Kingdom and Trinidad and Tobago who meet the established eligibility requirements (Spanish Observatory of Racism and Xenophobia, 2023).

