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Lower voting age to 16 and discuss politics in school, study says

Lowering the voting age to 16 in the Scottish independence referendum had positive effects and should be extended to all elections, a report suggests.

The move could increase young people's engagement with politics, according to the study. For this to happen, informed political discussion should also be encouraged in classrooms, researchers say.

The report found that schools had more influence than parents in giving young people confidence in understanding politics.

The study of under-18 year-olds in the referendum found that young people were at least as interested in politics as adults. Only seven per cent had never talked about the vote with anyone.

Young people were less likely than adults to align themselves with political parties, but the proportion who said they did not feel an affinity to one dropped in the year before the vote, from 57 per cent to 51 per cent.

Parents had a strong influence in encouraging young people to vote, but had less impact on how they voted, researchers found. More than 40 per cent of under-18s said they intended to vote differently than their parents.

Schools played a more significant role than parents in enhancing young people's political understanding, but only when pupils actively discussed the referendum in class. Lessons on general political issues did not have the same effect.

The report is published by the think tank d|part and is publically available online:
<http://www.politischepartizipation.de/index.php/en/>

Researchers conducted two surveys of under-18s, in April and May 2013 and then one year later. More than 1000 young people responded to each survey.

Dr Jan Eichhorn, from the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science and the author of the study, said: "Fears of under-18s being inappropriately ideologised stem from an underestimation of young people's capabilities. We found these fears to be

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unfounded. Their engagement with politics is complex and they appreciate school as a space to do this.

“To have a lasting, positive impact, we need to trust schools and teachers to discuss politics actively in the classroom. There are positive effects on young people’s political understanding and confidence that parental influence cannot achieve but school can.”

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