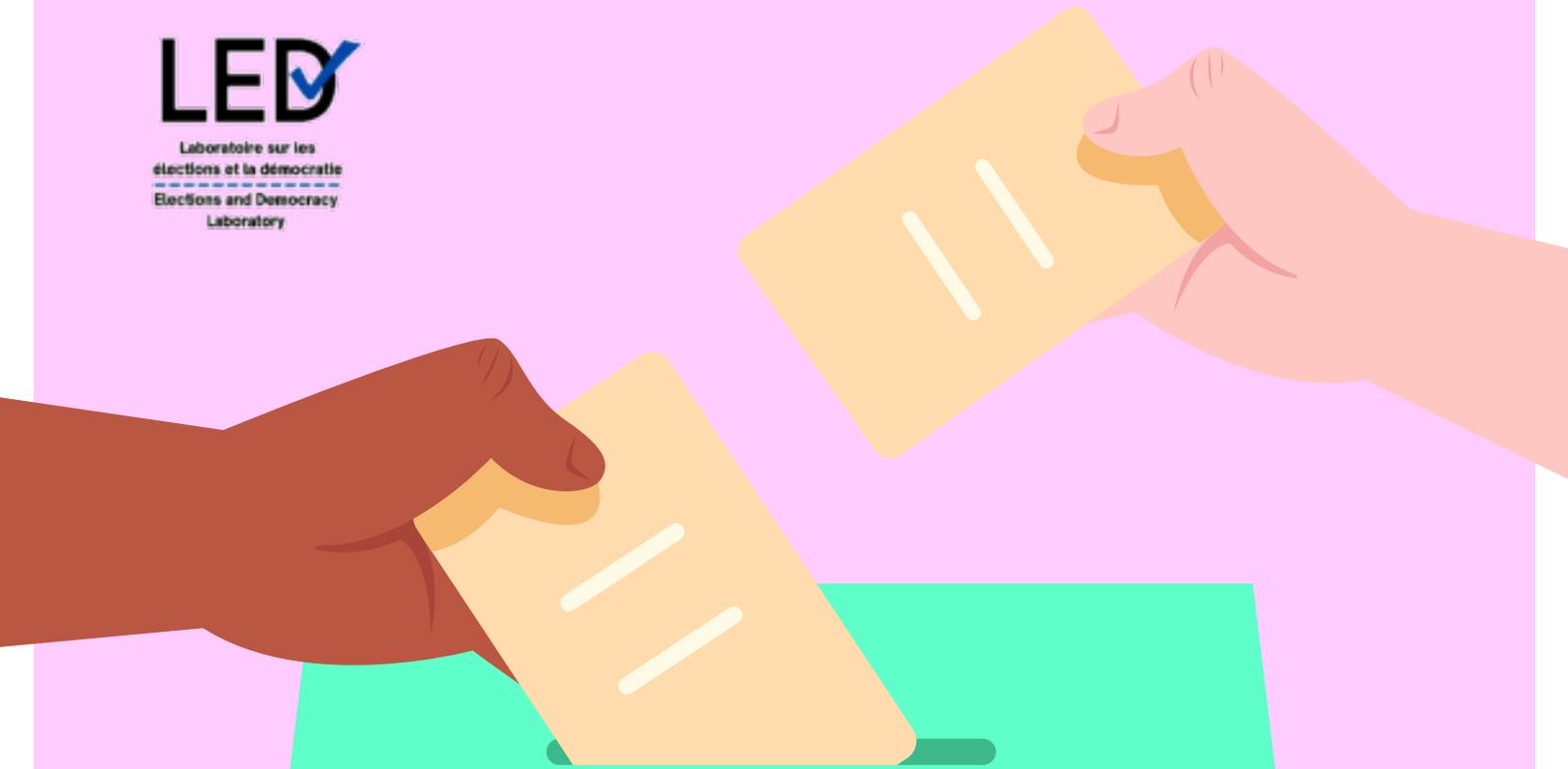




Laboratoire sur les
élections et la démocratie
Elections and Democracy
Laboratory



PUBLIC OPINION ON LOWERING THE VOTING AGE TO 16

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INTRODUCTION

Canada is witnessing a rise in the ‘Vote at 16’ movement. Unsatisfied with the functioning of democracy, youths are advocating to include more young people into the political process and to have more say on pressing issues like climate change. For instance, a group of young Canadians are challenging the court to lower the voting age to 16, arguing that it violates the Charter of Rights and Freedom (Maloney, 2021).

There are two main questions that this report seeks to investigate:

1. **What are the potential implications of lowering the voting age to 16?**
2. **Should organizations advocate for this suffrage reform?**

This report first explores the past experiences of countries that have expanded enfranchisement to 16-year-olds by examining a brief history and the effects of the reform. Then, key arguments for and against this voting age debate is discussed. In particular, this report focuses on studies that consider political maturity, voter turnout, and the political attitudes of adolescents from various countries. The findings reveal that lowering the voting age has a generally positive impact on turnout and political attitudes of adolescents.

The next section of this report identifies public opinion as an important factor in the adoption of the reform. Despite the benefits of lowering the voting age to 16, only a limited number of countries have enacted this enfranchisement to date. This report highlights the challenges associated with changing a policy without the widespread support of the public. To better understand what influences the public to lean towards one side of the debate in Canada, the relationship between public opinion and the following variables are tested: age, political interest, voter participation, and region.

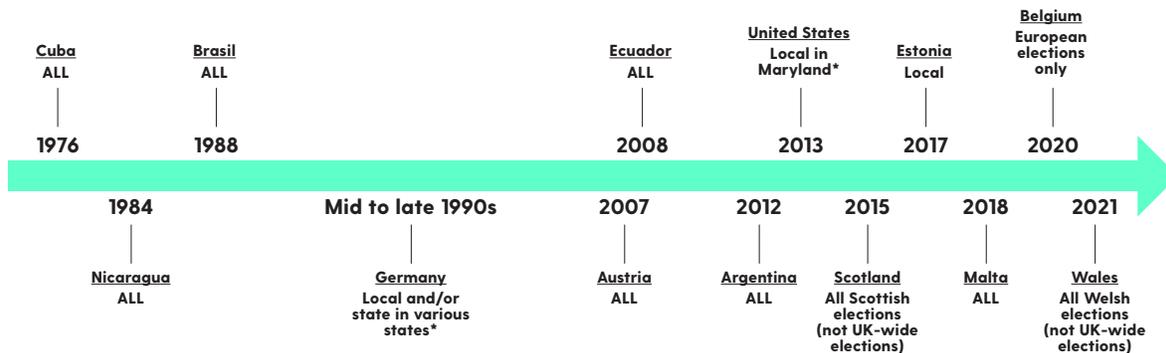
Using data collected in the 2019 Canadian Election Study, the results reveal that there is a relationship between public opinion and three of the variables tested: 1) age, 2) political interest, and 3) region. The overall findings demonstrate that people of younger age group, people with higher political interest level, and people living in the Atlantic Region are more supportive of lowering the voting age. On the other hand, people of older age group, people with lower political interest, and people living in the Prairie Provinces show stronger opposition towards this issue. Finally, based on these results, a few recommendations are proposed to help increase the public support for this reform.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LOWERING OF VOTING AGE TO 16

Only a handful of countries have lowered the voting age to 16 (see **Figure 1**). The first wave of franchise extension to 16-year olds began in the 20th century among Latin American countries, permitting younger voters to take part in national elections (e.g. Cuba in 1976, Nicaragua in 1984, and Brazil in 1988). Following this, Ecuador and Argentina adopted such a reform in 2008 and 2012 by drafting a new constitution (Bergh & Eichhorn, 2020). However, there are only a few academic studies conducted on these cases to determine the effects of the changes on key outcomes such as voter turnout, youth engagement, and political attitudes

Figure 1: A general timeline of countries lowering the voting age to 16



Sources: Bergh & Eichhorn (2020), Aichholzer & Kritzing (2020), Huebner & Eichhorn (2020), Leininger & Faas (2020), Toots & Idnurm (2020), and Douglas (2020).

Following this first wave, a second wave of youth suffrage slowly gained momentum across Europe. In the mid-1990s, some states in Germany started to lower the voting age for municipal and later state-wide elections (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021). Currently, seven German states allow voting at 16 for municipal elections, while four other states allow this for both municipal and state elections. A 2017 post-election survey found that “70% of eligible [youth] respondents [...] were happy that they were eligible to vote” and that 16- to 18-year-olds had a similar level of political interest and knowledge (Leininger & Faas, 2020). However, due to limited electoral data, the comparison of turnout among age groups 16 and 17, and 18 to 21 was unavailable for the authors of the study to analyse the effects of reform.

Similarly, in Austria, the voting age was lowered starting at the local-level elections. In 2007, Austria became the first EU country to extend the franchise for nationwide elections. Researchers found that regardless of the level of elections, there was consistently higher turnout among 16- to 17-year-olds compared to 18- to 20-year-olds (Aichholzer & Kritzing, 2020; Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014). Additionally, Austria witnessed a rise in the level of political interest among young voters after the reform (Zeglovits & Zandonella, 2013). However, this short-term outcome could have been triggered by contextual factors like increased awareness campaigns, heightened media pressure, and enhanced civic education.



Other countries like Scotland, Norway and Belgium have conducted ‘trial’ elections for lowering the voting age to 16. Specifically, in Scotland, 16- and 17-year-olds were allowed to vote in the referendum on Scottish independence in 2014. This one-off decision that did not apply to other elections eventually paved the way forward for youth enfranchisement. Like Austria, Scotland saw a higher level of turnout among adolescents aged 16 and 17 compared to their slightly older counterparts, and a boost in their internal political efficacy (Huebner & Eichhorn, 2020). Shortly after evaluating their experience, there was a rise in public support and Scotland extended the voting rights for all Scottish elections in 2015.

In Norway, two trial elections were held, one in 2011 and another in 2015, in which youths aged 16 and 17 were able to vote in the 20 selected municipalities. However, the Norwegian government decided that the voting age should remain at 18 and the trials were discontinued (Ødegård et al., 2020). While Norway also saw a remarkably high first-time turnout rate among youths, the study concluded that youth enfranchisement had no significant effect on the level of political efficacy or interest (Bergh, 2013; Ødegård et al., 2020). This outcome was also reflected in the Belgium case, where the city of Ghent invited its 16- and 17-year-old citizens to vote in the 2018 local elections as part of an experiment (Stiers et al., 2019). However, the votes of the adolescents did not actually count toward the outcome of the elections.

Nonetheless, the trend of lowering the voting age to 16 persists. After a long process, the voting age was finally lowered to 16 for all municipal elections in Estonia in 2017 (Toots & Idnurm, 2020). Malta became the second EU country to implement youth enfranchisement for all levels of election in 2018. In 2020, Belgium joined the other two EU countries and granted 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in European elections. In 2021, youths in Wales were eligible to vote in the 2021 Welsh Parliament elections (Eichhorn & Bergh 2021).

As a number of countries lower the voting age to 16, the debate about youth enfranchisement continues to spark across various countries, including the U.S. and Canada. The first state in the U.S. to implement the voting age reform was Maryland in 2013 for local elections. This has prompted other regions to adopt changes as small as the extension of voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds for school board elections.

In Canada, we are currently seeing a rise in this movement. The City of Vancouver, for instance, began officially endorsing the ‘Vote16’ campaign in 2021, calling for B.C. to lower the provincial voting age (Gomez, 2021). Furthermore, in late November of 2021, a group of young Canadians launched a court challenge to lower Canada’s minimum voting age, arguing that the current rule violates the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Maloney, 2021). Following this event, NDP MP Taylor Bachrach has tabled a private member’s bill in the House of Commons to extend the franchise to 16-years-olds (Wherry, 2021). In addition, Senator Marilou McPhedran re-introduced a bill in the Senate to lower the voting age to 16.

WHY LOWER THE VOTING AGE?

What has been the impetus behind these moves to lowering the voting age? This report suggests several reasons in favour and against the reform: notably, political maturity, voter turnout, and the political attitudes of adolescents. This report will now explore the main arguments that help us better understand why some oppose this change, while others strongly support it.

POLITICAL MATURITY

Many of the scholars that are against this suffrage reform claim that young citizens under the age of 18 are simply not politically 'mature' yet. Political maturity can be loosely defined in terms of one's ability and willingness to participate in electoral processes. This is considered to be a pivotal issue in the debate as it is argued that enfranchised age groups should have sufficient 'social awareness and responsibility' to make a meaningful vote. That is, a vote choice should accurately reflect one's preference.

Chan & Clayton (2006), for example, assess the political maturity of youths based on four factors: 1) interest in politics, 2) party identification, 3) political knowledge and 4) consistency and stability of attitudes. Based on the British Household Panel Survey, their findings indicate that a significant portion of 16- and 17-year-olds are less interested and less knowledgeable in politics than their older counterparts. This outcome is consistent with other studies conducted in different countries (McAllister, 2014; Bergh, 2013; Godli, 2015; Stiers et al., 2019). Some would argue that the reason for the difference in political maturity between adolescents and older voters is simply due to voting rights, rather than a matter of age. Since citizens aged 16 and 17 do not have voting rights, they do not have any incentive to enhance their political knowledge or become invested in politics like the enfranchised group of the population (Leininger & Faas, 2020).

However, the 2011 Norwegian voting age trial showed that voting rights do not affect the political maturity of 16- and 17-year olds. Based on post-election interviews with youth voters, Bergh (2013) and Godli (2015) found that voters aged 18 still expressed a higher degree of interest and knowledge in politics than voters aged 16 and 17 in Norway.

In contrast, other researchers have shown evidence for the opposite, claiming that youths today are well-informed and 'mature' enough to vote. Specifically, Hart & Atkin (2011) and Maheo & Belanger (2020) found that youths in the U.S. and Canada appear to be just as politically informed and skilled as young adults who are eligible to vote. In Scotland, those under 18 showed similar levels of interest as adults on political issues such as the Scottish independence (Huebner & Eichhorn, 2020). A post-election survey in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany also found that 16- to 18-year-olds do not differ in their level of political interest or knowledge (Leininger & Faas, 2020). Furthermore, unlike the Norwegian case, the argument about the lack of political knowledge and interest of 16- and 17-year-olds does not hold in Austria. Various studies looking at Austria after the voting age reform come to a similar conclusion that youths under the age of 18 are well equipped to take part in the election (Zeglovits, 2013; Wagner et al., 2012).

Based on the political maturity consideration, it is difficult to conclude whether citizens under 18 should be given voting rights. The varying empirical evidence from one country to another provides weak support for either side of the debate. At this point, no claims can be made on the relationship between political maturity and voting age. Instead, more recent studies have focused on the implications of lowering the voting age to 16 by closely examining what actually occurs when 16- and 17-year olds are given the right to vote.

VOTING AGE AND TURNOUT

One of the most common ways to measure the direct impact of voting age reform is through voter turnout. With previous research demonstrating that lowering the voting age to 18 in democratic countries has led to a decline in turnout, many assume that further lowering the voting age may have similar negative effects on turnout. However, new evidence from countries that have recently lowered the voting age to 16 proves otherwise.

In Austria, researchers observed generally higher turnout rates among adolescents aged 16 and 17 compared to 18- to 20- year-olds. Aichholzer & Kritzingner (2020) drew data from five elections that occurred between 2005 to 2015 and found that this outcome was independent of the level of election (i.e. national, regional or local election). Zeglovits & Aichholzer (2014) further confirm this result using the official electoral list and highlight that turnout of 16- and 17-year-olds is relatively similar to the overall turnout.

Similarly, the Norwegian voting age trial in 2011 demonstrated a significantly high turnout rate among newly enfranchised adolescents (58%) compared to first-time voters aged 18-21 (46%) (Bergh, 2013; Ødegård et al., 2020). This statistical data captured the overall outcome from 20 selected municipalities that participated in the pilot project. However, due to a terrorist attack that was targeted at teenagers two months before the election day, this trial was repeated in 2015 to capture more accurate data on youth engagement without the 'situational shock'. The results closely mirrored the findings from 2011, remaining consistent at approximately the same level (57%). Ødegård et al. (2020) argue that this pattern of stability reflects the consistent life cycle effects. Additionally, in Scotland, the Electoral Commission estimated that about 75% of registered 16- and 17-year-olds turned out to vote for the 2014 referendum, which was higher than expected (Huebner & Eichhorn, 2020). This compares to an estimated turnout of 54% among those aged 18-24 years. However, unlike the other research that draws data from the official records of electoral lists, this data was based on a post-elections self-reported survey.

Overall, this key finding from various studies highlights that there is no notable negative effect of reducing the voting age on turnout. It also suggests that age groups 16 and 17, and 18 to 20 should not be viewed as behaving the same due to the life cycle effects. People at the age of 18 are entering a 'transitional phase' in life, and are thereby less likely to vote (Highton & Wolfinger, 2001; Bhatti & Hansen, 2012). This is because they are moving away from home, leaving their old social networks and communities behind, to start their own life. As a result, the influence of their parents is replaced by their peers, who are generally less likely to vote.

On the other hand, the high electoral participation among 16- and 17-year-olds as seen in multiple countries can be explained by the fact that these adolescents are still living at home, in a "stable" living situation, and are strongly embedded in schools and families (Ødegård et al., 2020). Consequently, they are more likely to 'learn to vote' and develop a habit of voting. Prior research indicates that first-time voting experience is crucial as it sets up the pattern for future electoral behaviours, including a lifetime of abstention from voting (Franklin, 2004; Mycock et al., 2020). Hence, if earlier enfranchisement results in a higher youth turnout, then this will likely lead to rising aggregate turnout levels over time (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021; Leininger & Faas, 2020). Although the impact of earlier enfranchisement seems promising, researchers are unable to confirm whether this positive turnout trend will be maintained in the future.

POLITICAL ATTITUDES OF YOUTHS

Another way that researchers have studied the impact of lowering the voting age to 16 is by examining the shift in the political attitudes of youths. Specifically, most studies have focused on two key factors: political interest and political efficacy. One study in Austria compared the political interest of young citizens aged 16 and 17 before (2004) and after (2008) the enfranchisement. Based on the EUYOUNG and 'Votes at 16' survey, they found that there was a significant increase in the level of political interest (Zeglovits & Zandonella, 2013). Similarly, a 2017 post-election survey in Schleswig-Holstein (a German state) revealed that most youths were happy to be eligible to vote and were interested in voting in the upcoming national elections- even though they were ineligible (Leininger & Faas, 2020).

Furthermore, Huebner & Eichhorn (2020) conducted qualitative interviews with 20 Scottish young people after the referendum and found that they felt more confident in dealing with political issues. This boost in internal political efficacy among adolescents led to greater engagement in politics beyond just voting (e.g. involvement in campaigns, demonstrations, boycotts, joining political parties, and writing to MPs).

Interestingly, these studies observed that schools had an important role in developing their political interest and efficacy than parents. The research in Scotland highlights the importance of civic education and in-class discussion for youths. It was found that they tend to rely on schools to provide balanced information in order to form their own opinion (Huebner & Eichhorn, 2020). This is supported by another study conducted in the U.S. that examines civic education with respect to political engagement (Milner, 2020). There seems to be a consensus among scholars that suffrage reform accompanied by enhanced civic education in schools may have a positive impact on the political attitude and behaviour of adolescents (Aichholzer & Kritzing, 2020; Eichhorn, 2018).

Although there seems to be a generally strong positive trend for political interest and efficacy, this is not always clearly observed in other countries. For example, the voting age experiment in the city of Ghent (Belgium) saw a very limited effect of youth enfranchisement on internal and external political efficacy, political trust, and attention to politics (Stiers et al., 2019). They argue that since politics is not the most important element of their daily life, this opportunity to 'vote' has not changed the attitudes of 16- and 17-year-olds. Similarly, Bergh (2013) concludes in his findings that the Norwegian voting age trials did not raise the level of political efficacy nor the level of political interest among young people under the age of 18. This highlights some issues with cross-sectional analysis as each of the countries under study varies widely in context. For instance, while some countries are under partial enfranchisement or conducting an 'experiment' on lowering the voting age, others (such as Austria) have lowered the voting age to 16 for all elections. As a result, it is difficult to generalize the overall impact of earlier enfranchisement as evidence seen in one country may not apply in a different social or political context.

Additionally, there are two main challenges to understanding the consequences of lowering the voting age to 16: 1) the limited number of countries that are currently available for analysis and 2) the limited number of years that these countries have experienced early enfranchisement. Currently, the question of what the long-term impacts of lowering the voting age to 16 are, and more specifically, if the positive short-term effects (i.e. turnout rate or level of attitude) will be sustained in the long run remains to be further investigated. This will require more substantive data that follows this age group's development over time.

PUBLIC OPINION ON LOWERING THE VOTING AGE TO 16

If there are clear benefits to lowering the voting age, why haven't more countries adopted this reform? This report suggests that it is primarily a matter of public opinion and political will. The voting age debate cannot be discussed without considering public opinion, as the change cannot easily occur without the support of the general population. Based on the available data, we are able to observe the general stance of the public on this issue in various countries.

Most studies have identified a relatively low support for such change among the general population. For instance, Godli (2015) highlights that a substantial majority (70.3%) of the Norway population over the age of 18 was opposed to the suffrage reform when asked in a survey. Additionally, in the UK, the general opinion polling points to a strong support for keeping the current minimum voting age as only one-third of the public approve of giving 16- and 17-year-olds voting rights (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021). The only age group where a majority supported such reform was the 16- and 17-year-olds who were living in the trial regions. Even in the U.S., a small polling conducted by Hill-Harris shows that an overwhelming majority of Americans are against the idea of granting voting rights to citizens under the age of 18 (The Hill, 2019).

However, it is worth examining how views of the overall population might change after experiencing young people's political engagement. The Scottish case, in particular, demonstrates a drastic change in public opinion regarding this issue. Prior to the referendum in 2011, much of the public was opposed to early enfranchisement like the rest of the UK. By 2015, the support for extending the franchise to youths rose to over 50% in Scotland (Huebner & Eichhorn, 2020). Even political parties that were initially opposed to it changed their position and voted in favour of lowering the voting age for all Scottish elections in 2015 (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021). This was largely due to the overwhelmingly positive experience of 16- and 17-year-olds in the Scottish independence referendum.

Lastly, it is crucial to recognize that the results may differ based on how the question is framed. Greenwood-Hau & Gutting (2021) conducted an experiment using data from the UK and found that the support for lowering the voting age was higher when the issue was framed in terms of extending rights. In contrast, framing on policy changes alone consistently reduced the support for 'Votes at 16'. Hence, public opinion is not only subject to change based on a specific event (as noted above), but can also be shaped by the way the debate is framed within public discourse.

Table 1: Summary of Vote at 16 Outcomes in Each Country

COUNTRY	AUSTRIA	SCOTLAND	NORWAY	BELGIUM	GERMANY
Type(s) of elections:	Local, regional and national	Trial: Referendum	Trial: Municipal	Experiment: Municipal	Municipal and/or state elections
Political maturity of 16- and 17- year-olds	Similar to enfranchised members	Similar to enfranchised members	Lower than enfranchised members	Lower than enfranchised members	Similar to enfranchised members
Turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds	High	High	High	N/A	N/A
Political attitudes of youths on lowering the voting age to 16	Positive	Positive	No change	No change	Positive
Public opinion on lowering the voting age to 16	N/A	Positive	Negative	N/A	N/A

Sources: Austria: Aichholzer & Kritzinger (2020), Zeglovits (2013), Zeglovits & Zandonella (2013); Scotland: Huebner & Eichhorn (2020); Norway: Bergh (2013), Godli (2015), Ødegård et al. (2020); Belgium: Stiers et al. (2019); Germany: Leininger & Faas (2020).

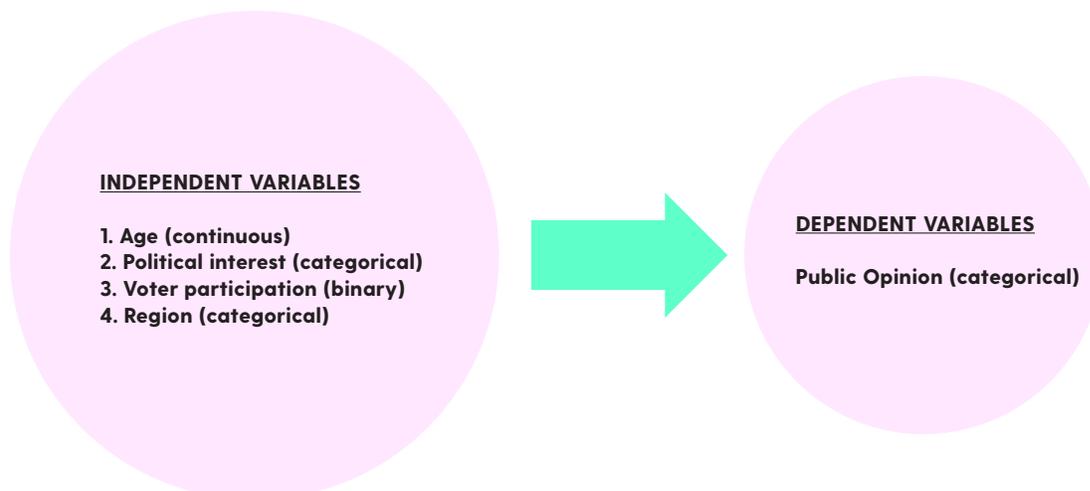
METHOD

This report relies on the 2019 Canadian Election Study (CES) Post-Election Survey (PES). The online survey was drawn from 10,337 respondents that have previously participated in the pre-election survey called the “Campaign Period Survey” (CPS). The CPS used a procured sample of 37,822 members of the Canadian general population, ensuring a balanced representation of gender and age within each region of Canada. There were two eligibility requirements to participate in the CES: respondents had to be 1) aged 18 or older, and 2) a Canadian citizen or a permanent resident. Consequently, the attitudes of Canadian adolescents aged 16 and 17 were not captured in the survey. The PES was fielded after the 2019 federal elections between October 24th and November 11th. The invited participants were given a series of questions regarding their views on current political events, elections and democracy, many of which are relevant to this study. The responses were collected anonymously through an online survey platform called Qualtrics.

The survey questions that will be used in this study are based on five variables: public opinion on lowering the voting age to 16, age, political interest, voter participation, and region (see **Appendix A**).

This study aims to investigate which factors have an influence on how the public thinks about ‘Voting at 16’. More specifically, we are interested to see if there is a particular pattern of support or opposition associated with certain groups in Canada. We begin analysing the data by conducting an inferential statistical test for each of the listed variables (see **Figure 2**). Cross tabulation with a Chi2 test will be used for independent and dependent variables that are categorical or binary. For continuous variables, correlation tests will be conducted. The data used in this study are unweighted. As well, the response options “don’t know” and “refuse to answer” were marked as missing and excluded from the analysis.

Figure 2: Independent and Dependent Variables



RESULTS

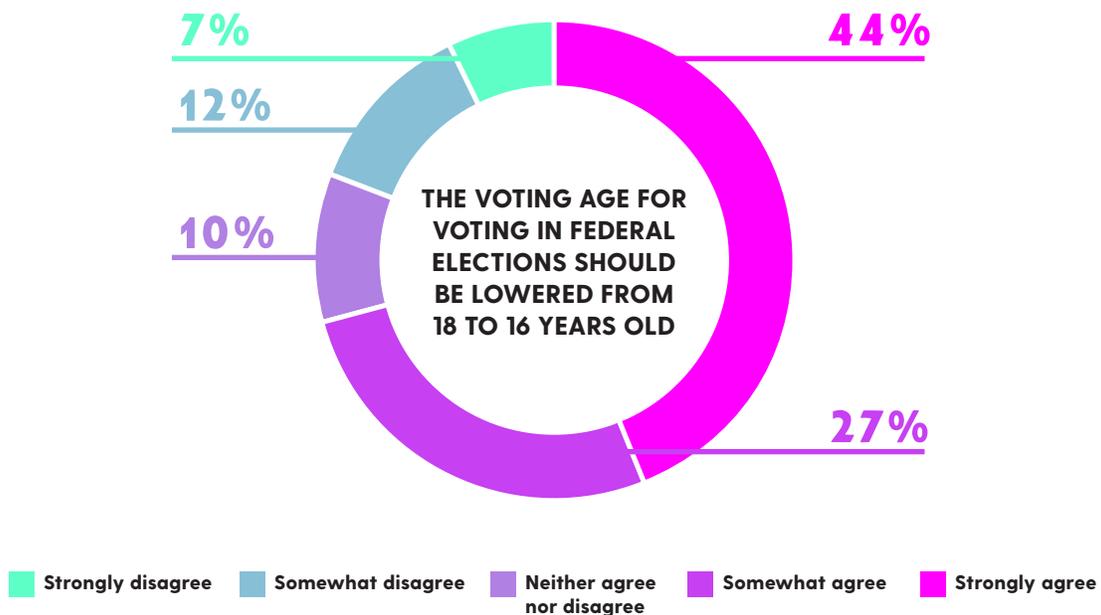
The results are presented in five parts. First, we examine the public opinion of respondents on lowering the voting age to 16. Then, we assess each of the tests between the independent variables (see **Figure 2**) and the dependent variable (public opinion) to determine if any of the factors could be a predictor of support or opposition to the voting age reform.

1. PUBLIC OPINION ON LOWERING THE VOTING AGE TO 16

Figure 3 summarizes the results from the data (n=5154) for public opinion on lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 for federal elections. Similar to the results found in studies from other countries like the UK, Norway and the US, the findings in Canada also show that more than 70% of the respondents disagree with lowering the voting age. In particular, we find that approximately 44% are strongly opposed to this change while 27% somewhat disagree.

On the other side of the spectrum, 19% of the participants in this survey are in support of lowering the voting age to 16. Specifically, 343 respondents strongly agree with the change, making up only 7% of the total. In addition, the data reveals that 12% responded 'somewhat agree' to the voting age question. Standing in between these two positions are 10% of participants who neither agree nor disagree with this voting age reform. Again, the generally low support for youth enfranchisement is in line with the polling results across other countries.

Figure 3: Public Opinion on Lowering the Voting Age to 16



2. PUBLIC OPINION AND AGE

Does a relationship exist between a respondent's age and their opinion on lowering the voting age to 16? The analysis below illustrating the trend between the mean age and each of the opinion response options are statistically significant (n=5,154, chi2=44.92, p<0.001) (refer to **Figure 4**).

The results indicate that those of older age tend to be less in favour of lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. Conversely, younger respondents seem to be more in support of this reform. The mean age that expressed strongly disagree in the survey turns out to be about 57-years-old. Whereas, the mean age that selected strongly agree is 47-years-old. The 10-year difference in the mean age along the two opposite spectrums highlights a key difference in opinion between older and younger age groups.

Interestingly, those who 'neither disagree nor agree' with this issue are in between those two mean ages (standing at 51-years old). However, as the mean age decreases, there is stronger support for lowering the voting age. On the contrary, as the mean age increases, people tend to disagree more strongly on this voting age issue (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 4: Relationship between Public Opinion and Age



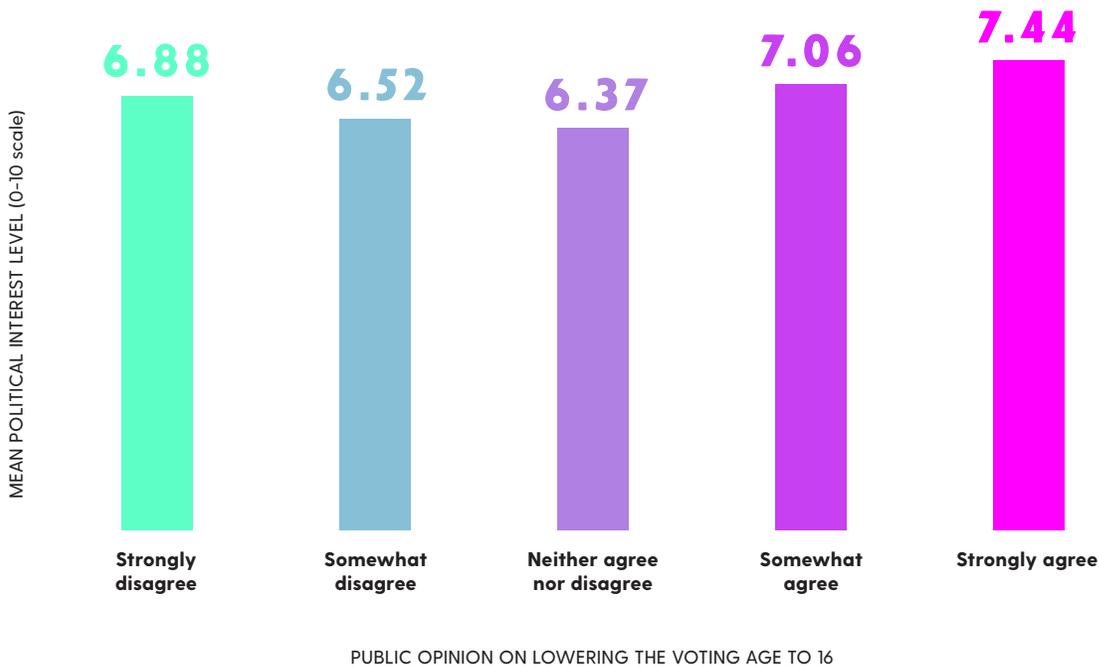
3. PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL INTEREST

The next variable that is considered to have a relationship with public opinion on voting at 16 is political interest (n=4,886, $\chi^2=11.05$, $p<0.05$). The average political interest level (on a 0-10 scale) was calculated for each of the opinion response options (see **Figure 5**).

The findings show that those who neither agree nor disagree with lowering the voting age have the lowest average political interest level, sitting at about 6.4. It could be that they are simply not engaged in politics enough to form a definitive opinion on this issue. A key pattern that we observed is that people with higher political interest tend to hold stronger opinions, in either direction. As the level of political interest increases, the strength of opinion also increases, from somewhat to strongly. For example, when we move from somewhat agree to strongly agree, the mean political interest level rises from 7.1 to 7.4. Likewise, the political interest increases from 6.5 to 6.9 when moving from somewhat disagree to strongly disagree.

However, when comparing those who agree with the lowering of the voting age to those who disagree, we notice that those who support have higher political interest than those who oppose. The average political interest is approximately 7.4 for strongly agree in comparison to approximately 6.9 for strongly disagree. Even somewhat agree surpasses the mean political interest level of strongly disagree (7.1 compared to 6.9), as well as, that of somewhat disagree (at about 6.5).

Figure 5: Relationship between Public Opinion and Political Interest



4. PUBLIC OPINION AND VOTER PARTICIPATION

We then test whether one's participation in voting is related to one's opinion on the voting age issue (n=5146, chi2 =7.28, p >0.1). However, the results show that the relationship between the two variables is not statistically significant. It could be that public opinion on lowering the voting age and voter turnout are related to the same underlying phenomenon, such as political engagement.

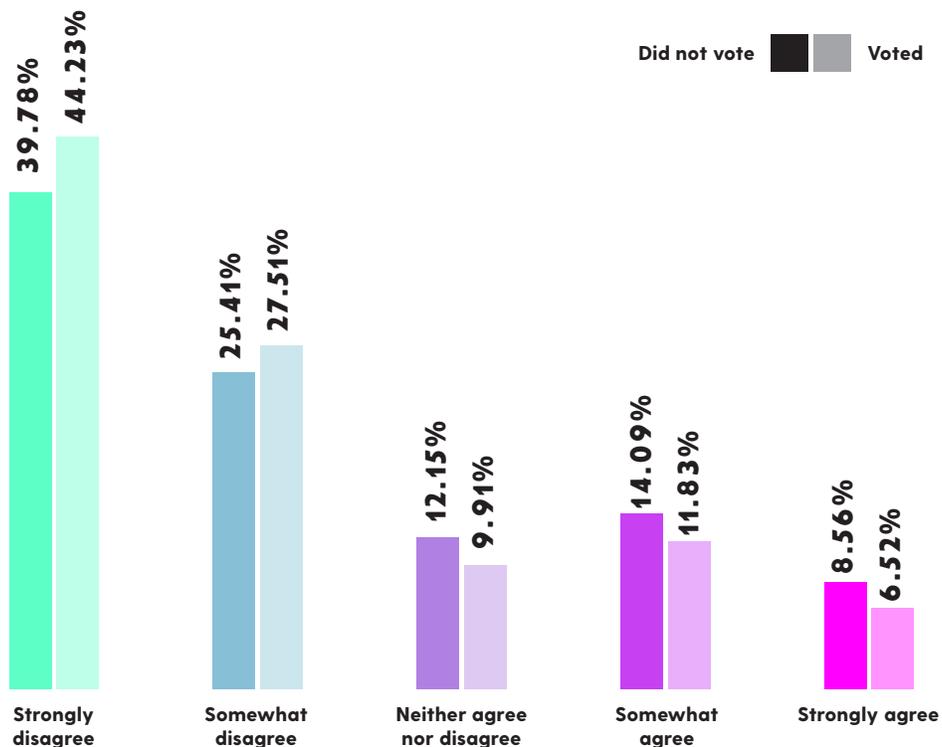
While there is not a drastic difference between those who voted and didn't vote in the 2019 federal elections and their opinions on lowering the voting age, this data set highlights the following observations (see Figure 6):

First, we found that there is a slightly higher percentage of voters who oppose this voting age reform than non-voters. For instance, about 44% of voters strongly disagree with this issue compared to 40% of non-voters who strongly disagree. As well, about 28% of voters somewhat disagree in comparison to 25% of non-voters.

On the contrary, non-voters tend to support this issue slightly more than the voters. Specifically, the findings show that while 14% of non-voters somewhat agree with lowering the voting age to 16, only 12% of voters somewhat agree. Furthermore, there is a higher percentage of non-voters (9%) who strongly agree than voters (7%). In addition to this, there is a greater proportion of non-voters (12%) who neither disagree nor agree than voters (10%).

Although the data illustrates these trends, the relationship between voter participation and opinion is not significant and does not point to a reliable pattern of support or opposition that can be taken into account.

Figure 6: Public Opinion and Voter Participation



5. PUBLIC OPINION AND REGION

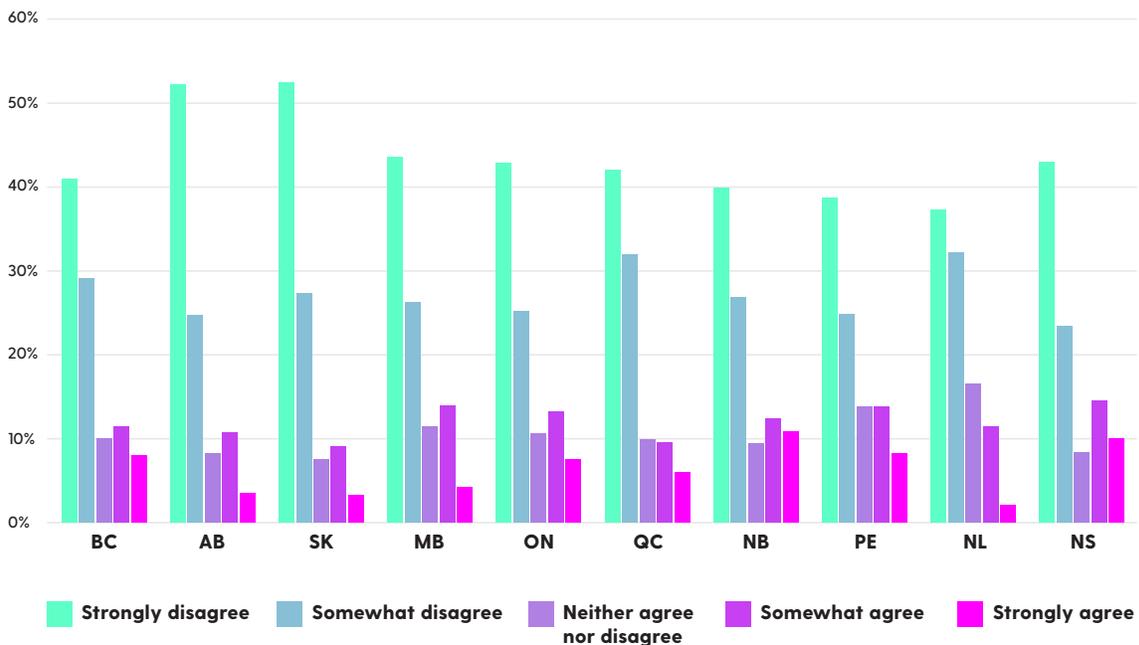
Lastly, the region of participants and their opinion on lowering the voting age to 16 are tested to see if certain provinces in Canada have a particular lean towards this issue (n=5,121, chi2=111.93, p <0.001). Due to the low response rates from the territories, the Northern Territories were not included in the analysis. Figure 7 (or Table 3) highlights the overall results across the provinces, which are statistically significant.

We begin by comparing the data based on specific regions in Canada: the West Coast, the Prairie Provinces, Central Canada, and the Atlantic Region (refer to Table 4). The findings show that the Prairie Provinces have the highest opposition to lowering the voting age to 16. Particularly, Saskatchewan ranks at the top with around 52.7% who strongly disagree, followed by Alberta at 52.5%, and Manitoba at 43.8%. Correspondingly, the Prairie provinces have the lowest support for this issue as their position on strongly agree ranges between 3% to 4%. This is in line with their strong conservative-leaning, particularly on social issues.

Conversely, the Atlantic Region has the strongest support for lowering the voting age to 16. For instance, New Brunswick (11%), Nova Scotia (10%), and PEI (8%) rank in the top three for having the highest percentage of those who strongly agree. The outlier for this region is Newfoundland (2%), whose support falls below that of the Prairie Provinces. On the flip side, most of the Atlantic provinces have the lowest opposition, in terms of strongly disagree, as they range anywhere between 37% to 40%. The outlier for this category is Nova Scotia, which exceeds the 40% mark. Overall, this finding reaffirms the more progressive side of the Atlantic Region on current issues, which has been shown in a recent study from Dalhousie University (2019).

For provinces in Central Canada and the West Coast, their position on strongly disagree and strongly agree consistently falls somewhere in between the Prairie and Atlantic Provinces (see Table 4). In particular, Ontario (43%) and Quebec (42%) stand higher above British Columbia (41%) for opposition to the voting age reform. Likewise, BC has greater support (that is, strongly agree) for this issue than Ontario and Quebec. This is, in part, reflective of the ongoing efforts in BC to extend the franchise to 16-year-olds in municipal and provincial elections

Figure 7: Public Opinion by Provinces in Canada



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Table 3: Comparison of Opinions on Lowering the Voting Age Across Provinces

PROVINCES	STRONGLY DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER DISAGREE NOR AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
BC	41.16%	41.16%	41.16%	41.16%	41.16%
AB	52.53%	24.88%	8.29%	10.75%	3.53%
SK	52.69%	27.42%	7.53%	9.14%	3.23%
MB	43.83%	26.38%	11.49%	14.04%	4.26%
ON	43.08%	25.39%	10.67%	13.30%	7.55%
QC	42.25%	32.16%	9.98%	9.62%	5.99%
NB	40.15%	27.01%	9.49%	12.41%	10.95%
PE	38.89%	25.00%	13.89%	13.89%	8.33%
NL	37.50%	32.29%	16.67%	11.46%	2.08%
NS	43.26%	23.60%	8.43%	14.61%	10.11%

Table 4: Ranking of Opposition and Support Across Regions (Highest to Lowest)

RANK	REGIONS	STRONGLY DISAGREE	RANK	REGIONS	STRONGLY AGREE
1	SK	52.69%	1	NB	10.95%
2	AB	52.53%	2	NS	10.11%
3	MB	43.83%	3	PE	8.33%
4	NS	43.26%	4	BC	8.06%
5	ON	43.08%	5	ON	7.55%
6	QC	42.25%	6	QC	5.99%
7	BC	41.16%	7	MB	4.26%
8	NB	40.15%	8	AB	3.53%
9	PE	38.89%	9	SK	3.23%
10	NL	37.50%	10	NL	2.08%

■ West Coast ■ Central Canada
■ Prairie Provinces ■ Atlantic Provinces

CONCLUSION

Based on this research, three out of the four variables tested are related to public opinion on lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 for federal elections. First, age is a key influence on how the public thinks about this issue. Younger people tend to be more supportive of lowering the voting age than their older counterparts. This relationship is also evident in other countries like Norway, in which the population over the age of 18 was opposed to this reform while a majority of 16- and 17-year-olds were in support (Godli, 2015). Additionally, political interest is an important factor when considering public opinion on this topic. People with higher political interest levels show greater support for lowering the voting age. However, those with low political interest levels are undetermined in their position on this issue. Lastly, the region is related to public opinion on voting at 16. The findings indicate that the Prairie Provinces are strongly against lowering the voting age, while the Atlantic Provinces have the strongest support for this reform in Canada.

Overall, the public opinion on lowering the voting age to 16 in Canada is consistent with results from other countries that have not yet extended the enfranchisement to 16-year-olds. Like the studies from the UK, Norway, and the U.S., our data also shows that more than 70% of the respondents disagree with lowering the voting age. However, it is worth noting that public opinion is

subject to change. For instance, Scotland saw a drastic shift in position after the 2011 referendum. Due to the positive experience of 16- and 17-year-olds, the public who was initially opposed to early enfranchisement became more supportive of this issue afterwards (Huebner & Eichhorn, 2020). Although the majority in Canada is currently not in support of this reform, trial elections or elections at the lower level (i.e. local or municipal) that include 16- and 17-year-olds could potentially bring about a shift in public opinion regarding this issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a widespread concern among the population that youths are not politically mature enough to be able to participate in voting. Contrary to many beliefs, multiple studies have confirmed that this is not always the case. Studies in Norway, the U.S., Canada, Scotland, Germany and Austria found that the level of political interest and knowledge between 16- and 18-year-olds are similar (Bergh, 2013; Hart & Atkin, 2011; Huebner & Eichhorn, 2020; Leininger & Faas, 2020; Zeglovits, 2013). In addition, countries that have lowered the voting age to 16 have mainly experienced positive effects on turnout and political attitudes of youths (see **Table 1**). While the long-term impacts of lowering the voting age are difficult to determine, it appears that lowering the voting age to 16 has clear benefits to society. Hence, it is important to educate people based on empirical evidence and break any misunderstandings or stereotypes they may have towards youths.

To advocate for this reform and to increase the public support for this issue, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. FRAME THE ISSUE IN TERMS OF “EXTENDING THE RIGHTS” RATHER THAN “LOWERING THE VOTING AGE”. A study conducted in the UK reveals that the support for lowering the voting age was higher when the issue was framed in terms of extending rights. Whereas, framing the issue based on policy changes alone consistently reduced the support for Vote at 16 (Greenwood-Hau & Gutting, 2021). Although the data collected for this report was limited to the wording of the survey question, changing the way that the debate is framed in public discourse may have a positive effect on how people feel about the issue.

2. ENHANCE THE POLITICAL INTEREST OF YOUNG PEOPLE. According to the results, younger people tend to support this issue more than older people. However, findings also reveal that people with higher political interest levels have stronger support for lowering the voting age than those with lower political interests. Furthermore, those with minimal political interest level ‘neither agree nor disagree’ on this issue. By engaging young people in political activities, their level of interest in politics can increase and their position on this issue can be further developed and/or strengthened.

3. ENGAGE WITH YOUTHS IN THE PRAIRIE PROVINCES. This report highlighted that the Prairie Provinces, particularly Saskatchewan and Alberta, have the highest opposition to lowering the voting age to 16. Correspondingly, the Prairie Provinces have the lowest support for this issue. Due to the strong conservative-leaning in this region, their position on this issue is not surprising. However, engaging with young people in the Prairie Provinces may help to garner greater support for the ‘Vote at 16’ movement in Canada.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: PES Questions and Response Options

VARIABLE	ORIGINAL VARIABLE NAME IN PES	SURVEY QUESTIONS	RESPONSE OPTIONS
Public Opinion on Vote at 16	pes19_emb_vote16.	The voting age for voting in federal elections should be lowered from 18 to 16 years old.	Strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, strongly agree, don't know/prefer not to answer
Age	pes19_yob.	To make sure we are talking to a cross section of Canadians, we need to get a little information about your background. First, in what year were you born?	1920- 2010 Don't know/prefer not to answer
Region	pes19_province.	In which province or territory are you currently living in?	Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, Nunavut, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Saskatchewan, Yukon
Political Interest	pes19_interest.	How interested are you in politics generally? Use a scale from 0 to 10, where zero means no interest at all, and ten means a great deal of interest.	0-10 scale No interest at all A great deal of interest Don't know/prefer not to answer
Voter Participation*	pes19_turnout2019_v2.	The federal election was held on Mon October 21. In any election, some people are not able to vote because they are sick or busy, or for some other reason. Others do not want to vote. Did you vote in the recent federal election?	Yes, No, Don't know/Don't remember, Prefer not to answer
	pes19_turnout2019.	The federal election was held on Monday, October 21. In any election, some people are not able to vote because they are sick or busy, or for some other reason. Others do not want to vote. Did you vote in the recent federal election?	Yes, No, I usually vote but didn't this time, I thought about voting but didn't, I wasn't registered to vote, Don't know/Don't remember, Prefer not to answer

*Voter Participation Variable: A split sample of questions was asked about voter turnout. For this analysis, they were combined, with anyone who had noted they had voted as 1 and those who noted they did not vote (for any reason) as 0. Those who could not recall or skipped the question were marked as missing.

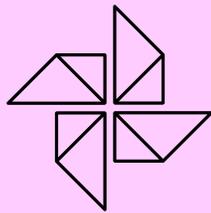
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