

Sticking to Eighteen: Status Quo and the Politics of Lowering the Voting Age

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Abstract

This brief analyzes public preferences on the franchise question of lowering the voting age using survey data across multiple countries collected in 2022 and 2023. We document sharp generational divides: younger respondents are more open to lowering the voting age, while older cohorts are more skeptical. Left-right ideology strongly structures attitudes, with left-leaning respondents consistently more supportive than right-leaning peers, though the magnitude of gaps varies by country. Cross-national patterns suggest institutional context and migration salience mediate these preferences. We conclude with targeted policy options that align reforms with demographic support, anticipate ideological opposition, and tailor communication to country-specific opportunity structures.

Keywords

voting age reform, cross-national and ideological divides



The Meanings of Voting for Citizens: A Scientific Challenge, a Portrait, and Implications

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Executive Summary

The aim of this policy report is to provide evidence on citizens' preferences on voting age, especially regarding voting below eighteen. What are citizens' preferences? How do they vary between and across countries? This question is particularly pertinent given ongoing reforms and debates in several countries but also at the supranational level: Austria lowered the voting age to 16 in 2007, the UK announced plans to do so in July 2025, and Germany lowered it to 16 for European elections in 2024, while debate continues over extending this to other elections. This policy report uses original data from nine countries to comprehend the structure of individual attitudes toward voting age. Based on a representative survey of about 2000 interviewees per country in Australia, Brazil, Colombia, Hungary, Italy, Kenya, Serbia, Sweden and the United States, the data suggest the following:

- *Most citizens in most countries prefer the status-quo.*
- *Voting below eighteen is more popular among city residents, younger generations and citizens with left leaning ideology.*

Policy Implications

Some overall resistance toward lowering the voting age should be expected, given that it tends to be the least preferred option particularly among older generations, which are generally the most likely to vote and hence one of the better represented demographics (Bhatti and Hansen, 2012b; Bhatti et al., 2012). These demographics may benefit from targeted inclusion in any deliberative process surrounding such reforms. That said, lowering the voting age may gain broader collective acceptance once introduced, as support for voting below eighteen appears to be stronger where it is already in place (see Brazil).

Why Voting Age Matters

Low electoral participation puts democracy at risk. Voting age matters because it shapes who participates and how well democracy represents citizens across generations. Several authors have argued for lowering the voting age. Doing so could raise short-term turnout since under-18s often live with their families and attend school – both linked to higher participation (Bhatti and Hansen, 2012a). In the long run, voting earlier may help establish lasting voting habits and civic norms at a crucial phase of political socialization (Franklin, 2020) and ensure that young people's interests are better represented, as older generations tend to vote more regularly (Bhatti and Hansen, 2012b; Bhatti et al., 2012). Earlier enfranchisement might also increase political satisfaction, efficacy, and trust (Aichholzer and Kritzinger, 2020; Huebner and Eichhorn, 2020; Sanhueza Petrarca, 2020). Critics, however, argue that younger citizens may lack knowledge or vote mainly for expressive reasons, which could make their choices less effective in shaping policy (Hamilton, 2012; Tóka, 2009).

What Our Research Shows

This policy brief is based on data collected about two months before general election in the following countries: Tunisia, Italy, United States, Kenya, Sweden, Hungary, Serbia, Australia, Nigeria, Estonia, Colombia, Brazil. We interviewed overall more than 25,000 people online and via face-to-face surveys. In terms of respondents, we included the adult population eligible to vote in each respective country, which was typically 18 years old and above, except for Brazil, where the voting age is 16. In order to achieve a representative sample, we implemented quotas on age, gender, and region as well as education groups (Plescia et al., 2025). Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents who favour different minimum voting ages across twelve countries. In most countries, the current minimum is 18 years, and this option also attracts the largest share of support among respondents. Brazil stands out as the only country in which support for voting below 18 years represents the majority view, which matches its existing lower voting age, whereas support for setting the minimum above 18 remains relatively limited everywhere.

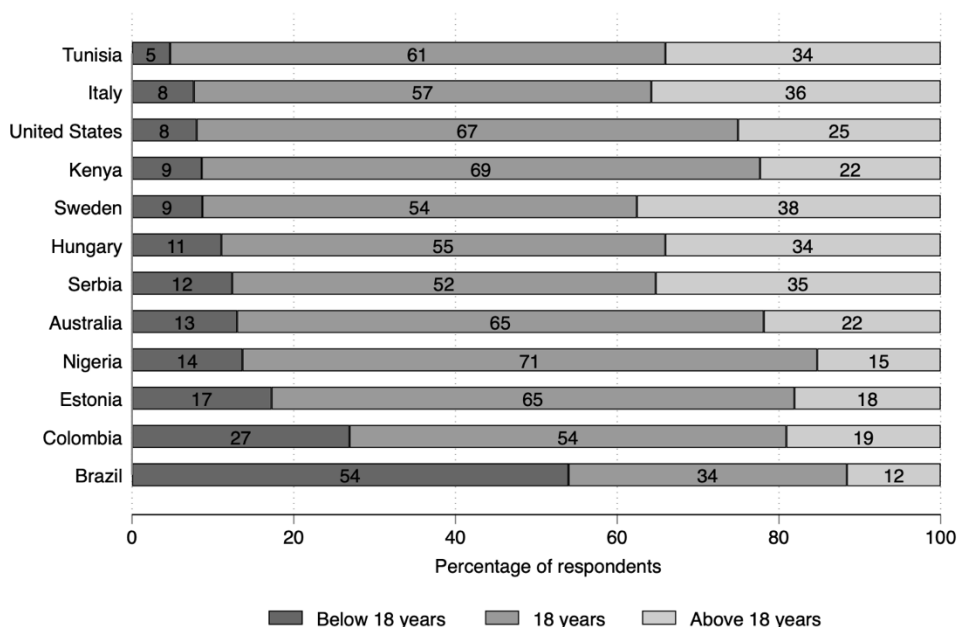


Figure 1. Preferences for voting age across countries.

How are preferences for voting age distributed across socio-demographics characteristics?

Figure 2 shows that support for voting below 18 years' old is higher among younger generations. Indeed, Baby Boomers are the least likely to support voting below 18 years' old (with an overall average of 8 percent) while members of Generation Z are the most likely to support voting below 18 years' old (with an overall average of 22 percent). Still, across all generations the voting age of 18 is the most preferred option.

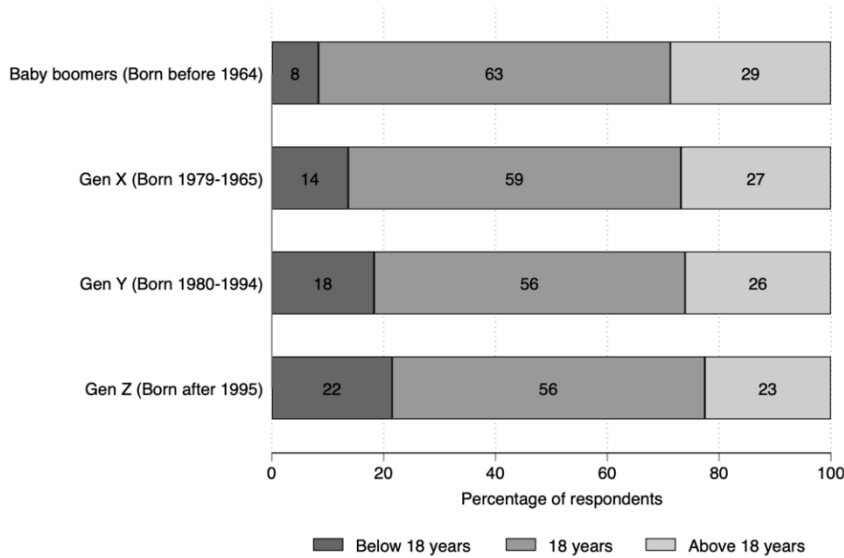


Figure 2. Preferences for voting age across generational cohorts.

The figure shows citizens' preferred voting age – below 18, at 18, or above 18 – broken down by education level. Across all three groups (lower, middle, and higher education), the distribution is nearly identical: roughly 15-16% favour voting below 18, around 58-59% prefer 18, and 26-27% would raise it above 18, indicating that education level has virtually no effect on voting age preferences.

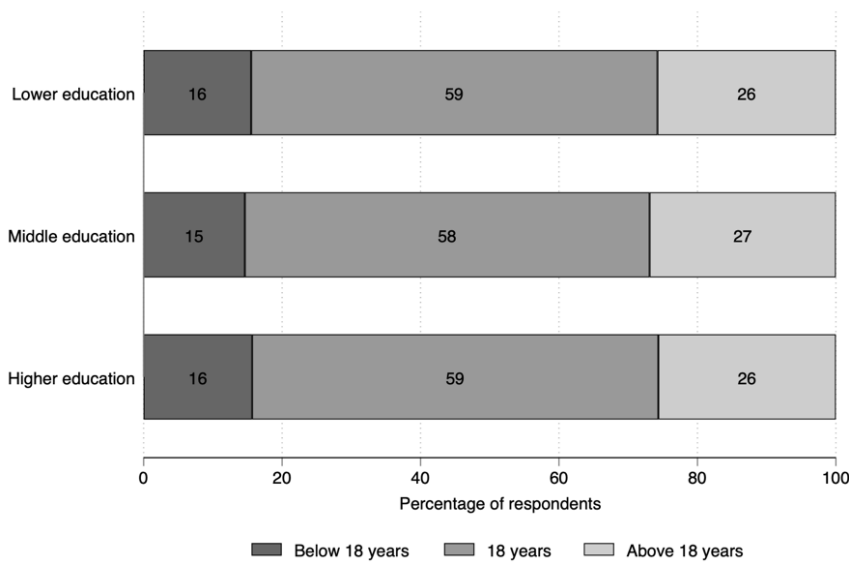


Figure 3. Preferences for voting age across levels of education.

Figure 4 displays preferred voting age by ideological self-placement (Left, Center, Right). While support for 18 years is uniformly high across all three groups (59%), left-leaning respondents are notably more likely to favour voting below 18 (20%) compared to Center and Right (both 14%), who in turn show slightly higher preference for raising the voting age above 18 (27% vs. 21% on the Left).

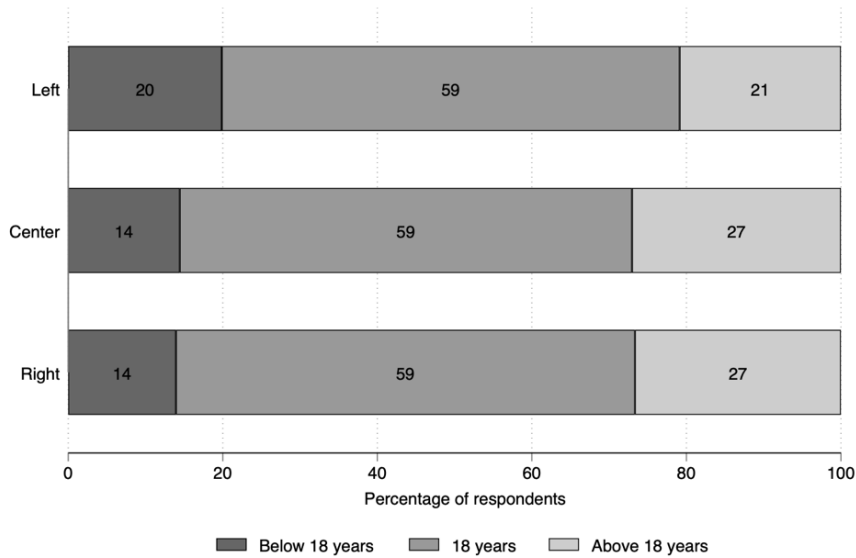


Figure 4. Preferences for voting age across left-right positioning.

Policy Options Compared

For countries considering or actively debating a reform of the voting age, the following options are worth considering. They are not mutually exclusive and can be combined depending on the political context. Keeping the voting age at 18 while investing in civic education is the safest route. It reflects the majority preference across countries and avoids backlash, though it also means missing out on the potential benefits of enfranchising younger citizens earlier. A softer alternative is to run pilots at the subnational level or for specific elections, building acceptance through visible experience. This works better in contexts where support is already comparatively higher, but resistance from older generations remains a real obstacle. Where resistance is strongest, structured dialogues with older cohorts can help build legitimacy before any reform is attempted, though this takes time and resources. Finally, since support for lowering the voting age is higher on the left while support for raising it is higher on the right, any communication strategy should be carefully calibrated to avoid reinforcing that divide.

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About the Researchers

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Cal Le Gall is a Postdoc researcher in Comparative Politics at the University of Salzburg. He worked as a post-doctoral researcher in the [DeVOTE](#) project between 2021-2023. His research interests revolve around voting behaviour, public opinion, European integration, and globalization, employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods. His current research project deals with the effects of external constraints on the transformation of political participation and aspiration for alternatives to representative democracy.



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Carolina Plescia is Associate Professor in the Department of Government at the University of Vienna. She is the PI of the ERC starting grant project [DeVOTE](#) (2021-2026) which examine the meanings of voting for ordinary citizens, their causes and consequences. She is also co-leading (with [Jan Maly](#)) a project funded by the [WWTF](#) on citizen-centered democratic innovation, which aim to understand citizen preferences for participatory budgeting algorithms.