THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
School of Social and Political Science

d|part

A youth problem?

Citizenship education in the context of political and digital change

Dr Jan Eichhorn

University of Edinburgh & d|part

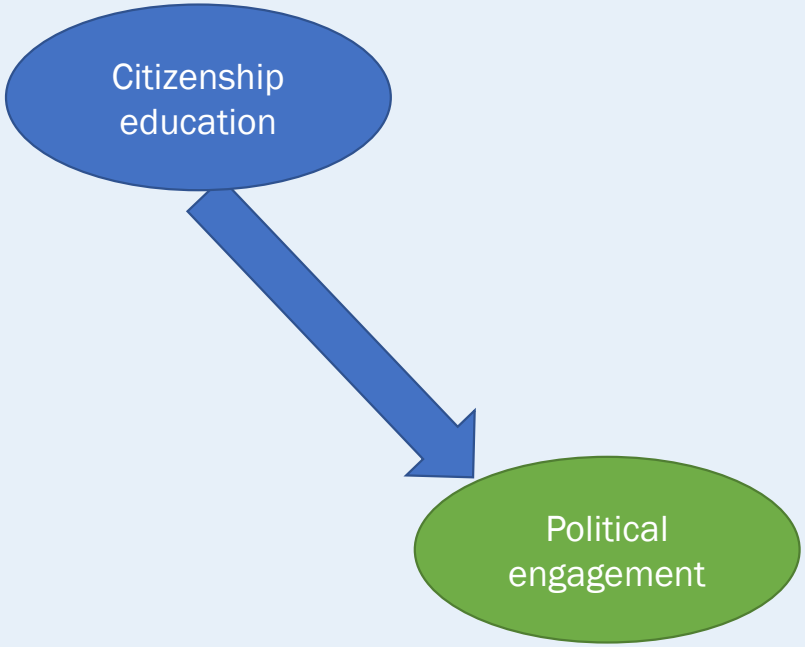
The plan for this talk

- The impact of citizenship education
- Online and offline participation: a straight-forward story?
- A youth issue? Opportunities for and limits of the classroom

The impact of citizenship education

There is a positive story!

Clear positive association shown in many empirical studies



https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13676261.2018.1450968

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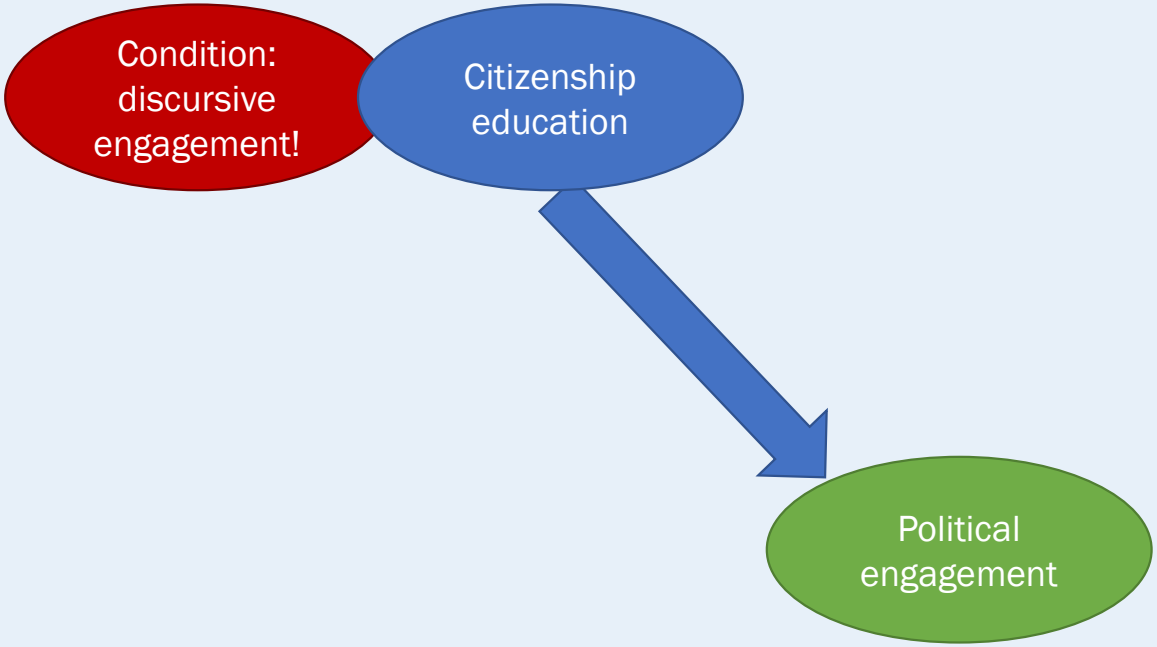
Clear positive association shown in many empirical studies



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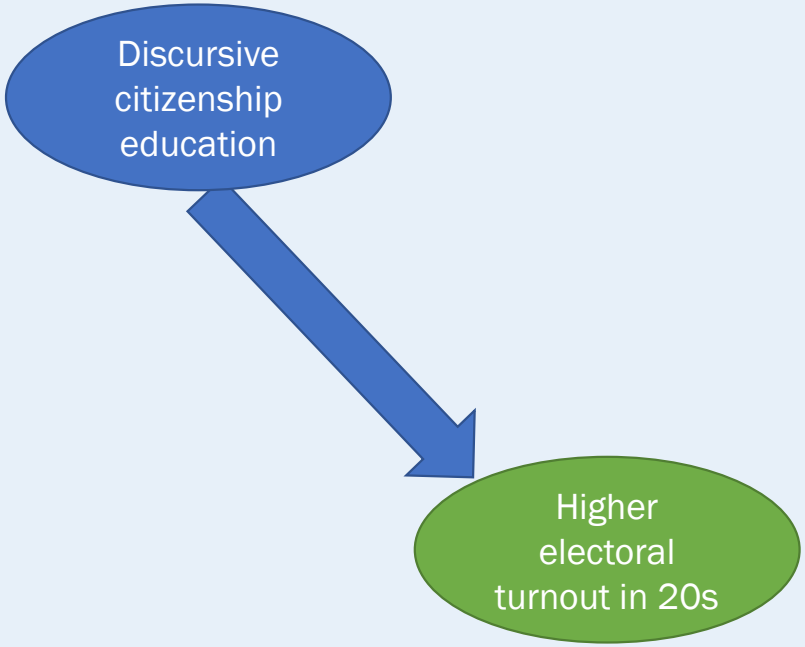
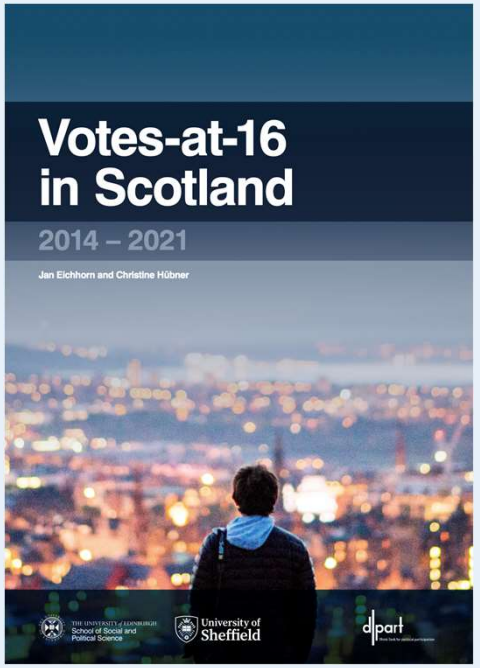
And it gets better!

There are lasting impacts into adulthood

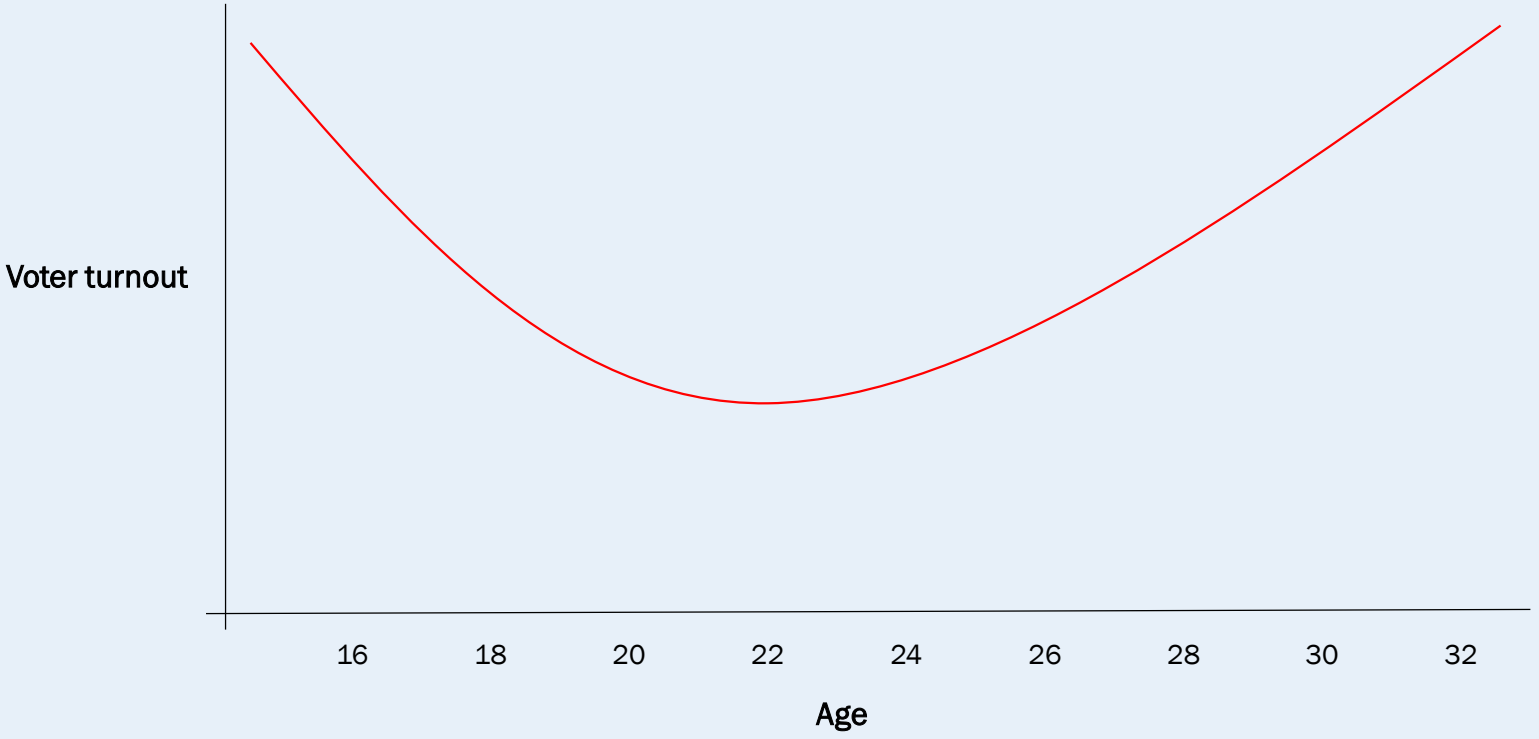


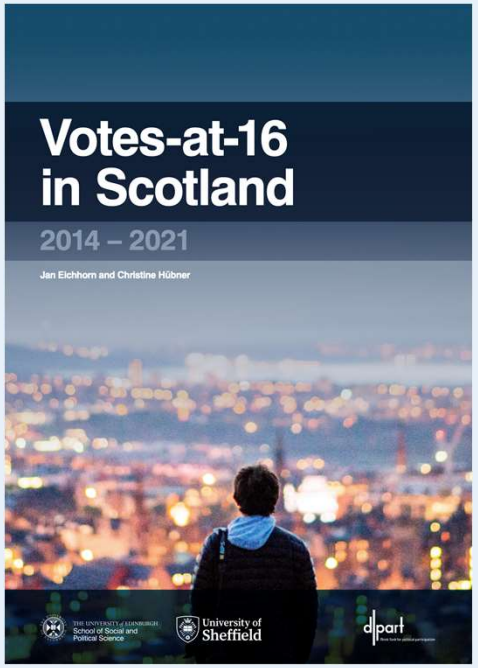


https://dpart.org/publications/votes-at-16-in-scotland-2014-2021/

Situating it within broader context

The standard pattern of turnout in early adulthood





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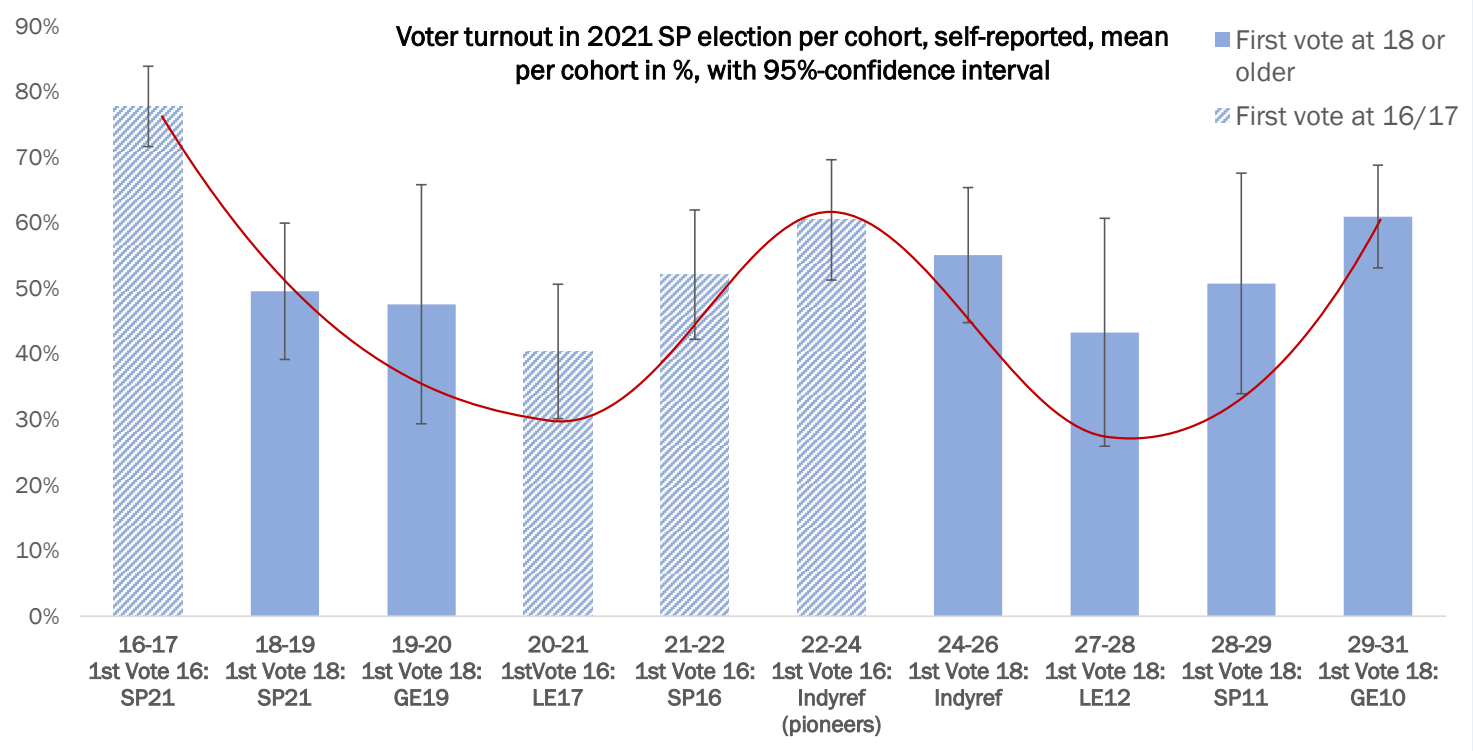
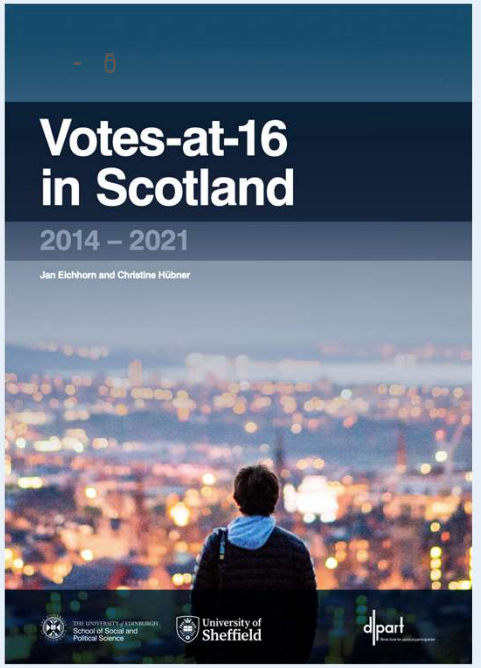
Situating it within broader context

The actual pattern shows the role of Votes-at-16



Age of respondents and first election at which they were eligible to vote



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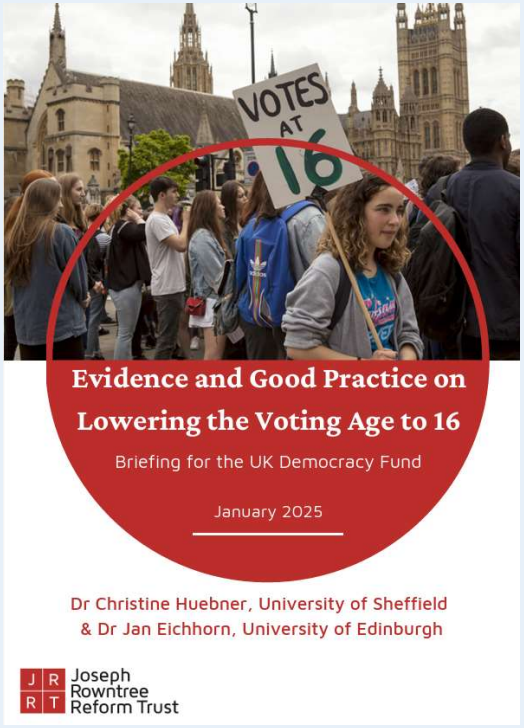
Amplifying positive effects

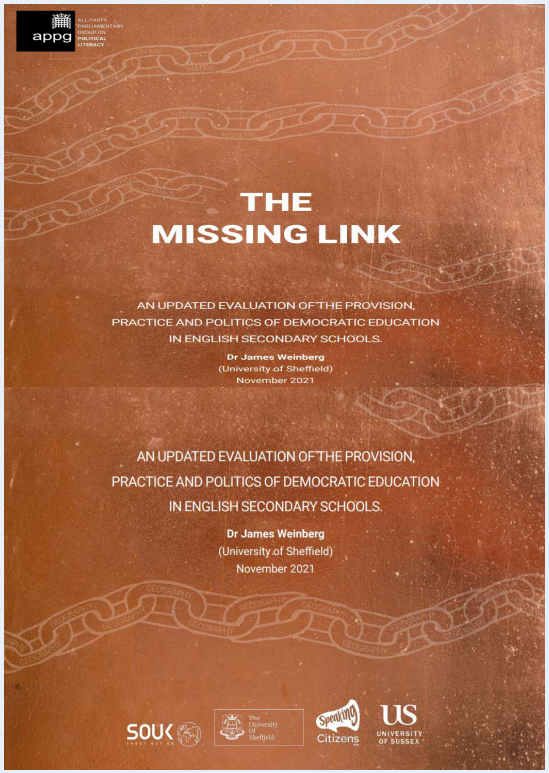
Connecting learning to opportunities for engagement (in school and beyond)



https://www.jrrt.org.uk/evidence-and-good-practice-on-lowering-the-voting-age-to-16-2/

Amplifying positive effects

Support schools and teachers in implementing what works well



https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/315863/; https://www.shoutoutuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/The-Missing-Link-Report-Digital-APPG-on-Political-Literacy-Report-Shout-Out-UK-Dr-James-Weinberg.pdf

But what participation are we talking about?

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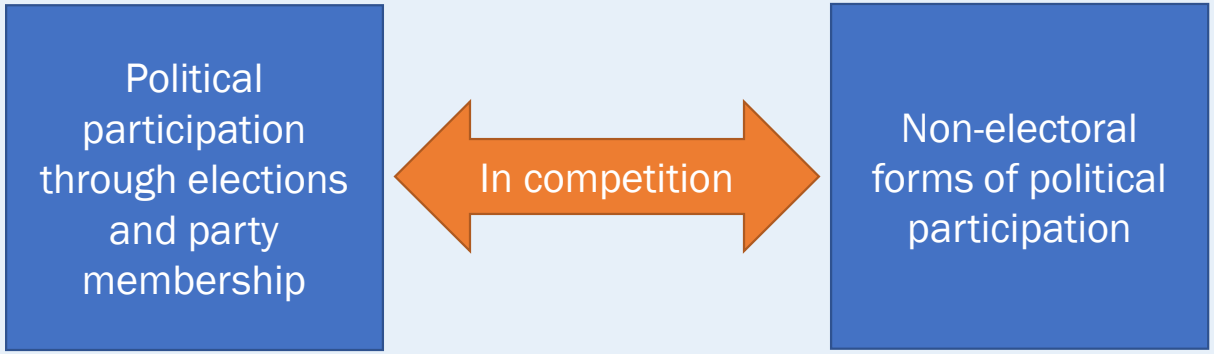
A traditional concept of political engagement



But what participation are we talking about?

A traditional concept of political engagement (frequently propagated by politicians)

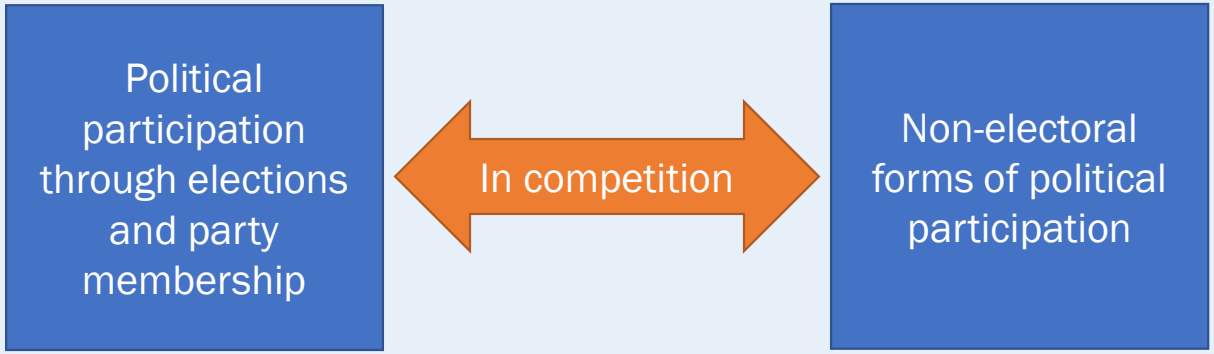
Political participation through elections and party membership

Non-electoral forms of political participation

Friedrich Merz in ARD "Wahlarena", 17 February 2025

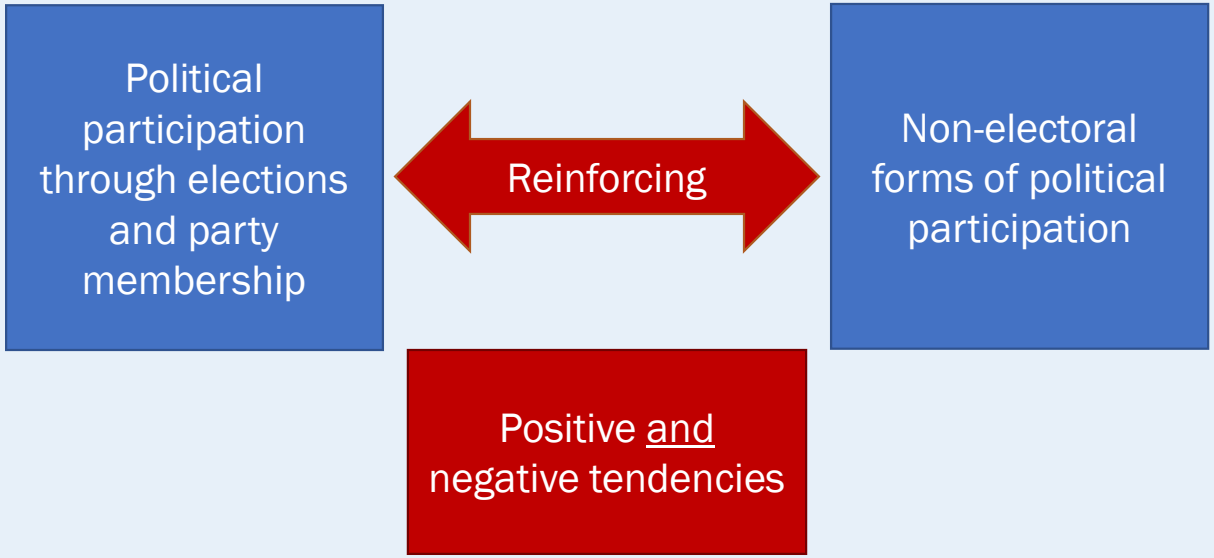
But what participation are we talking about?

A traditional concept of political engagement (internalised often by young people)



But what participation are we talking about?

In practice, however



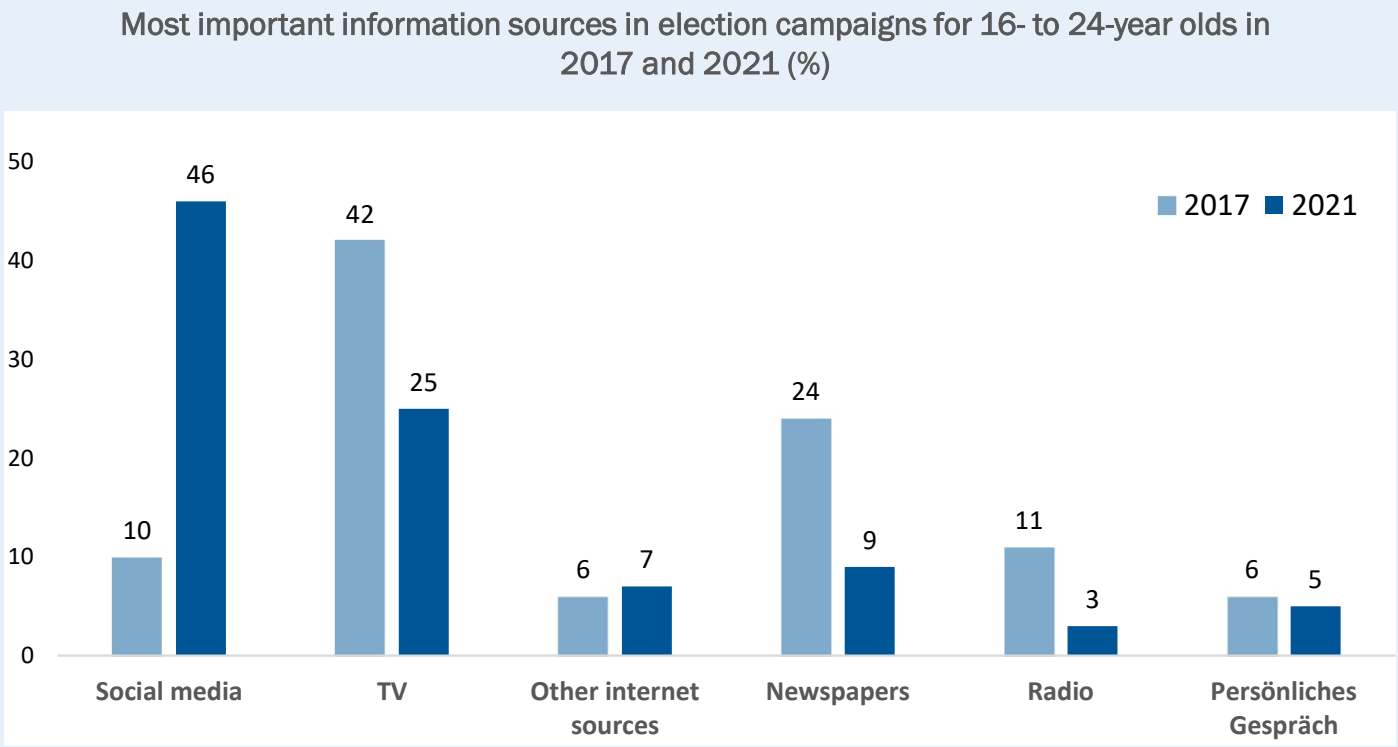
Online and offline participation: a straight-forward story?

Information sources have changed drastically

The leading platforms now for young people

Information sources have changed drastically

This is a recent phenomenon (e.g. Germany)



https://www.dpart.org/de/topics/jugendbeteiligung

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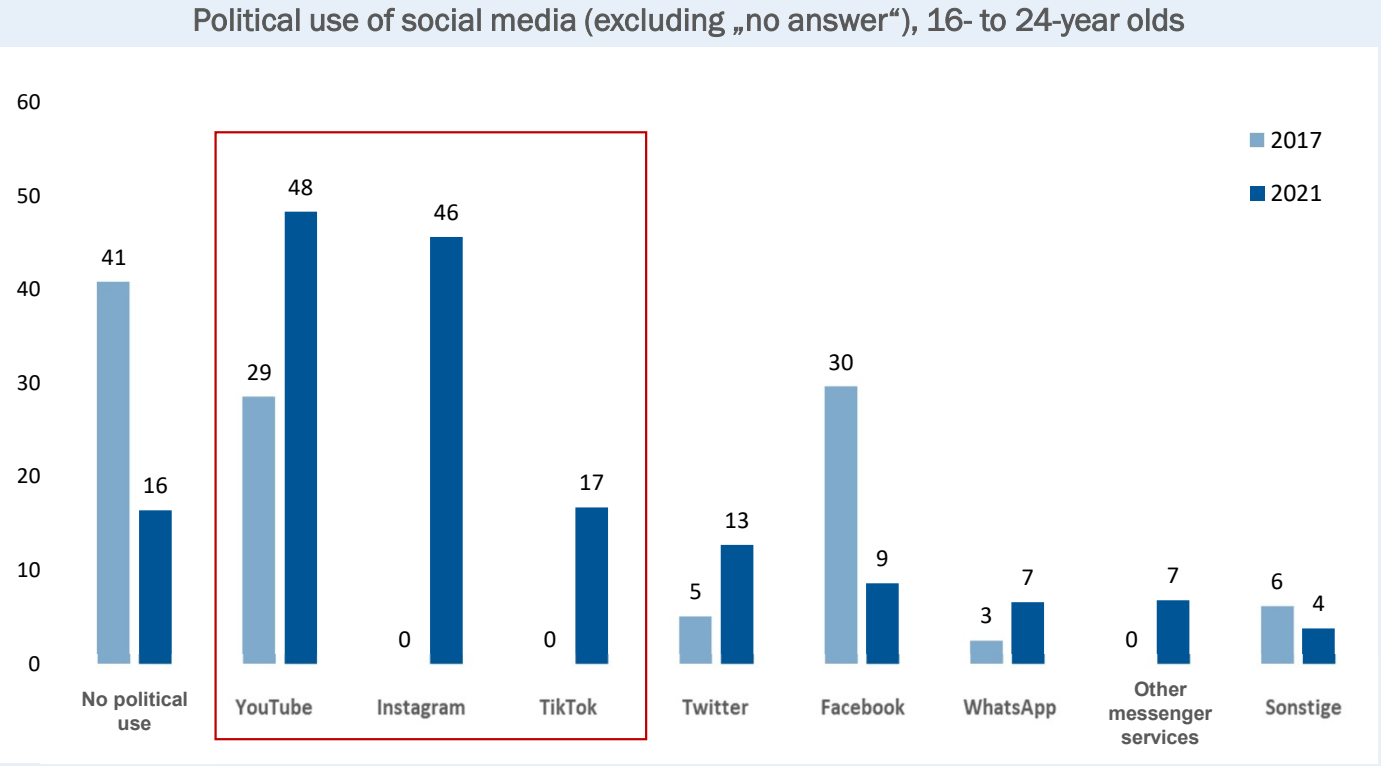

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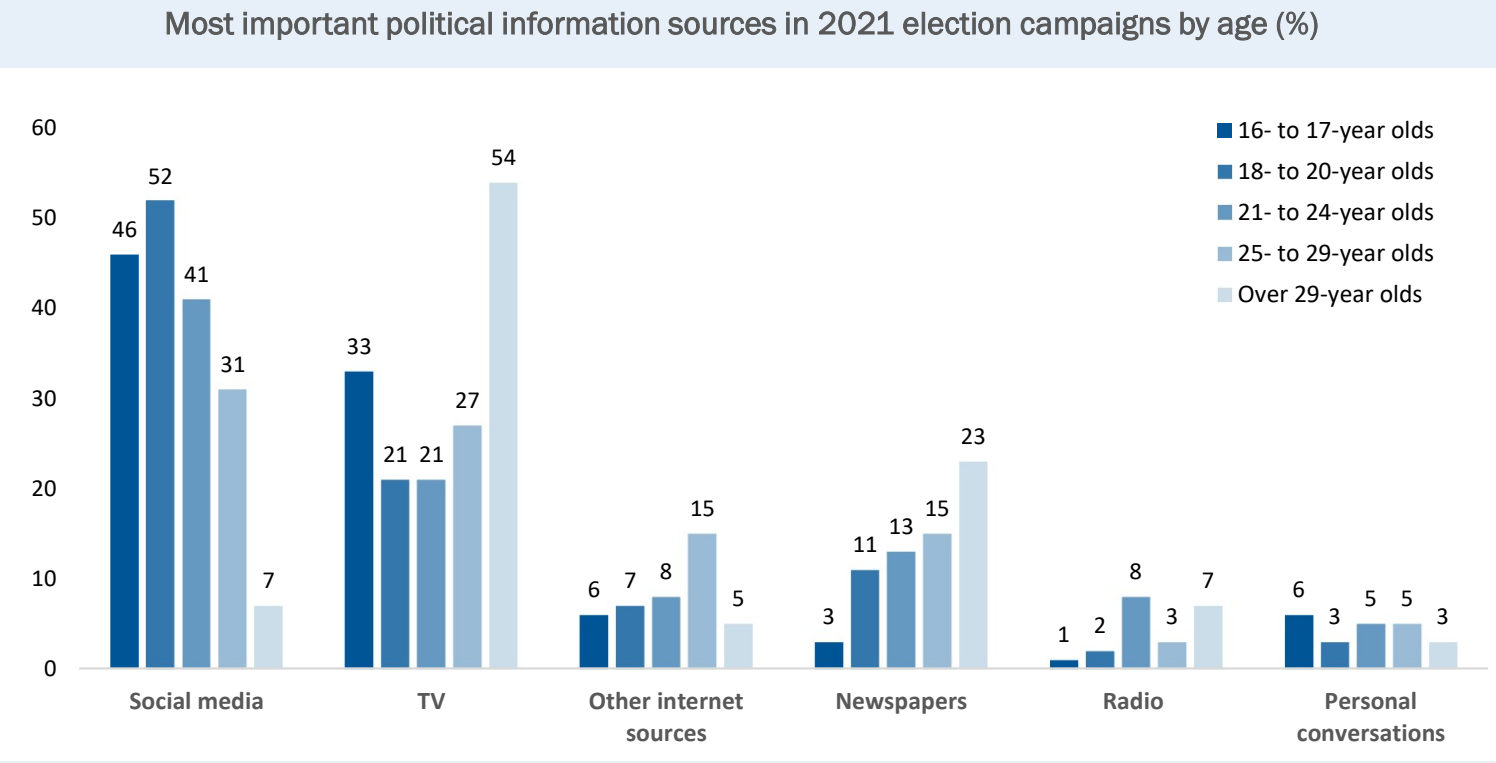
Information sources have changed drastically

We've seen a growing difference between younger and older voters



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But what does that mean?

Is social media engagement good or bad per se?

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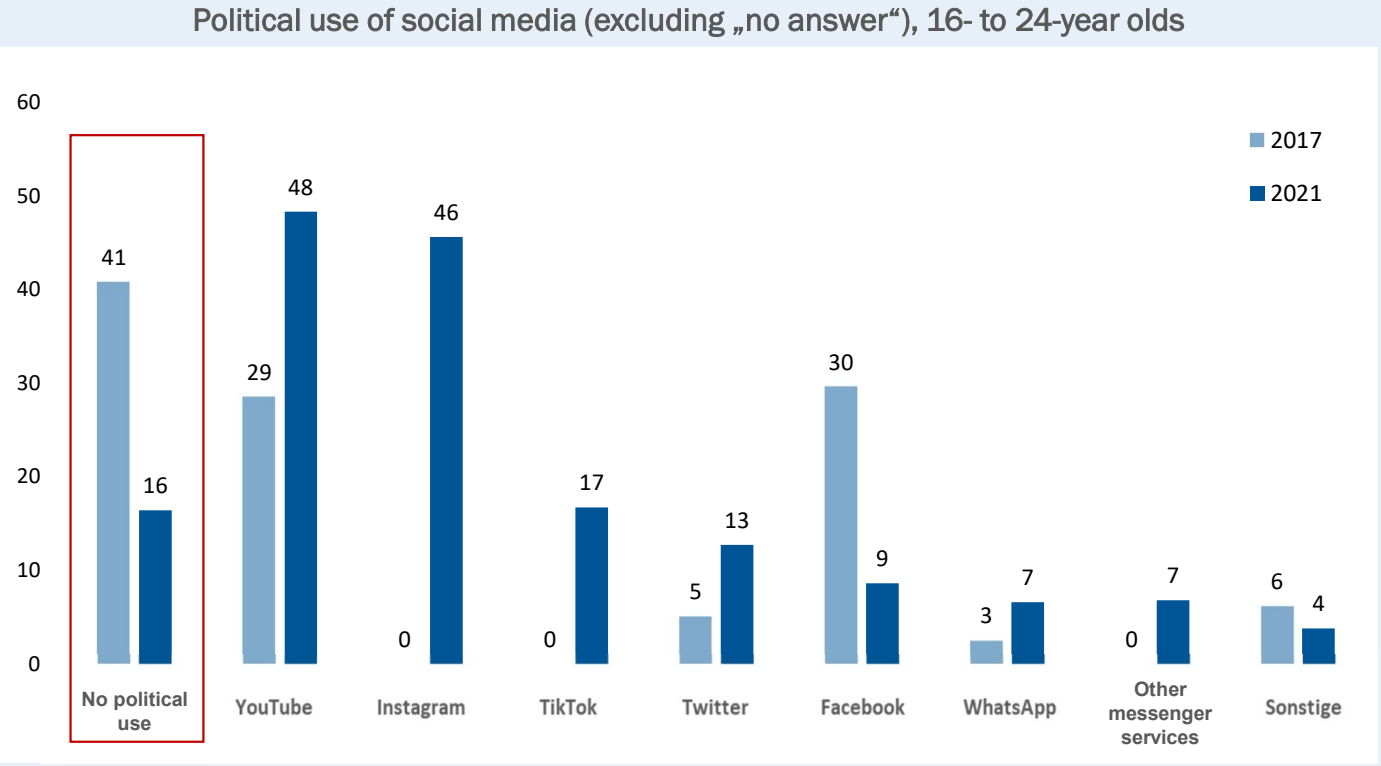

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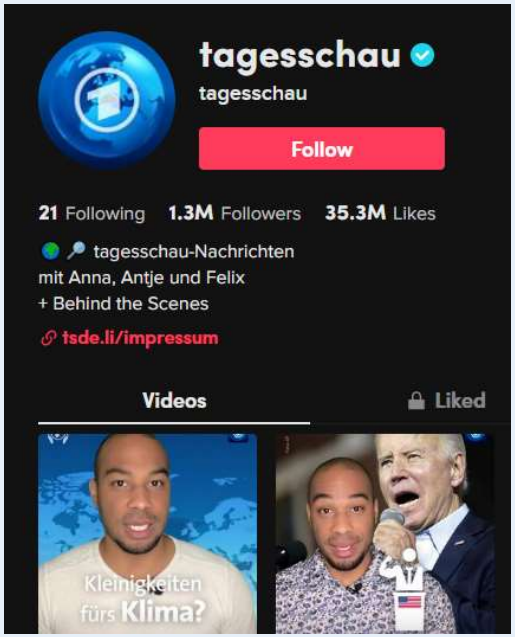
But what does that mean?

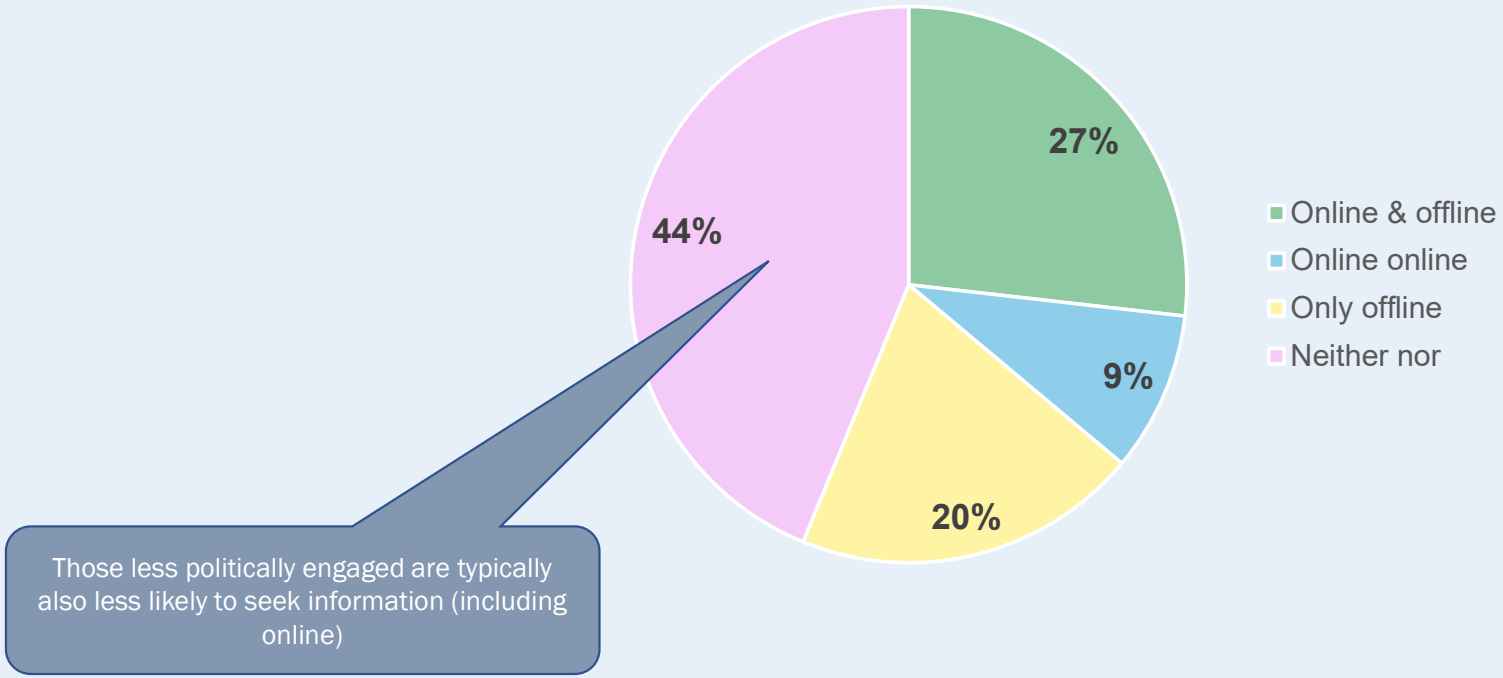
Social media content is not just about influencers



*For me it was the **Tagesschau** on TV, but now I don't watch TV anymore and I just find it much more relaxed on social media to just scroll down, you can just look at the topics that interest you.*

Ali, 16 (Hamburg focus groups)

How do young people engage politically?



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How do young people engage politically?

But who is the most critical/intentional in their engagement of those who participate?

https://www.dpart.org/de/topics/jugendbeteiligung

How do young people engage politically?

Everyone engaged seriously engages online!

Online engagement because of the reach and to mobilise, offline engagement for physical visbility and efficacy

Offline you can create an even bigger amplifier to be heard, (...) so the others really see that the people have a problem there. Online is more for preparation.
Jonas, 22 (Hamburg focus groups)

Low self-perceived efficacy offline, online engagement seen as more immediate and with greater reach

Every day in the evening (...) I am on Facebook or BILD or FOCUS and I just go to the comment section. (...) I try to create some order again. (...). I mean, there are simply opinions that require some counter.
Markus, 24 (Hamburg focus groups)

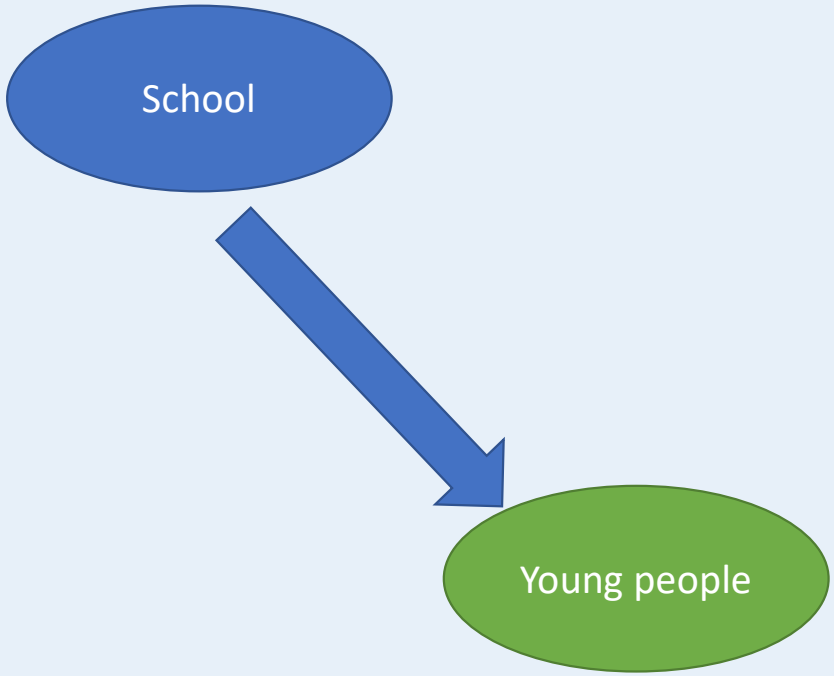
Assume your comment gets 15,000 likes, how long would it take you to tell 15,000 people your views in Hamburg?
Ali, 16 (Hamburg focus groups)

Strong algorithm awareness

https://www.dpart.org/de/topics/jugendbeteiligung

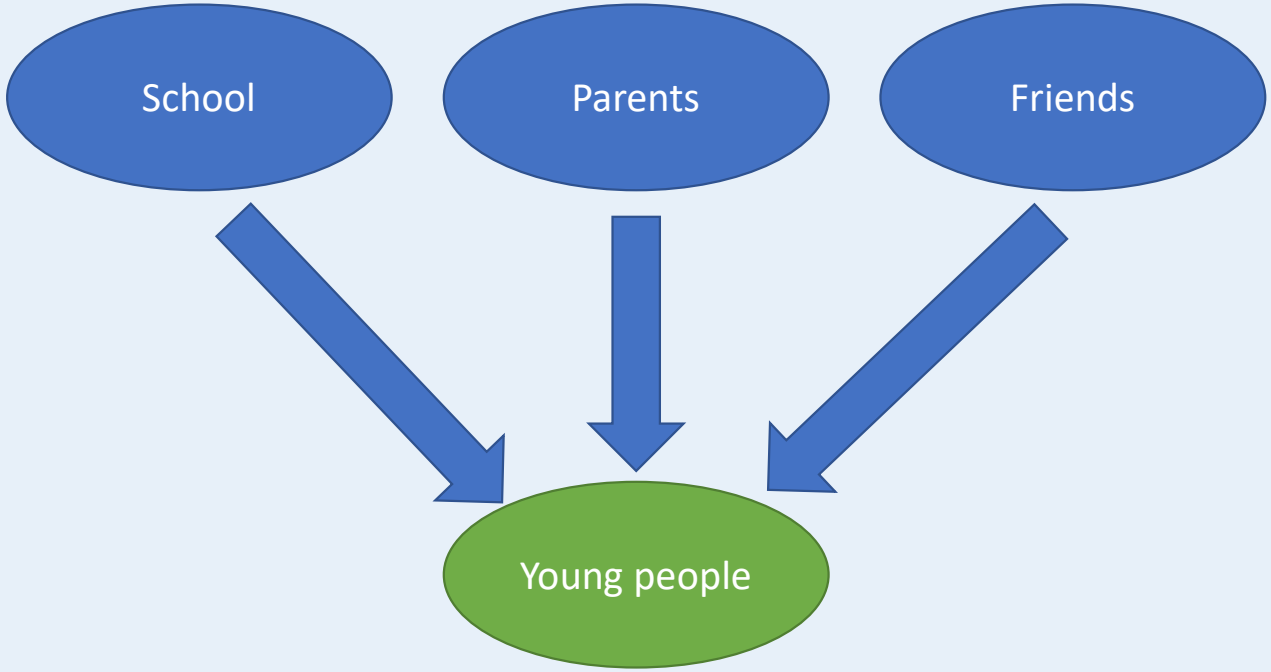
A youth issue? Opportunities for and limits of the classroom

The limits of citizenship education



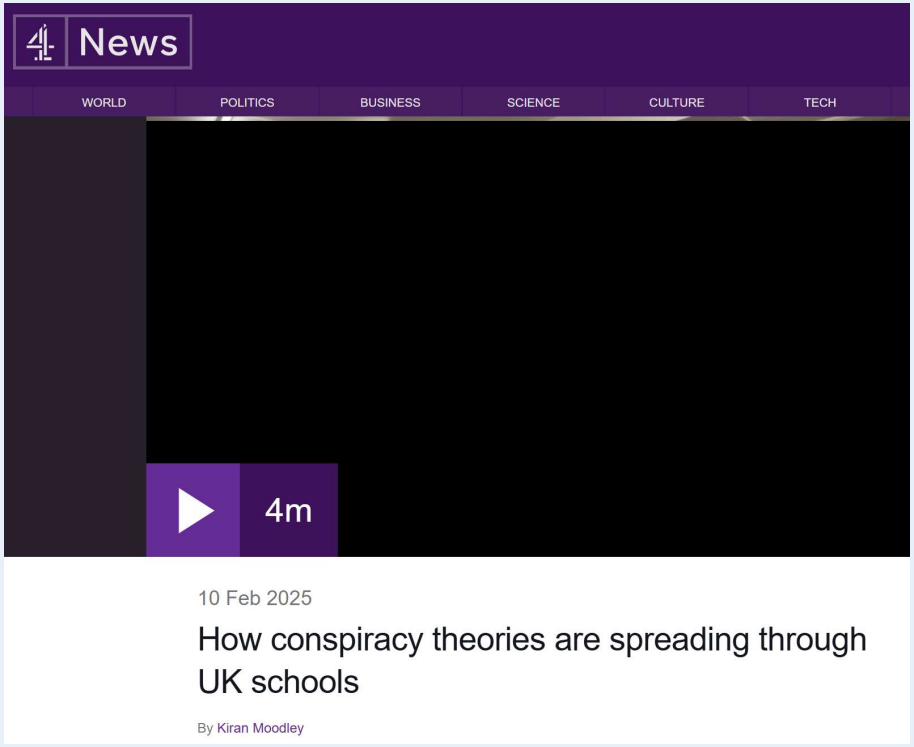
The limits of citizenship education

Socialisation and peer influences



The dangers of online information misuse

Fake news and misinformation are serious issues – right now



https://www.channel4.com/news/how-conspiracy-theories-are-spreading-through-uk-schools

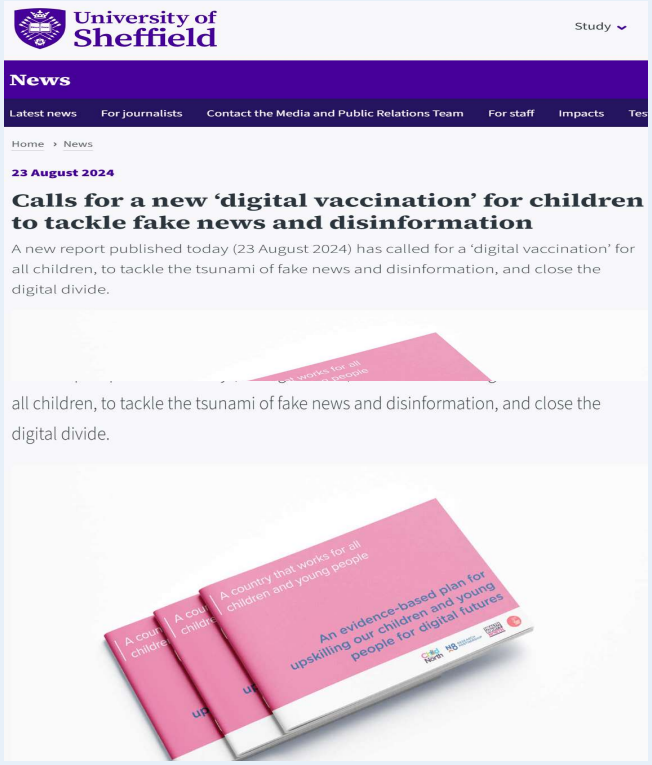
The dangers of online information misuse

Fake news and misinformation are serious issues – right now

→ **Also in your practice?**

The dangers of online information usage

Inoculation as key



https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/news/calls-new-digital-vaccination-children-tackle-fake-news-and-disinformation

But: Is disinformation a youth issue?

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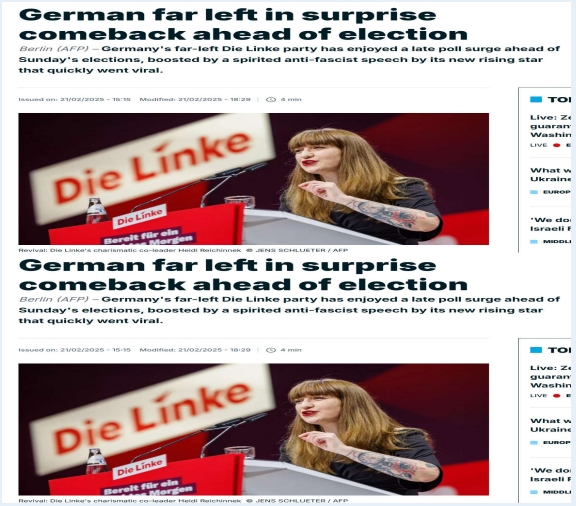
Critical assessments of content production and politics “supply”

I always have the feeling that they [politicians] don't want to address young people at all. They want to appeal to their ***core voters, who are 60+*** *and that's just how they talk.*
Helena, 24 (Hamburg focus group)

There's still a lot of room for improvement for us, but at least we’re engaging in a ***rethink*** *noting that we have to use such channels.*
Heidi Reichinnek, MdB (Die Linke)

We're not particularly clever on social media and we don't have any ***reach*** *there either.*
Andreas Schmidt, MdL (SPD)



https://www.dpart.org/de/topics/jugendbeteiligung, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250221-german-far-left-in-surprise-comeback-ahead-of-election

But: Is disinformation a youth issue?

Young people are as competent in matching programmes to parties as everyone else

Political Psychology

Political Psychology, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2023
doi: 10.1111/pops.12892

Voting at 16? 16–17-Year-Old Germans Vote as Correctly as Adults

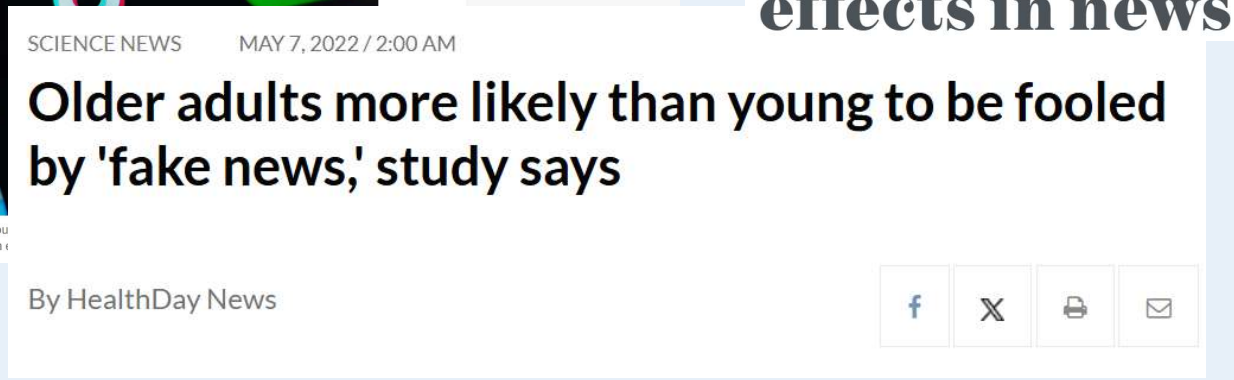
Anna Lang
University of Erfurt

Lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 years has recently been a hot topic of the political debate in many democratic countries. This study investigated whether the voting quality of 16–17-year-olds is inferior to that of the voting population. Shortly before the 2021 German federal election, two samples, representative for age and gender, indicated personal preferences about various political issues and weighted them according to importance, allowing for the calculation of individual expected values for political parties. Participants then indicated their voting choice. These choices were normatively correct when individuals voted for the party that best reflected their preferences, that is, the one maximizing the expected value. Results show that the voting decisions of 16–17-year-olds were as good as those by eligible voters. The study indicates that the exclusion of 16–17-year-old Germans in democratic elections cannot be justified by their lack of decision-making ability.

KEY WORDS: voting, decision quality, decision competence, normative voting, voting age

https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/pops.12892

But: Is disinformation a youth issue?

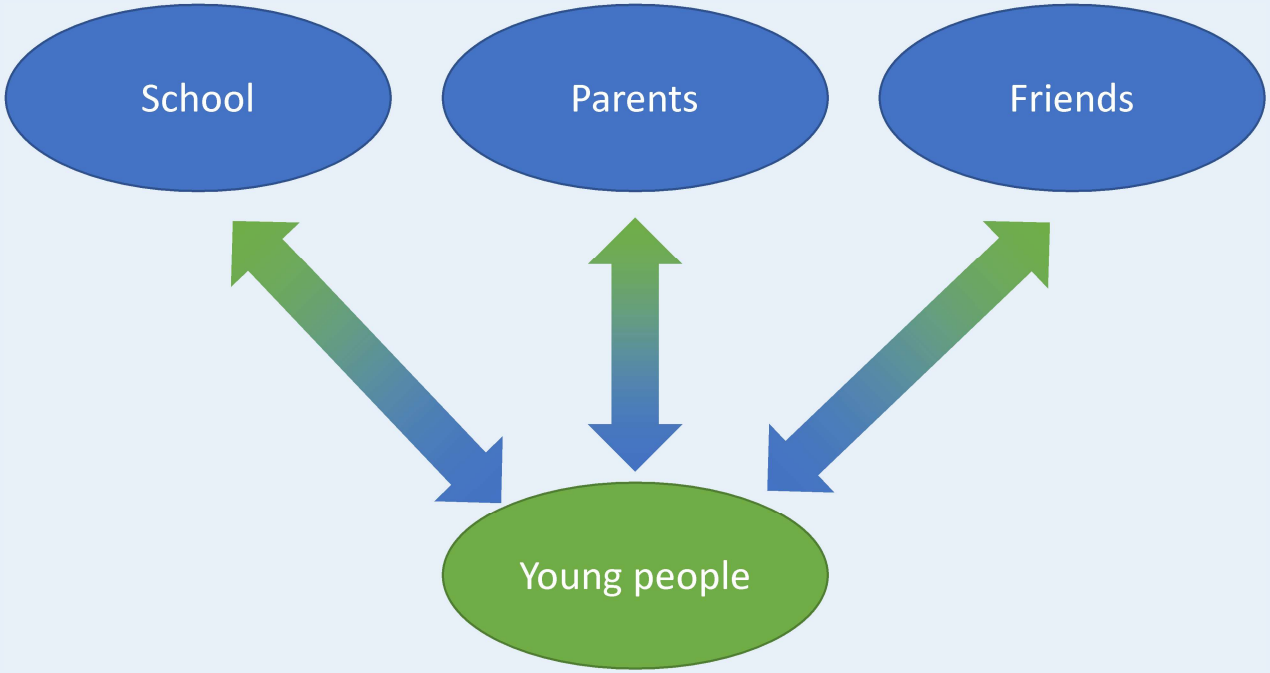


https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/aug/16/teens-online-conspiracies-study, https://www.upi.com/Science_News/2022/05/07/fake-news-older-adults-more-susceptible/2181651853701/, https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/older-americans-are-more-vulnerable-to-prior-exposure-effects-in-news-evaluation/

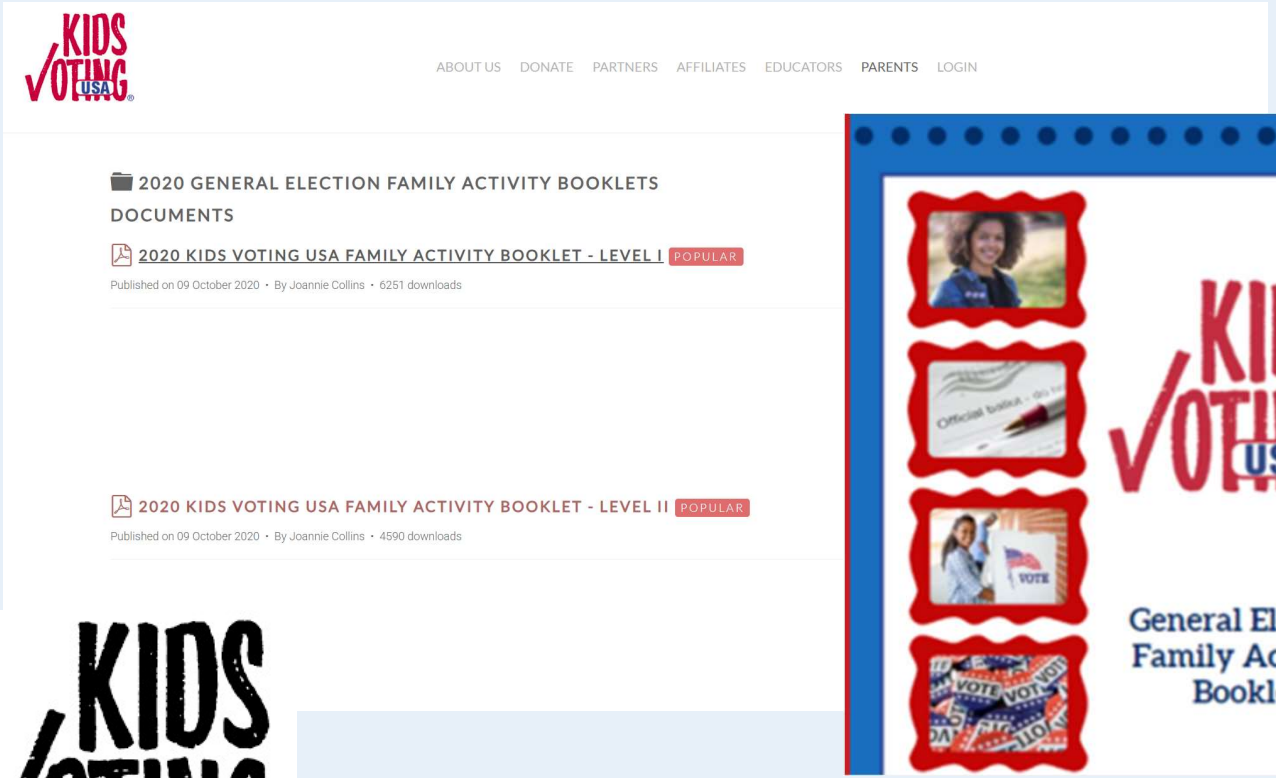
Disinformation: a whole society issue?

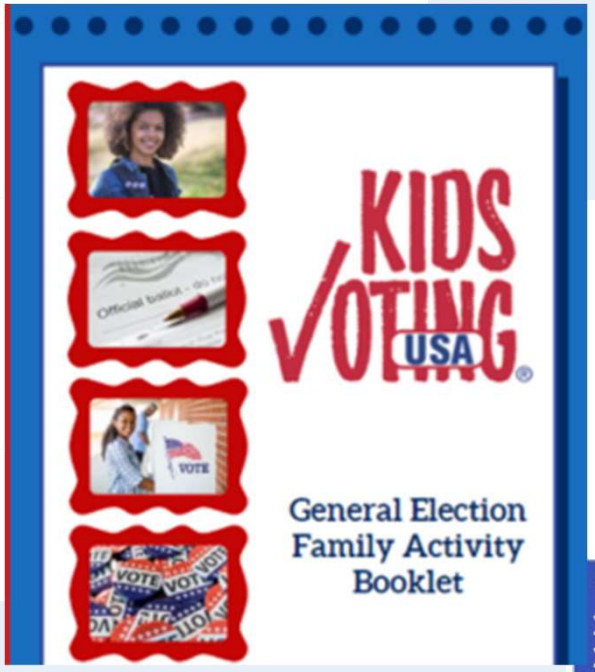
Young people as learners & educators?

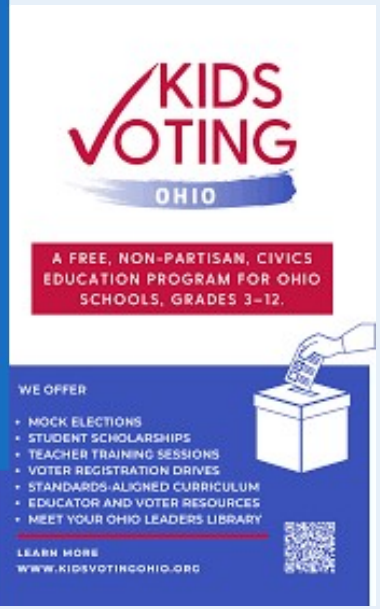
Considering reverse socialisation pathways as empowering



Young people as learners & educators?







KIDS VOTING USA®

https://www.kidsvotingusa.org/parents/2020-family-activity-booklets

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Thank you for your attention. Any questions or comments?

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