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Democracy for the youth? The impact of mock elections on voting age attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Should 16-year-olds be entitled to participate in elections? We theorize that mock elections for adolescents, who are not eligible to vote, affect the short-term support among the general public for lowering the voting age. To test our theoretical expectation, we utilize variation among municipalities in the organization of mock elections during the Danish local elections in 2009. Difference-in-difference estimates with data from the subsequent local elections in 2013 demonstrate that citizens in municipalities with mock elections for adolescents were more supportive of lowering the voting age and that their support was strongly rooted in ideological differences.


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Introduction

Democratic societies have institutional constraints on who can participate in elections. The most salient boundary between voters and non-voters in contemporary democracies is age, and it is rooted in the dominant view that only adults should have the right to vote (Dahl 1989). Over time, most countries have settled on a voting age of 18 (Blais, Massicotte, and Yoshinaka 2001), but several Western democracies are considering allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote (Chan and Clayton 2006).

Despite broad scholarly and public interest in the preferred voting age, attention to the public opinion on the matter has been limited. However, there are at least two specific reasons to study public opinion dynamics in this context. First, examining the factors explaining citizens' level of support for lowering the voting age helps us understand how people perceive fundamental democratic principles, that is, when to include people in democratic

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processes. Second, understanding the sources of support for changes in the voting age institution can help assessing the prospects for pursuing such changes, especially in countries where institutional adjustments of the voting age require constitutional changes.

Thus, a crucial aspect of the voting age question is how specific initiatives affect support for lowering the voting age. In this article, we examine how initiatives inviting adolescents to participate in democracy affect citizens' preferences on lowering the voting age. More specifically, we examine how mock elections, that is, simulated elections for adolescents who are not eligible to vote, in connection with an election, can shape the level of support for lowering the voting age among the general public.

To study how mock elections affect adults' attitudes on voting age, we utilize variation in the organization of mock elections during the 2009 municipal elections in Denmark. Thirty-one of the 98 Danish municipalities organized such mock elections for 16- and 17-year-olds. Combining survey data sampled at the municipal level with contextual information about mock elections, we are able to study the dynamics of support for the voting age across municipalities with and without mock elections.

Our theoretical proposition is that citizens will be more accepting of a change in the voting age from 18 to 16 when they are exposed to local electoral activities that include adolescents in democratic processes and highlight the benefits of lowering the voting age. The empirical test, with difference-in-difference estimates using data from the subsequent 2013 municipal election where none of the municipalities organized mock elections during the election campaign, provides support for this expectation. The design substantiates that the effect is not a result of long-term unobserved differences between the municipalities that are unrelated to the mock election activities in different municipalities. Furthermore, to examine how mock elections affect public attitudes on voting age, we study contextual and individual heterogeneity in the effect. First, by studying whether a quantitative feature of the mock elections, that is, turnout in mock elections, caused heterogeneous changes in the public. Second, by studying whether people's relation to a change in the voting age and their ideological profile caused heterogeneous responses.

While contextual features such as mock elections are expected to affect people's attitudes on voting age, previous studies have focused on how individual factors shape voting age attitudes. Based on and contributing to this line of research, we show that citizens' attitudes differ in predictable ways. However, while some of the results echo findings in the literature, for example, lower support for lowering the voting age among older people, our results show that, in the Danish case, citizens' attitudes on voting age are rooted in ideological and partisan differences. This contradicts recent findings from the UK (Birch, Clarke, and Whitely 2015), and emphasizes the

relevance of comparative studies of voting age attitudes in different institutional and electoral settings.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we outline the relevance of the voting age institution with specific focus on the context of the public debate on voting age. Second, we hypothesize how mock election activities aimed at including adolescents in the election as well as individual factors are expected to affect citizens' support for lowering the voting age. Third, we introduce the empirical case and strategy of analysis. Fourth, we present and discuss the results.

Caring about the voting age

The voting age has been a key issue in the public debate alongside the development of modern parliamentary democracies. In Western Europe, starting with the UK in 1969, a large number of countries reduced the voting age to 18 during the 1970s. The USA, Canada and Australia followed a similar path. Young people were better educated and capable of participating in democracy than ever before, but the primary argument for lowering the voting age was that many young men served in the army. "Old enough to fight, old enough to vote" was a common slogan.

Globally, 18 is the most common voting age (Blais, Massicotte, and Yoshinaka 2001; McAllister 2014). During the 1990s, however, concerns about declining turnout rates among younger voters put the voting age back on the political agenda. A proposal to lower the voting age to 16 was brought to a vote and defeated in the British parliament in 1999. Some German *Länders* lowered the voting age to 16 during the 1990s, and in 2007 Austria became the first EU member state to adopt a voting age of 16 at all levels (Zeglovits and Schwarzer 2009; Ødegård 2011). In the USA, the voting age has recently been lowered in a few elections at the local level, for example, in Takoma Park and Hyattsville, Maryland.

A variety of Western countries, including Australia, and the Nordic countries Norway and Denmark, are currently debating whether to lower the voting age, inspired by the experiences from Germany and Austria. Thus, the public debate continues and several reports have examined the possible democratic advantages and disadvantages (McAllister 2014). The intensity of the debates not only reflects the political initiatives on this issue, but also the various campaigns led by youth organizations and political parties, advocating the political rights of young citizens.

The relationship between voting age and age of maturity is often discussed in relation to tax liabilities with reference to the old saying, "no taxation without representation" (Dahl 1989). The literature on political maturity often portrays young people as politically ignorant, yet it is also argued that 16-year-olds today do have sufficient knowledge about politics, and that

they should be ready to vote once they leave school (Folkes 2004; Hart and Atkins 2011). Local election studies in German *Länders* suggest that 16–17-year-olds are more likely to participate in elections than 18–24-year-olds (Electoral Commission 2004, 15–16), and post-election surveys in Austria indicate that political interest and turnout among 16–17-year-olds is as high or even higher than among 18–20-year-olds (Wagner, Johann, and Kritzing 2012; Zeglovits and Zandonella 2013; Zeglovits and Aichholzer 2014). Furthermore, it is argued that giving young people genuine political rights might actually strengthen their democratic commitment and political engagement (Ødegård 2011). In short, there is widespread disagreement on these matters (Cowley and Denver 2004; Folkes 2004; Chan and Clayton 2006; Cook 2013).

During the 2011 Norwegian local elections, 21 out of 428 municipalities lowered the voting age to 16. A large-scale experiment examined, among other things, how voting rights affected 16- and 17-year-olds' political interest, political efficacy and attitudinal consistency (Bergh 2013; Godli 2015). The findings from Norway, as well as from Germany and Austria, are interesting because they are based on studies of real changes in the electorate.

Despite public and scholarly disagreement and debate over the preferred voting age, little attention has been devoted to explaining the attitudinal differences in the general public. Who favors including adolescents in the electorate? Attitudes among adults are important since they ultimately decide whether they will push the limits for when a person is considered an adult in regard to political participation.

Explaining voting age attitudes

There has been little focus on explaining support for lowering the voting age, and in particular how the electoral environment affects such attitudes. We center on one specific election initiative that is expected to affect citizens' level of support, namely the initiative to include adolescents in democratic practices through mock elections. More specifically, we expect that such initiatives can spill over and affect support in a positive manner.

Events in the context of political campaigns have implications for public opinion (Holbrook 1994; Shaw 1999; Jacobson 2015), and specific events during election campaigns can, intentionally or unintentionally, affect how citizens perceive political issues. Previous studies have examined, for instance, how campaign events affect citizens' political attitudes and behavior (Tolbert, Bowen, and Donovan 2009), how citizens' political attitudes in general are sensitive to the information environment prior to elections (Hopmann et al. 2010), and how campaigns can cause short-term changes in citizens' assessments of the political system (Banducci and Karp 2003).

Mock elections are usually held to increase young people's knowledge about democratic politics and elections (Deitz and Boeckelman 2012). However, we are not interested in how mock elections affect the behavior and attitudes of the primary audience, that is, the 16–17-year-olds, but how such initiatives can affect the general public's support for lowering the voting age. Since mock election activities are centered on the democratic participation of adolescents and the accompanying democratic benefits, we expect that citizens will be more likely to support giving such groups democratic rights, that is, lowering the voting age.

On average, people are more likely to be exposed to political arguments for lowering the voting age in electoral contexts where mock elections are organized. As mock elections are mobilization initiatives aimed at including adolescents in the electoral process, the adult population will be more likely to be exposed to the mobilization initiative and arguments for why adolescents should be allowed to vote. Thus, we expect that citizens will be more accepting of a change in the voting age from 18 to 16 when they are exposed to an electoral context where 16-year-olds have the possibility to participate in mobilization activities.

A few studies have examined the public opinion on lowering the voting age and the factors explaining the different opinions. In 1965, Beck and Jennings conducted a survey among American high school seniors, their parents, teachers and school principals regarding the question of lowering the voting age to 18 (Beck and Jennings 1969). They found that parents' attitudes on voting age were weakly associated with voting age attitudes among the high school seniors, whereas region, sex and projected political participation were substantially related to voting age attitudes.

More recently, Birch, Clarke, and Whitely (2015) found that 16% of the respondents were in favor of lowering the voting age to 16 in the UK. When they analyzed the potential predictors of being in favor, they found that older, higher-income, and middle- and upper-class individuals were less in favor of lowering the voting age to 16. Interestingly, they expected left-wing ideology to be related to more positive attitudes, but found no empirical evidence for such an expectation.

Evidence from Norway revealed limited support in the population for lowering the electoral legal age to 16 (Bergh 2014). Only about 20% of the respondents were in favor of lowering the voting age. Studying the predictors of variation in these attitudes, they found that older voters were more skeptical toward lowering the voting age. However, it is noteworthy that the most positive attitudes were found among the 30–44-year-olds, and not among the youngest voters, the 18–29-year-olds. Since young people will benefit from extension of the franchise, we expect that citizens' support for lowering the voting age will be most prominent among this group of citizens.

In regard to ideology, Bergh (2014) found in a Norwegian study that more leftist voters than rightist voters were in favor of lowering the voting age. In Denmark, progressive reductions of the voting age have followed an increasingly consistent implementation of the principle of equal and universal suffrage for all citizens, and over time the parties on the left side of the political spectrum have been most progressive with respect to extensions of the franchise and lowering the voting age (Svensson 1978; Kjaer and Levinsen 2013). As preferences on the voting age issue are expected to be strongly related to preferences on changing the institutional status quo, we also expect that people's ideological stance will be decisive in explaining their attitudes on voting age.

Research design and data

During the Danish local election campaign in November 2009, 31 out of the 98 municipalities held mock elections for the 16–17-year-olds (see Online Appendix C). They were initiated by the Danish Youth Council in collaboration with Local Government Denmark (KL) and served two purposes: to strengthen the political engagement of the younger generations and to contribute to the public debate on lowering the voting age to 16. We focus on the latter aspect, as we are interested in how the public perceived the voting age issue in a political context with mock elections.

Local elections are held every four years at the municipal level. The municipalities are heavyweights in the Danish public sector (Blom-Hansen and Heeager 2011, 227); they provide welfare services and their budgets approximate half the total public expenditures.

More than 50,000 16–17-year-olds participated in the mock election. This large-scale mock election was the first of its kind in Denmark. During the weeks leading up to the elections, schools and local political institutions organized political events and activities to involve young people in political debates on a variety of issues, such as public transportation, student housing, recreational activities, etc. In addition, some youth organizations campaigned in favor of lowering the voting age.

In the 31 participating municipalities, there were 15 mayors from the Liberal Party (*Venstre*), 15 mayors from the Social Democratic Party (*Socialdemokraterne*) and 1 from a non-partisan list. Overall, we found no evidence that municipalities organizing mock elections differed from other municipalities with regard to for instance the party of the mayor ($p = .955$) or voter turnout ($p = .254$).

The Danish case offers a unique opportunity to examine how mock elections aimed at including adolescents in democratic activities affect public opinion on lowering the voting age, as we are able to compare citizens from municipalities with and without mock elections. Furthermore, we are

able to compare the mock election context with the next election, four years later, where no mock elections were held at all.

Empirically, we use two national surveys conducted in the wake of the municipal elections in 2009 and 2013. The 2009 survey was collected between 4 December and 31 December (the local elections in the 98 municipalities were all held on 17 November) as a combined telephone and web survey conducted by Epinion. A total of 3336 respondents answered the questionnaire (for more details, see Elklit and Kjaer 2013). The 2013 survey was collected between 20 November and 16 December (the local elections were held on 19 November) as a combined telephone and web survey conducted by TNS Gallup. A total of 4528 respondents answered the questionnaire (for more details, see Elklit, Elmelund-Præstekær, and Kjaer Forthcoming). Both surveys have identical measures and were sampled at the municipal level, ensuring comparability and observations from all 98 municipalities. Importantly, we have a sufficient number of observations (at least 30) from each municipality in both 2009 and 2013.

In order to substantiate that our estimates are unaffected by unobserved differences between the municipalities, we utilize a difference-in-differences approach. More specifically, we measure the difference between the mock election municipalities and other municipalities in the 2009 local election campaign conditional upon the same difference in the subsequent local election campaign in 2013. The logic behind this research design is to exploit the fact that no municipalities experimented with mock elections in the subsequent election, which enables us to use the difference-in-difference estimates to identify the impact of mock elections taking potential differences between the municipalities into account. In sum, we expect a difference in peoples' voting age attitudes during the 2009 election conditional upon whether they live in a mock election municipality (MEM).

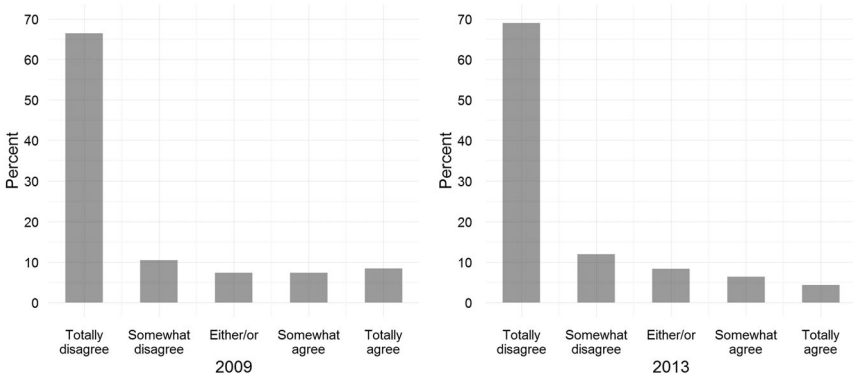


Figure 1. Distribution of voting age attitudes.

Voting age attitude is measured on a five-point Likert scale from totally agree to totally disagree with the statement: “The voting age for municipal elections should be lowered to 16 years” (for the wording of all variables, see Online Appendix A; for descriptive statistics, see Online Appendix B). The variable is right skewed meaning that the vast majority of Danish citizens disagree that the voting age should be lowered to 16. [Figure 1](#) shows the distribution in 2009 and 2013, and it is clear that the public is not in favor of lowering the voting age. In 2009, a minority of 15% were positive (somewhat or totally agree) toward a lowering of the voting age, and in 2013 it was only 10%. These results are largely in line with recent studies from Norway, Australia and the UK (Bergh 2014; McAllister 2014; Birch, Clarke, and Whitely 2015). Thus, we also create a binary variable where respondents were assigned the value 1 if they did not totally disagree and 0 if they did. We do this to test the impact of mock elections on voting age attitudes as an ordinal variable and binary variable, the latter making it easier to calculate predicted probabilities of having more positive attitudes toward a lower voting age.

The key independent variable, MEM, is coded 1 for municipalities that implemented mock elections during the 2009 election and 0 for other municipalities. This is relevant because important information may be lost, for example, if the variation in the quantity or quality of mock elections differed across municipalities. Below we thus examine whether the turnout in the mock elections affected the public’s reactions to the events.

The impact of mock elections

To estimate the impact of the mock elections, we estimate cumulative link mixed models for the ordinal dependent variable and mixed-effects logistic models for the binary dependent variable. [Table 1](#) shows six different regression models, three for the ordinal dependent variable and three for the binary dependent variable. The first model includes three variables: MEM, municipality election period and the multiplicative term of the two. First, we find that citizens had more positive attitudes toward lowering the voting age in municipalities with mock elections. More specifically, we find a significant effect of being an MEM. Respondents in MEMs were more positive toward lowering the voting age in the 2009 municipal election, whereas this difference is absent in 2013.

The second model accounts for gender, age groups, high school education and ideology. Support for lowering the voting age is significantly lower among older citizens, compared to the baseline category with citizens aged 18–25. This is in line with results from previous studies, as outlined above. Ideology is substantially related to voting age attitudes where right-leaning

Table 1. Voting age attitudes, regression.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Mock election period (2009)	0.101* (0.060)	0.048 (0.064)	0.055 (0.070)	0.037 (0.061)	-0.032 (0.066)	-0.029 (0.072)
MEM	-0.001 (0.076)	-0.046 (0.077)	-0.078 (0.087)	-0.004 (0.077)	-0.045 (0.079)	-0.081 (0.090)
MEM × Election	0.239** (0.104)	0.228** (0.111)	0.230* (0.118)	0.251** (0.107)	0.248** (0.115)	0.266** (0.123)
Male		0.249*** (0.052)	0.264*** (0.056)		0.205*** (0.054)	0.222*** (0.058)
Age: 26–35		0.123 (0.163)	0.242 (0.179)		0.192 (0.170)	0.289 (0.187)
Age: 36–45		0.140 (0.152)	0.184 (0.164)		0.193 (0.158)	0.229 (0.172)
Age: 46–55		-0.111 (0.148)	-0.108 (0.159)		-0.074 (0.154)	-0.070 (0.166)
Age: 56–65		-0.234 (0.144)	-0.219 (0.159)		-0.194 (0.150)	-0.193 (0.166)
Age: 66–		-0.449*** 0.146	-0.418** (0.163)		-0.416*** (0.151)	-0.398** (0.169)
High school		0.075 (0.054)	-0.031 (0.058)		0.064 (0.055)	-0.044 (0.060)
Ideology (right-wing)		-0.241*** (0.012)	-0.157*** (0.016)		-0.228*** (0.012)	-0.150*** (0.016)
Party: Soc. Lib.			0.398*** (0.132)			0.435*** (0.141)
Party: Con.			-0.352*** (0.133)			-0.327** (0.135)
Party: Soc. Peopl.			0.290*** (0.098)			0.255** (0.104)
Party: Lib. All.			-0.413* (0.212)			-0.408* (0.216)
Party: DPP			-0.873*** (0.123)			-0.888*** (0.125)
Party: Liberals			-0.463*** (0.092)			-0.448*** (0.094)
Party: Red-Green Alliance			0.422*** (0.119)			0.350*** (0.128)
Party: Other/non-partisan			-0.169* (0.091)			-0.134 (0.095)
Children			0.121 (0.094)			0.107 (0.099)
Leftish mayor			-0.027 (0.059)			-0.017 (0.061)
Model	CLMM	CLMM	CLMM	Mixed logit	Mixed logit	Mixed logit
Log likelihood	-7970.56	-7161.67	-6346.98	-4706.7	-4151.9	-3651.1
N (individuals)	7519	6993	6266	7519	6993	6266
N (groups)	98	98	98	98	98	98

Note: Regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Intercept and threshold coefficients not reported in the table. Baseline for age: 18–25 years. Baseline for party: Social Democratic Party.

* $p < .1$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

citizens are more likely to be against a lower voting age. The third model further includes party choice, whether the respondent has a child aged 17–19, and a context variable measuring the mayor’s party affiliation.



Figure 2. Mock elections and voting age attitudes.

Models 4, 5 and 6 mimic the first three models but include the binary dependent variable. The results are substantially identical to the first three models and thus not sensitive to grouping the answers on the dependent variable. In order to substantially interpret the estimate for mock elections in Table 1, Figure 2 provides the predicted probabilities based on the marginal effects from Model 6. The other variables are set to a male below age 25 with a high school education, with no children aged 17–19, living in a municipality with a left-wing mayor, ideologically on the middle of the scale and voting for the Social Democrats.

The blue confidence intervals include municipalities that implemented mock elections in 2009, whereas the red confidence intervals include municipalities that did not implement mock elections. Looking at the period with mock elections, that is, during the 2009 local elections, we find a significant difference between municipalities implementing and not implementing mock elections. For the period without mock elections, there are no differences between the two groups of municipalities in their average support of a lower voting age. This suggests that the mock elections did not have any lasting effect.

For ideology, Figure 3 shows the probability of supporting a lower voting age for different ideological values. The other covariates are set to the same values as for the predicted probabilities reported in Figure 2. Left-wing voters, at one end of the scale, have a probability of approximately 60% of not being totally against lowering the voting age. Right-wing voters, at the other end, are substantially less likely, at less than 20%, to support a lower

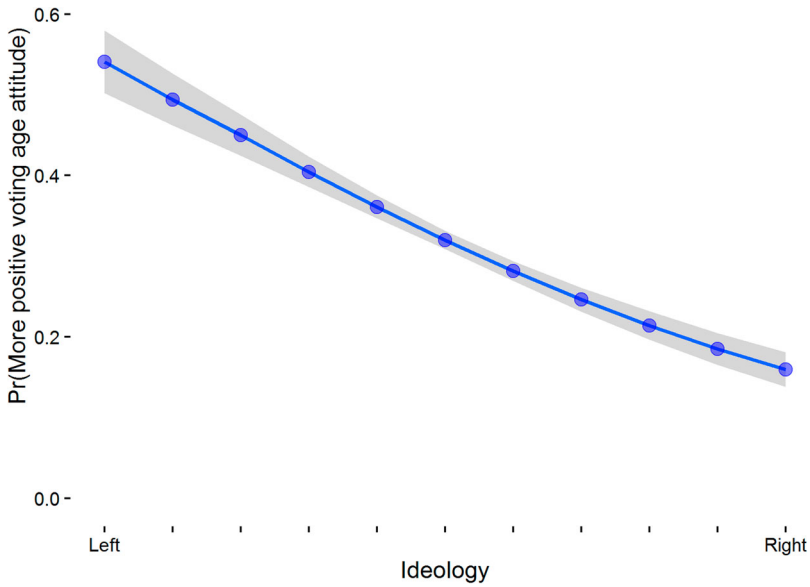


Figure 3. Ideology and voting age attitudes.

voting age. The difference in over 40 percentage points emphasizes the substantial impact of ideology on support for a lower voting age. Left-leaning citizens are, in other words, substantially more likely to support lowering the voting age. While not in line with the empirical results from Birch, Clarke, and Whitely (2015), it echoes our theoretical expectation, that is, that “people on the left of the ideological continuum should be more likely to endorse expanding the franchise than those on the right” (298).

Although the probability is above 50% for the most left-wing citizens, it is important to keep the distribution and coding of the dependent variable in mind. In other words, the probability of totally disagreeing that the voting age should be lowered to 16 is less than 50% for the most left-wing citizens, whereas the most right-wing-oriented persons are likely to be against lowering the voting age.

To sum up, the results show that citizens were more supportive of lowering the voting age in municipalities that implemented mock elections in 2009. At the individual level, older and more right-leaning citizens were less likely to support lowering the voting age.

Do mock elections have heterogeneous effects?

A relevant aspect is the potential heterogeneous impact of mock elections across individuals and municipalities. Specific individual-level features might shape the impact of mock elections. Here, we consider two such

factors, namely respondents' ideological profile and their personal relation to a change in the electoral institutions, that is, whether people with children in the relevant age group were more likely to be affected by the mock elections.

It is possible that turnout in the mock elections matters for their impact on peoples' voting age attitudes. So far, we have treated mock elections as identical, but some mock elections were more successful in getting young citizens to participate (turnout rates among adolescents ranged from 8.1% to 88.2%). One expectation could be that the effect of mock elections on voting attitudes would be higher among citizens in municipalities where mock elections were a great success.

To examine potential heterogeneous effects, we take a closer look at the 31 municipalities that implemented mock elections. For the individual-level heterogeneity, we examine whether mock elections had a greater impact on citizens with children aged 17–19 and citizens with a right-wing ideological orientation. For the contextual-level heterogeneity, we examine whether mock elections had a greater impact on citizens' attitudes in municipalities where the mock elections were a success, that is, where a greater percentage of the adolescents participated in the election. Once again, the fact that no municipality held mock elections in 2013 allows us to estimate difference-in-differences between the turnout in the mock elections and the mock election period.

Table 2. Voting age attitudes, mixed logit, heterogeneous effects.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Mock election period (2009)	0.286*** (0.088)	0.286*** (0.088)	0.297*** (0.098)	0.305*** (0.095)
Absolute turnout	0.001 (0.002)			
Relative turnout		0.055 (0.171)		
Children			0.161 (0.216)	
Ideology				-0.246*** (0.028)
Absolute turnout × MEP	-0.001 (0.004)			
Relative turnout × MEP		-0.011 (0.266)		
Children × MEP			0.173 (0.304)	
Ideology × MEP				0.027 (0.043)
Log likelihood	-1502.8	-1502.8	-1327.2	-1339.4
<i>N</i> (individuals)	2364	2364	2091	2213
<i>N</i> (groups)	31	31	31	31

Note: Regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Intercepts not reported in the table.

* $p < .1$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

Table 2 shows four models with voting age attitudes as the dependent variable. Model 1 reports the results when we look at the percentage turnout as the absolute turnout in the mock election, that is, not taking the overall turnout in the municipality into account, whereas Models 2 reports the turnout in mock elections relative to the overall turnout in the respective municipality. Model 3 reports the effects among people with children in the relevant age group, and Model 4 reports the effects for people who vary in their left–right ideology.

All models show a significant effect of the mock election period (the coefficient for the difference between the municipalities in the two elections). Looking at the interaction terms across all four models, we do not find any empirical heterogeneity in the impact of mock elections. This is the case for absolute turnout in the mock elections (Model 1), for relative turnout compared to the turnout in the local election (Model 2) as well as for both individual factors (Models 3 and 4). Interestingly, the impact of the mock elections was homogenous and robust to both contextual and individual moderators. Thus, the success of the mock elections and the examined individual differences did not moderate the impact of the mock election on citizens' attitudes.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The evidence presented here speaks to a growing body of literature on how the public perceives basic democratic rights in the form of the voting age institution. The findings show that both contextual and individual factors matter for the support. Mock elections are by definition not real elections, but they take place in an electoral environment and affect attitudes on voting age.

Using difference-in-difference estimates with data from the Danish local elections in 2009 and 2013, we show that mock elections during the 2009 local election campaign made people less skeptical of lowering the voting age. However, attitudes toward the voting age are not only shaped by contextual factors but also by individual-level factors, especially ideology.

While the difference-in-difference estimates in support of lowering the voting age are statistically significant, the substantive significance can be discussed. We found that citizens in municipalities that implemented mock elections were approximately five percentage points more likely to have a more positive view on lowering the voting age. This is not enough to shift the public's support from opposing to supporting a lower voting age, but it does indicate that mock election initiatives affect the overall support.

In line with findings from other countries, the overall public support for lowering the voting age is not near a majority. Furthermore, our results for the individual-level factors indicate that citizens' attitudes toward voting age institutions are to a large extent rooted in ideological differences and

partisan preferences. This suggests that citizens have strong priors on voting age and points to the limitations of campaign activities and educational initiatives, for example, mock elections, in shaping public opinion on the issue. In sum, the role of ideology is strong and the mock elections did not alter the impact of ideology on peoples' voting age attitudes.

Even though, in the Danish case, mock elections for adolescents did not change attitudes among the adult electorate toward lowering the voting age to 16 enough to alter the predominant negative view, the findings are remarkable in terms of more general discussions of the implications of mock elections. Mock elections are typically seen as a way of stimulating political awareness and experience among adolescents who have not yet reached the official voting age. Mock elections are conducted to educate and prepare young people to vote in real elections. This is also the idea behind similar mock election initiatives in the UK (e.g. The Parliament's Election Toolkit and The Hansard Society's YVote Mock Elections), the USA (e.g. Youth Leadership Initiative's Mock Election and the National Student/Parent Mock Election) and in individual US states (e.g. Washington State, California and Florida). However, in the Danish 2009 local mock elections, the organizers had a dual purpose, namely (1) to educate the youth in democratic elections and (2) to campaign for a more positive attitude toward younger voters (ultimately to gain support for lowering the voting age to 16) (Valgretskommissionen 2011).

Mechanisms explaining the impact of political initiatives like mock elections can be related to citizens' direct experiences (e.g. by observing or participating in events and election activities) and/or indirect experiences through the local information environment (e.g. by exposure to news and media campaigns) (Campbell 2012; Pacheco 2013). In this specific study, it is not possible to disentangle the causal mechanisms. However, since only 16–17-year-olds had the direct experience of participating in the mock elections 2009, we assume that the attitudinal differences identified in the general electorate were caused by differences in the local information environment.

The more positive attitude among the established electorate toward lowering the voting age was an intended aim of the initiative. So even though the voting age will probably not be lowered in Denmark in the foreseeable future, the findings suggest that mock elections may affect not only the young people who participate but also the general electorate. Furthermore, in the Danish case, the positive effect on the voters' attitudes was not dependent on whether the mock election was successful or how many 16–17-year-olds actually participated in the vote. In other words, we learn that for proponents of lowering the voting age mock elections do not seem to be a risky business. To conclude, we found empirical support for the expectation that the increased focus on a possible reduction of the voting age to 16 makes the public less disapproving of such an idea.

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General points

The underlying research materials for this article can be accessed at the Harvard Dataverse and GitHub: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7910/DVN/AIP0V8> and <https://github.com/erikgahner/jepop-me>

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