

**Votes at 16 in the UK: Opportunities and Ethical Challenges for the Hard-to-Reach and Seldom-Heard Youth Segment**

**DR CHRISTOPHER PICH**

**Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom**

**DR KRISTINA HARRISON**

**Kelley School of Business, Indiana University, Bloomington, United States of America**

**DR GUJA ARMANSDOTTIR**

**Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom**

All correspondence to Dr. Christopher Pich, University of Nottingham, Nottingham University Business School, Department of Marketing, Tourism and Analytics, Jubilee Campus, Nottingham, NG8 1BB. [christopher.pich@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:christopher.pich@nottingham.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

In July 2025, the UK Government extended voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds, enfranchising approximately 1.5 million young citizens. While widely seen as a milestone for democratic renewal, this reform raises pressing questions about how to engage newly enfranchised voters, often characterized as hard-to-reach or seldom-heard. Traditional methods such as surveys and adult-led focus groups frequently underperform with this group, risking misrepresentation and low participation. This paper advances methodological innovations for researching young people in ways that are authentic, ethical, and transferable to broader market research contexts. A case study of Jersey, which lowered its voting age in 2008 yet continues to face low turnout among youth, illustrates both persistent barriers and emerging opportunities. Findings show that young people are interested in issues, crave impartial information, value genuine interaction with decision-makers, and appreciate opportunities to be heard. Creative methods including projective storytelling, gamified polling, participatory digital ethnography, and peer-led groups proved effective in eliciting richer insights and building trust. The paper positions young people as co-creators of engagement rather than passive subjects and outlines practical strategies for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. Beyond politics, these lessons highlight how methodological innovation can help market researchers reach elusive consumer groups across commercial and social contexts.

## **Introduction – UK Government introduces votes at 16!**

*“The youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow.”* — Nelson Mandela

In July 2025, the UK Government announced it would extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds for all future elections, enfranchising approximately 1.5 million young citizens (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2025). Extending the vote to the youth in UK can be seen as not simply a policy reform, but an open invitation to involve a new generation in shaping democracy. This marks a profound shift in the UK’s democratic landscape and positions the country alongside Austria, Scotland, Wales, Malta, and Jersey, and other nations that have successfully lowered the voting age (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2021; Eichhorn & Huebner, 2025; World Population Review 2025). Evidence suggests that early enfranchisement fosters lasting democratic habits and higher turnout (Eichhorn & Huebner 2025; Henn et al., 2025; Huebner, 2021). Further, creating a culture of democratic participation from 16 years of age, has shaped “lifelong habits. Those who vote early remain more consistently engaged voters” (Electoral Society 2025). Yet, enfranchisement alone does not guarantee engagement. Newly enfranchised voters are often skeptical of political institutions, heavily influenced by peer networks/digital cultures, and are often underserved by existing democratic education (Huebner, 2021; Henn et al., 2025; Pich, 2023). Some commentators view these first-time voters as a potential electoral force, while others caution that they may remain a misunderstood and overlooked bloc (Dermody et al., 2010; Mycock & Tonge, 2012; Poorrezaei et al., 2023). Traditional research approaches such as adult-led surveys, polls, and focus groups, struggle to capture a youth perspective, risking misrepresentation of this “seldom-heard” segment (Shino, 2021; Poorrezaei et al., 2023; Ohme et al., 2019). Addressing these challenges requires methodological innovation and youth-informed strategies that move beyond extraction toward co-creation.

While scholarship has examined youth voting behaviors across disciplines, and established contexts, little empirical guidance exists on *how* to research and recruit newly enfranchised populations, particularly those characterized as hard-to-reach or seldom-heard (Sevón et al., 2023; Keating & Janmaat, 2016). Without innovation, researchers risk misrepresenting this group and undermining engagement strategies. Although the immediate focus is on the UK’s newly enfranchised 16–17-year-old voters, the implications extend beyond politics. For market research professionals more broadly, these challenges mirror those of engaging other elusive or sensitive populations, from early-stage product adopters to consumers navigating socially sensitive issues. This paper argues that building trust, ensuring cultural resonance, and embedding research in the spaces young people inhabit are not only democratic imperatives but also methodological lessons for applied research more broadly. By embedding research within the communication styles and cultural spaces young people inhabit, these approaches extend methodological innovation to both democratic and commercial research contexts. Crucially, young people themselves must help shape these conditions, with their wants and needs informing efficient and targeted engagement strategies.

The purpose of this paper is fourfold. First, we explore the methodological and ethical challenges of researching newly enfranchised populations. Second, we present a short case study in the context of Jersey, which reveals how young people would benefit from collaborative, youth-informed initiatives that have the potential to strengthen democratic engagement locally and generate scalable insights for national-international application. Third, we present a series of pragmatic steps that can be adopted by practitioners, policymakers and/or researchers to engage effectively and authentically with young people and potentially other hard-to-reach seldom-heard groups. Finally, we chart forward-looking research pathways that integrate political,

commercial, and ethical considerations. Taken together, these contributions underscore that the success of Votes at 16 depends not only on policy reform but also on how researchers and practitioners engage this emerging electorate.

## **Votes at 16 – Challenges and Opportunities**

### *Challenges in Researching Young People*

Engaging young voters in the democratic process poses obstacles rooted in structural, behavioral, and ethical complexities. Across the UK and US, many express disengagement and cynicism, reporting a lack of trust in politicians and skepticism about whether their voices are heard (Pich, 2023). This distrust undermines traditional outreach methods, such as party advertisements and voter registration drives, which may be viewed as manipulative or irrelevant. Structural barriers also hinder engagement: low registration rates, complex electoral systems, and inadequate political education particularly affect marginalized groups with limited civic resources (Dermoddy et al., 2010; Henn et al., 2025; Henn & Oldfield 2016). Overcoming these requires systemic support, such as accessible registration systems and school-based democratic education (Association for Citizenship Teaching 2025).

Media fragmentation compounds the problem. Young voters consume most political information via social media, where algorithms create echo chambers and misinformation spreads rapidly (Harrison et al., 2024; Rhodes, 2021). Many struggle to identify credible sources, with over half concerned about fake news (BBC, 2024). Relying on passive news exposure increases the risk of misleading or false information (Lee, 2019). Young people also tend to trust familiar sources such as celebrities or influencers (Ofcom, 2024). Creating online spaces with accurate information is therefore vital (The Politics Project, 2025). Political marketers must navigate an environment where message control is limited, and young people often distrust institutional sources. This context also raises ethical concerns, as targeted digital strategies may blur the line between persuasion and manipulation. Traditional market research approaches face significant limitations with this demographic (Ipsos, 2021; GWI, 2023). Surveys and polls suffer from low response rates and sample bias, reducing the accuracy of insights. Moreover, ethical concerns arise when researchers attempt to track online behavior or infer beliefs from digital engagement. Inferring political preferences based on influencer interactions, for example, risks both privacy violations and flawed conclusions (Ofcom, 2024; Harrison et al., 2024). Collecting data on young voters therefore requires a balance between innovative methods and robust ethical safeguards (Ohme et al., 2019; Sloam & Henn, 2024). Addressing these barriers requires rethinking how insights are generated from newly enfranchised youth. Conventional survey and focus group techniques often fall short with audiences who are both digitally native and sceptical of formal institutions (Sevón et al., 2023; Percy-Smith et al., 2019; Poorrezaei et al., 2023). Although framed here in political terms, many of these challenges, such as distrust of institutions, fragmented media consumption, and sample bias in surveys, are also faced by market researchers seeking to understand other elusive consumer groups (Choi et al., 2015; Dolnicar et al., 2016). The following section presents a set of innovative, youth-centred research methods designed to overcome these limitations and produce actionable, credible insights.

### *Innovative Research Methods for Hard-to-Reach Youth Segments*

The goals of this paper are to advance market research scholarship by consolidating and adapting innovative methods suited to newly enfranchised 16–17-year-old voters, a group often classified as hard-to-reach due to low survey response rates, media fragmentation, and distrust of

institutional actors (Ipsos, 2021; GWI, 2023; Sevón et al., 2023). Traditional surveys and focus groups, while still valuable, often fail to capture the nuanced attitudes and behaviours of this cohort, particularly in politically sensitive contexts (Percy-Smith et al., 2019; Poorrezaei et al., 2023). Emerging techniques such as peer-led focus groups (Sevón et al., 2023; Percy-Smith et al., 2019), gamified polling (Ipsos, 2021; GWI, 2023), participatory digital ethnography (Ohme et al., 2019; Sloam & Henn, 2024), youth advisory panels (Henn et al., 2025; Pich, 2023; Pich & Armannsdottir, forthcoming), projective storytelling (Weber, 1985; Khan et al., 2024), and influencer-partnered outreach (Ofcom, 2024; Harrison et al., 2024) offer new pathways for generating authentic, contextually grounded insights. These approaches share a common emphasis on trust-building, cultural resonance, and participant agency, making them equally applicable to other elusive market segments, from early-stage product adopters to consumers engaged in socially sensitive issues (Percy-Smith, 2006; 2018; Schumann et al., 2010; Smith, 2019).

These research methods offer transferable value to commercial research, public health campaigns, and social policy development (Henn et al., 2025; Sevón et al., 2023; Poorrezaei et al., 2023). By embedding research within the communication styles and cultural spaces young people already inhabit, both on- and offline, these approaches mitigate common participation barriers while enhancing data richness and validity (Ohme et al., 2019; Sloam & Henn, 2024). The critical contribution lies in reframing youth research as a co-created process rather than an extractive exercise, producing insights that are not only methodologically sound but also ethically robust (Percy-Smith et al., 2019; Gurrieri et al., 2016). These techniques demonstrate how methodological innovation can bridge the gap between difficult-to-reach populations and the actionable intelligence needed to inform strategic decision-making (Ofcom, 2024; Harrison et al., 2024).

**Table 1. Innovative Research Methods for Hard-to-Reach Youth Segments**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Key Advantages</b>	<b>Limitations / Cautions</b>	<b>Application and Comparison to Traditional Methods</b>	<b>Ethical Considerations</b>
<b>Peer-led focus groups</b>	Small-group discussions facilitated by trained young moderators from the same demographic.	Builds trust and relatability; reduces power imbalance; encourages candid responses.	Requires rigorous moderator training; potential peer conformity bias.	Used in adolescent health and democratic engagement research to surface sensitive issues (Sevón et al., 2023; Percy-Smith et al., 2019; Poorrezaei et al., 2023). Unlike traditional adult-led focus	Ongoing informed consent; ensure diversity among peer facilitators.

Method	Description	Key Advantages	Limitations / Cautions	Application and Comparison to Traditional Methods	Ethical Considerations
				groups, they reduce power imbalances and foster peer relatability, though risk conformity effects.	
<b>Gamified polling</b>	Surveys embedded in games or interactive quizzes.	Boosts engagement and completion rates; can integrate knowledge checks.	May oversimplify complex issues; quality depends on design rigor.	Established in commercial survey platforms (Ipsos, 2021; GWI, 2023) and trailed in youth voting simulations (Poorrezaei et al., 2023). Unlike traditional surveys, it embeds questions in interactive games to sustain engagement but may oversimplify complex topics.	Avoid manipulative incentives; clearly explain data usage.
<b>Participatory digital ethnography</b>	Observation and interaction within youth-dominated online spaces.	Captures natural behaviors and emergent themes in native contexts.	Time-intensive; potential influence from researcher presence.	Common in brand and consumer culture studies, and applied to youth political engagement in online communities (Ohme et al., 2019; Sloam & Henn, 2024). Goes beyond traditional	Anonymize data; obtain platform/community permissions.

Method	Description	Key Advantages	Limitations / Cautions	Application and Comparison to Traditional Methods	Ethical Considerations
				ethnography by embedding researchers in digital-native spaces, though time and ethical costs are higher.	
<b>Youth advisory panels</b>	Standing panels advising on research design, recruitment, and interpretation.	Enhances cultural relevance; improves validity of findings.	Requires sustained engagement and incentives.	Used in public health and education to co-design interventions (Henn et al., 2025) and piloted in political engagement in Jersey (Pich 2023; Pich & Armannsdottir, forthcoming). Unlike one-off surveys or focus groups, panels involve ongoing dialogue and shared decision-making.	Ensure fair compensation; maintain representative diversity.
<b>Projective storytelling techniques</b>	Indirect elicitation using images, scenarios, or fictional characters.	Reveals deeper attitudes; reduces defensiveness on sensitive topics.	Interpretation can be subjective; requires skilled facilitation.	Longstanding in advertising and branding (Weber, 1985) and recently applied to political brand image research (Khan et al., 2024). Unlike direct questioning, projective tasks elicit underlying	Avoid triggering content; clarify fictional nature to participants.

Method	Description	Key Advantages	Limitations / Cautions	Application and Comparison to Traditional Methods	Ethical Considerations
				attitudes indirectly, though interpretation is more subjective.	
<b>Influencer-partnered outreach</b>	Collaboration with trusted micro-influencers to promote participation.	Extends reach into otherwise disengaged subgroups; leverages existing trust.	Risk of perceived endorsement; potential sample bias.	Ubiquitous in commercial campaigns and increasingly common in youth-targeted voter registration and engagement (Ofcom, 2024; Harrison et al., 2024). Differs from traditional recruitment ads by leveraging trust in peer-like figures, though risks perceived endorsement.	Disclose partnership; ensure influencers follow ethical guidelines.

While Table 1 outlines six innovative methods, it is important to go beyond description by showing how these approaches differ from traditional techniques, where they have been applied, and what adaptations are needed for different contexts and settings.

### *Critical Comparison of Methods*

As Table 1 demonstrates, innovative approaches diverge from conventional surveys, polls, and adult-led focus groups by embedding research in spaces, relationships, and formats that resonate with young people. For instance, peer-led focus groups differ from traditional moderator-led groups by reducing adult-youth power imbalances. They have been applied in health and democratic-civic engagement research (Sevón et al., 2023; Percy-Smith et al., 2019; Poorrezaei et al., 2023), but in market research they require rigorous moderator training and safeguards to prevent conformity or peer pressure bias. Gamified polling builds on conventional surveys but reconfigures them into interactive quizzes, widely used in commercial research (Ipsos, 2021) and piloted in voter education tools (Poorrezaei et al., 2023). For political contexts, adaptation is needed to avoid oversimplifying complex issues such as policy preferences.

Participatory digital ethnography, common in consumer and brand studies, extends classic ethnography into youth online communities (Ohme et al., 2019; Sloam & Henn, 2024). Its adaptation for market research must emphasize data anonymization and platform permissions to avoid ethical breaches.

Youth advisory panels differ from one-off surveys by providing sustained dialogue and co-creation. While used in education and public health (Henn et al., 2025) and piloted in Jersey (Pich 2023; Pich & Armannsdottir, forthcoming), researchers and practitioners must budget for sustained incentives and ensure representative diversity. Projective storytelling techniques, longstanding in advertising (Weber, 1985), have only recently been applied in political brand image research (Khan et al., 2024). Here adaptation requires careful scenario design to avoid triggering sensitive partisan responses and to maintain neutrality. Finally, influencer-partnered outreach contrasts with traditional recruitment by leveraging trusted peer figures. Ubiquitous in commercial marketing and increasingly used in political campaigns (Ofcom, 2024; Harrison et al., 2024), its adaptation requires transparency and strict ethical guidelines to avoid conflating influencer endorsement with partisan persuasion.

While the individual method comparisons clarify how each diverges from traditional approaches, it is also important to step back and evaluate their overall applicability. Not all techniques carry the same level of readiness for commercial practice, and some require more careful adaptation than others. Taken together, these comparisons reveal important distinctions in transferability. Gamified polling and influencer-partnered outreach are already widely embedded in commercial market research and can be readily applied to youth engagement with minimal adaptation. Their strengths lie in boosting response rates and leveraging trust in familiar figures, though both require careful ethical framing to avoid oversimplification or implicit endorsement. By contrast, peer-led focus groups, youth advisory panels, participatory digital ethnography, and projective storytelling have only partial precedents in commercial contexts. While each offers powerful means of eliciting authentic insights, they demand adaptation to ensure rigor, neutrality, and feasibility for market researchers accustomed to traditional survey-based approaches. For example, peer-led groups mitigate power imbalances but risk peer conformity bias, while digital ethnography provides cultural depth but poses scalability and ethical challenges. Projective storytelling is longstanding in advertising research yet requires careful facilitation to avoid misinterpretation. Youth advisory panels, although transformative for co-creation, require sustained investment and may not align with short-term commercial project cycles. This evaluative perspective underscores that methodological innovation is not uniformly transferable: some methods can be directly implemented, while others require recalibration to align with the norms and constraints of commercial practice.

#### *Opportunities in Marketing to Young Voters*

Despite these challenges, Votes at 16 introduces substantial opportunities to reshape political engagement. Lowering the voting age can act as a catalyst for long-term democratic participation, signaling to young voters that their voices matter and fostering habits that carry into adulthood (Eichhorn & Huebner 2025; Electoral Society 2025, Henn et al., 2025; Huebner, 2021). This moment offers a unique chance to build early loyalty and strengthen political brands through meaningful engagement.

The digital environment, while challenging, also presents opportunities for digital mobilization. Social media and influencer marketing can be powerful tools when deployed ethically and transparently. However, campaigns must avoid exploitative practices and ensure that content

aligns with the values and interests of young voters (Pich 2023). Ethical considerations should guide strategy, with clear boundaries to prevent surveillance or manipulative micro-targeting. Engaging young voters effectively requires innovative research methods. Traditional approaches should be supplemented with creative and participatory techniques, such as gamified polling, interactive tools, and peer-led data collection (Poorrezaei et al., 2023). These methods not only improve data quality but also enhance trust, as they signal respect for youth perspectives. Projective techniques, such as storytelling, scenario-building, and visual prompts, can uncover deeper attitudes without intrusive questioning (Weber, 1985).

### *Ethical Considerations*

Ethics is a central concern in engagement strategies. Researchers and political marketers have a responsibility to maintain consent, transparency, and equity. Surveillance-like tactics, such as tracking online behavior without consent, undermine trust and risk long-term reputational harm. Likewise, ensuring that disadvantaged groups are represented in both research and outreach prevents the reinforcement of existing participation gaps.

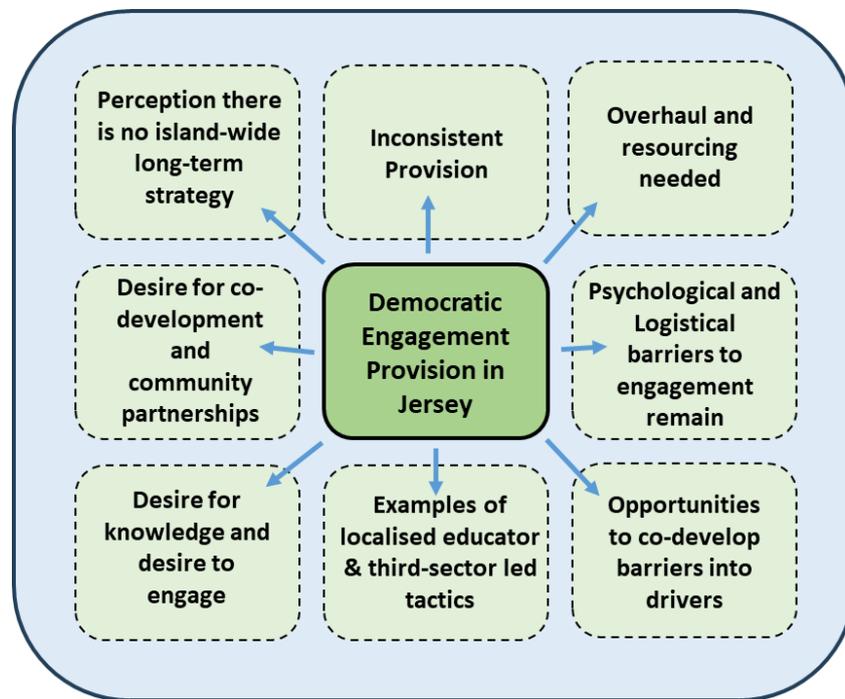
While digital tools and social listening offer rich data, they present ethical dilemmas. It is neither accurate nor ethical to assume that a young person's engagement with an online influencer equates to ideological alignment. Privacy concerns are a priority, requiring transparency in data collection and informed consent (Vishwakarma et al., 2025). Participatory research, where young people act as co-researchers, can improve authenticity while minimizing ethical risks. Projective techniques, such as storytelling and scenario-building, offer creative and non-intrusive ways to uncover deeper attitudes (Khan et al., 2024).

### **Votes at 16 – Research in Action – The Case of Jersey**

To illustrate the challenges and opportunities in researching young people and democratic engagement, we include a short case study in the context of the Crown Dependency of Jersey by Pich and Armannsdottir (forthcoming). The independent jurisdiction of Jersey has the lowest turnout in General Elections than in all Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries and lowered the voting age from 18 to 16 in 2008 (Adetunji 2008). Despite facilitating votes at 16 for some time, Jersey continues to face low engagement from young people in General Elections (Boleat 2023). Pich and Armannsdottir (forthcoming) are leading an ongoing collaborative, cross-sector and cross-discipline study aimed to co-develop targeted strategies and programmes to strengthen democratic engagement in Jersey.

This exploratory qualitative study included distinct data collection methods. Stage one involved carrying out twenty-three semi-structured interviews with educators, policy makers, industry specialists, and stakeholders from the third sector to assess the current provision of democratic engagement programmes in Jersey. Stage two involved five focus group discussions with segmented voter groups (including young people aged 16-18 years) to understand their perspective of the current provision of democratic engagement programmes and to identify envisaged strategies and activities associated with strengthening democratic engagement. Participants (stage two) were incentivised to take part in the study with a £25 gift voucher for a large online retailer. Qualitative projective techniques were incorporated into the interviews and focus group discussions to build rapport with participants, create an engaging interactive research environment, and elicit deeper insights than standalone interviews and focus group discussions (Khan et al. 2024). Data collection was undertaken January 2025 – July 2025 and

continued until researchers reached theoretical saturation. Initial findings are illustrated in figure 1 and discussed below.



**Figure 1: Initial Findings from ongoing democratic engagement study in Jersey**

Initial findings suggest that young people are not disengaged but interested in issues including sustainability, employment, education, travel, housing, and amenities to name a few - they crave impartial knowledge of local politics and democratic processes and practices in Jersey. Importantly, the methods themselves revealed much about how to engage this group. Projective techniques were especially effective, helping to build rapport, create an engaging environment, and elicit deeper insights than standard interviews or focus groups. Modest incentives worked to boost participation and signalled respect for participants' contributions. Perhaps most strikingly, young people expressed genuine appreciation at simply being invited into the conversation and listened to, essentially highlighting that engagement itself is a meaningful outcome, not just the data produced.

At the same time, this research suggests that stakeholders across all sectors (including academic and third sectors, policy makers and firsthand accounts from citizens) believe the provision of educational programmes on democratic engagement in Jersey need to be overhauled, adequately resourced, and structured around a long-term, transparent, consistent, and co-developed island-wide strategy to tackle low levels of engagement. Nevertheless, there is a common perception that the current provision is patchy, inconsistent and there is no strategy currently in place to strengthen long-term democratic engagement. Participants revealed several logistical, systematic and educational barriers to engagement including confusion with the electoral system, uncertainty with the roles of elected officials, perceived irrelevance of engaging in democratic processes, feelings of apathy, mistrust and disconnection between islanders and

policy makers, and perceived lack of accountability and transparency by policy makers and institutions. However, participants also uncovered a range of creative, thought-provoking, targeted and relatable democratic engagement activities-tactics often developed and facilitated at a local level by educators and organisations from the third sector. This research also revealed that young people desire to know more about local politics and democratic processes. Finally, there was collective agreement that education is the key driver to tackle low levels of democratic engagement in Jersey. All young people need unbiased and relatable knowledge on democratic processes, civic responsibilities and political institutions delivered by experienced and informed stakeholders on a routine basis, which will equip people with the skills they need to become informed and engaged citizens.

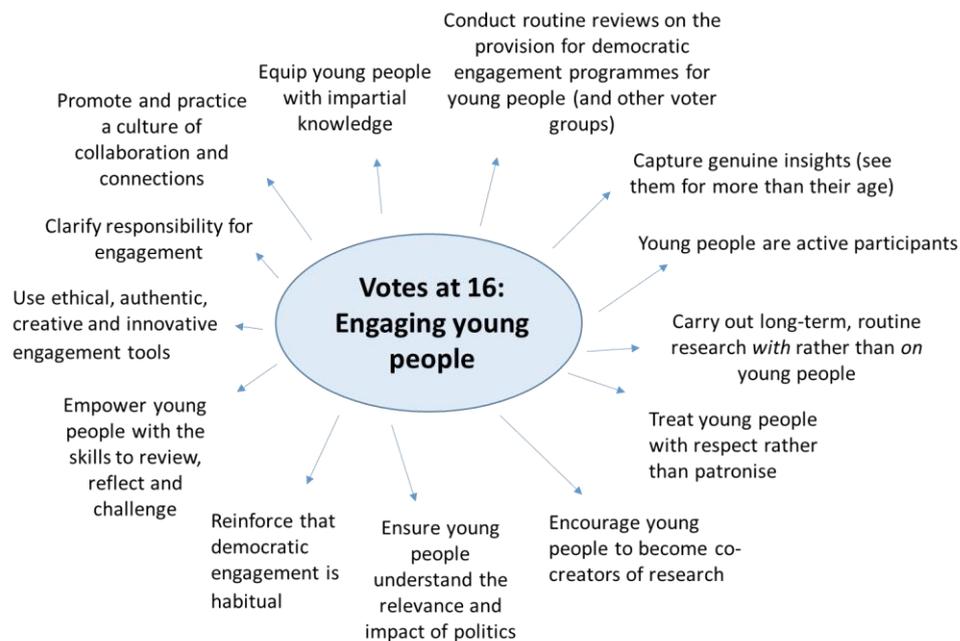
Building on these reflections, scholarship highlights that hard-to-reach groups require participatory, co-created methods to generate authentic and actionable understanding (Henn et al., 2025; Sevón et al., 2023; Percy-Smith et al., 2019; Pich 2023). Consequently, several important insights emerged from the case study. First, creative, participatory methods worked. Projective techniques, gamified exercises, and interactive focus groups proved effective in building rapport and eliciting deeper perspectives, confirming the importance of creative research designs. Second, incentives facilitated engagement. Providing modest rewards not only boosted participation but also signaled respect for participants' time and contributions. Third, young people want to be heard. Participants sought impartial, accessible knowledge of the political system and expressed a desire to be consulted regularly, not only at election time. Fourth, authenticity matters. Young people crave genuine interaction with politicians and decision-makers and want to be treated as active citizens rather than passive targets of campaigns. Finally, co-creation is essential. Sustainable engagement requires involving young people in the design and delivery of democratic education and outreach programs. Youth-led initiatives are more likely to resonate and have lasting impact.

In summary, the Jersey case highlights both barriers and opportunities. It demonstrates that lowering the voting age must be accompanied by well-resourced, co-created educational programs and systematic research strategies that respect youth agency (Association for Citizenship Teaching, 2025; Henn et al., 2025; Petkar 2025). Moreover, these lessons extend beyond politics: cross-sector collaboration, projective research techniques, and youth co-creation provide valuable guidance for market researchers engaging other elusive consumer groups. The case affirms that young people are not disengaged but require authentic, impartial, and creative pathways to become informed, active citizens.

Methodologically, the Jersey case underscores that traditional approaches alone are insufficient for engaging newly enfranchised youth. Techniques that emphasize co-creation, indirect elicitation, and trust-building, such as projective storytelling, incentives, and participatory ethnography, proved especially valuable (Ohme et al., 2019; Sevón et al., 2023; Sloam & Henn, 2024; Percy-Smith et al., 2019; Poorrezaei et al., 2023). Some of these approaches, such as gamified polling and projective techniques, are readily transferable to commercial research on elusive or sensitive consumer groups (Khan et al., 2024). Others, such as youth advisory panels or long-term participatory engagement, require adaptation to align with commercial project cycles (Henn et al., 2025; Pich 2023). Taken together, the case demonstrates that method innovation is central not only to democratic renewal but also to advancing rigorous, ethical, and inclusive market research.

### **Votes at 16 – Strategies for meaningful data collection and engagement**

With the expansion of voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds, the critical question is *how* to engage this demographic effectively while respecting ethical considerations and avoiding viewing these voters as “just a teenager”. Engagement must move beyond outreach campaigns to focus on education, co-creation, and authentic interaction. More specifically, this section outlines several steps for practitioners, policy makers and researchers to consider when designing research projects and development programmes to engage young people (as illustrated in figure 2).



**Figure 2: Strategies to engage young people for long-term democratic engagement**

First, democratic education should be mandatory, consistent, and embedded in school curricula, ensuring that all young people, regardless of socio-economic background, receive the tools to participate meaningfully (Pich, 2023). Digital platforms, interactive voter guides, and school-based mock elections can reinforce this learning. Information must be delivered in ways young people understand and trust, deem authentic, avoiding jargon and emphasizing relevance to their lives (White et al., 2023). Henn et al., (2025) argue that greater democratic understanding makes young people more informed, active citizens. Therefore, as the UK Government prepares to extend the voting franchise, there have been renewed calls to ensure young people are empowered with impartial trustworthy knowledge to ensure they are fully informed to support them on their democratic journey. For example, young people must be “equipped with the knowledge, confidence and critical skills to engage meaningfully” (Association for Citizenship Teaching, 2025). For success, democratic education across the UK must be overhauled (Petkar, 2025) and recent recommendations include a statutory entitlement to democratic education from primary through post-16, specialist teacher training, curriculum modernisation, direct engagement with politicians, and tailored youth-led communication campaigns (The Politics Project, 2025).

Second, we support the explicit calls for governments to fund and mandate democratic education programs (Lin, 2015). As outlined earlier in this paper, for success with votes at 16 in the UK, democratic education must be overhauled (Petkar, 2025). Recommendations include a statutory entitlement to democratic education from primary through post-16, specialist teacher

training, curriculum modernisation, direct engagement with politicians, and tailored youth-led communication campaigns (The Politics Project, 2025). Therefore, schools and educators can implement these programs with the support of trained teachers and impartial materials (Brodie-McKenzie, 2020). Political parties should engage ethically, avoiding manipulation and presenting clear policy information. Third-sector organizations can act as neutral facilitators, bridging gaps between young people and institutions (Pich & Armannsdottir, forthcoming). Collaboration among these various stakeholders ensures a coordinated and credible approach to youth engagement.

Third, for research and engagement strategies to be effective, they should treat young people as active participants in shaping policy and democratic processes, not as passive subjects of study (Percy-Smith, et al., 2019; Sloam & Henn, 2024; Walther, 2023). In order to see this new constituent group as active citizens rather than just “young people,” political market researchers should see young people as co-creators in designing outreach programs, messaging, and research activities (Bigi et al., 2016). Additionally, using peer-led focus groups and youth advisory panels to gather authentic perspectives can help understand this group (Poorrezaei et al., 2023). We also recommend creating platforms where youth voices lead to visible outcomes, demonstrating that their input is valued and acted upon.

Fourth, a practical way to engage with this new voter group will be to engage in authentic conversations via hosting interactive forums, town halls, and online dialogues where young people can engage with decision-makers (Wray-Lake, 2019). Utilizing participatory communication methods that respect youth perspectives and encourage collaboration, thus enacting an “Interactive” market research strategy can help foster dyadic and genuine dialogue (Bigi et al., 2016). Therefore, trust building can be brought about by transparency of intended outcomes. Finally, we believe it will be paramount to use ethical and innovative engagement tools. Social media campaigns should be authentic and avoid manipulative micro-targeting (Harrison, et al., 2024). Gamified tools and interactive simulations can make learning about voting engaging (Poorrezaei et al., 2023). Additionally, projective and creative techniques, such as scenario-based workshops, can reveal attitudes that standard surveys miss while fostering critical thinking (Weber, 1985).

The steps and strategies set out in this section are equally transferable beyond young people aged 16- to 17- years of age. For instance, the stages and strategies have transfer potential to commercial contexts where researchers must engage niche or distrustful audiences, such as early adopters of fintech products, consumers in stigmatized categories (e.g., cosmetic procedures), or marginalized hard-to-reach and seldom-heard communities whose perspectives are often underrepresented in mainstream surveys. Further, the steps and strategies (along with the innovative research methods outlined earlier in this paper in table 1) may need to be adapted to suit different contexts-settings, and/or tailored to address the wants and needs of different voter groups. The final section of this presents three areas for further research.

### **Future Research – Young people are the future**

The extension of voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds in the United Kingdom represents a significant paradigm shift for market researchers, demanding new conceptual frameworks and research approaches. Existing scholarship has predominantly focused on older voters and traditional campaigning techniques, leaving a critical gap in understanding this emerging electorate (Pich, 2023; Poorrezaei et al., 2023). Young voters navigate political engagement differently, shaped by digital ecosystems, peer networks, and identity-driven interactions with

political brands (Bignoux, 2020; Eckstein et al., 2024; Mycock & Tonge, 2012; Ohme et al., 2019). Future research must therefore explore how these voters construct political meaning, respond to marketing strategies, and engage with democratic processes across both online and offline spaces. Central to this agenda (illustrated in table 2), are three interrelated pathways for future research, which consider: fostering collaboration among stakeholders, addressing cultural change in engagement norms, understanding behavioral and affective shifts in political participation, countering misinformation and disinformation, and ensuring impartiality in political communications and research design.

**Table 2: Votes at 16 - Future Research Agenda**

<b>Research Pathway</b>	<b>Research Focus</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Expected Contributions</b>	<b>Ethical Considerations</b>
<b>1. Method Innovation</b>	Developing new tools for hard-to-reach voters	Gamified polling, projective techniques, advisory panels	Improved data accuracy and engagement	Transparency, youth involvement in design
<b>2. Cross-Cultural</b>	Comparative youth engagement	Cross-national surveys, case studies	Universal vs. context-specific insights	Cultural sensitivity in data collection
<b>3. Longitudinal</b>	Tracking long-term effects of Votes at 16	Panel studies, behavioral analytics	Evidence on long-term participation patterns	Privacy protection in longitudinal tracking

Theoretically, this research agenda calls for a reconceptualization of young voters as active market actors. Extending political brand engagement and co-creation theories to this demographic is essential to understanding how youth identities interact with party branding and perceived authenticity (Harrison et al., 2023). Moreover, incorporating frameworks from influencer marketing and digital persuasion is necessary to capture how algorithms, platform design, and online social interactions shape political exposure and engagement. This perspective aligns with the need to examine young voters not as passive recipients of political messaging but as co-creators of political discourse who actively negotiate meaning across digital and offline spaces (Bigi et al., 2016). Addressing these dynamics requires theoretical models that integrate the drivers of cultural and affective change while recognizing the influence of rapidly evolving media environments.

Empirical research must also evolve to address the complexity of this landscape. Understanding youth political identities requires ethnographic, participatory, and social listening methods capable of capturing the nuanced influence of peer networks, influencers, and subcultures on identity formation while avoiding intrusive surveillance practices. Evaluating engagement strategies should involve field experiments, A/B testing, and focus groups to assess the effectiveness of tactics such as gamified interventions, grassroots mobilization, and issue-based campaigns (Poorrezaei et al., 2023). Furthermore, innovative methodologies, including gamified polling, simulations, and youth-led advisory panels, offer pathways to overcome low survey participation and uncover latent attitudes through projective techniques. Across all these efforts,

ethical considerations must remain central, emphasizing transparency, voluntary participation, and informed consent, particularly when analyzing online behavior or interpreting influencer-driven interactions. These approaches must also explicitly address how misinformation and disinformation shape youth engagement and explore interventions that counter these effects while maintaining impartiality.

Finally, this agenda underscores the importance of cross-cultural and longitudinal research to capture both contextual differences and long-term impacts of enfranchising younger voters. Comparative studies between the UK, US, Austria, and Scotland can identify which patterns of youth engagement are universal and which are culturally specific, enhancing the global relevance of research insights. Longitudinal research, using panel studies and behavioral analytics, will be vital to assessing whether early enfranchisement creates enduring patterns of political participation, trust, and loyalty (Pich & Armannsdottir, forthcoming). Future research should also prioritize collaboration between policymakers, educators, and researchers to develop interventions that are both innovative and ethically grounded. Practical and creative solutions, such as school-based parallel elections, peer-to-peer data collection, digital ethnography, and AI-assisted sentiment analysis, can enhance data quality while safeguarding privacy and equity. By embedding the three concerns of collaboration, cultural change, behavioral and affective shifts, misinformation, and impartiality throughout these efforts, this research agenda not only advances scholarship but also provides policymakers with actionable strategies to ensure that Votes at 16 contributes to long-term democratic renewal.

## **Conclusion**

Votes at 16 across the UK is more than a policy change; it is a litmus test for the adaptability of democratic systems. If approached authentically, it offers an unprecedented opportunity to inspire, empower, and integrate young people into civic life. However, without sustained investment in education, innovative research, and ethical engagement, the promise of Votes at 16 may remain unrealized. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that young people are key contributors to develop the conditions for participation. Further, it is critical to understand the wants, needs and behaviours of young people as it will allow policy makers and practitioners to develop efficient, effective, and targeted strategies and programmes to encourage democratic engagement. Nevertheless, as this paper acknowledges, facilitating and managing formalised research projects with young people can be challenging. Therefore, practitioners, researchers and policy makers need to be bold, creative, strategic and collaborative as they develop and manage systematic research projects designed to tap into the world view of hard-to-reach participants. The case study of Jersey illustrates both the challenges and opportunities inherent in translating Votes at 16 into lasting democratic engagement. It reinforces that policy change must be paired with well-resourced, co-created educational programmes. Looking ahead, the future research agenda outlined in this paper offers a roadmap for academics and practitioners to test, refine, and scale strategies that are ethically sound, culturally relevant, and capable of empowering young people as active political participants. Beyond politics, these findings highlight methodological innovations that market researchers can adapt to engage other hard-to-reach groups, from digitally native consumers sceptical of traditional advertising, to patients navigating sensitive health issues, to young consumers shaping the future of retail and brand loyalty.

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