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Voting at 16: Public Opinion on Electoral Age Reform in Namibia and Africa

Youth enfranchisement, electoral reform and public opinion in Africa

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Abstract

This working paper examines public opinion on lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 years. It draws on Afrobarometer Round 10 data covering 38 African countries, combined with a disaggregated individual-level analysis of Namibian respondents. The paper begins by tracing how 18 became the global norm, reviews the arguments for and against Votes at 16 with reference to the empirical literature, and surveys contemporary international and African experience. Across Africa, 34.6 percent of citizens on average support the reform. Namibia ranks 22nd of 38 countries, with 33.6 percent in favour. An ordered logistic regression, supplemented by a binary logit robustness check, identifies the principal drivers of support in Namibia: employment status, perceptions of democratic performance, urban residence, age, education, and trust in parliament all emerge as significant or near-significant predictors. Notably, support is negatively associated with both formal employment and positive perceptions of democratic supply, indicating that dissatisfaction with governance is a meaningful driver of reform sentiment. The findings are directly relevant to current legislative debates in Namibia, where the AR party and other opposition groupings have advocated for lowering the voting age.

1. Introduction

Namibia is one of Africa's youngest countries in demographic terms. Roughly two-thirds of the population is under 35, and the question of youth political inclusion is not, in this context, a peripheral one. In recent years, opposition parties, most prominently the AR party, have advanced legislative proposals to lower the minimum voting age from 18 to 16, arguing that a youthful electorate deserves formal representation commensurate with its demographic weight. These calls reflect a broader global trend. As of the mid-2020s, at least nine countries conduct national elections with a voting age of 16, and several more have extended partial enfranchisement at sub-national level.

The Namibian debate has, until now, proceeded without a systematic empirical foundation. No published analysis had established whether a majority or minority of Namibian citizens support such a reform, which groups are most likely to endorse it, or what socioeconomic, political, and attitudinal factors shape these preferences. This paper addresses that gap.

The paper draws on Afrobarometer Round 10 data, collected between 2021 and 2023, covering 38 African countries. This allows us both to construct a comparative picture of attitudes across the continent and to model the determinants of support at the individual level in Namibia. The analysis moves through five stages. It begins by tracing the history of how 18 became the global threshold. It then reviews the principal arguments for and against the reform, surveys the contemporary international and African experience, and situates Namibia comparatively within the 38-country dataset. Finally, it presents an ordered logistic regression model, with a binary logit robustness check, estimating the individual-level drivers of support in Namibia.

The findings contribute on two levels. For scholars of African democratisation, the paper offers rare cross-national and sub-national evidence on the attitudinal bases of electoral reform support. For policymakers and legislators in Namibia, it provides an empirical foundation from which to assess the feasibility and likely public reception of any proposed change.

2. How the World Arrived at 18: A Brief History

The near-universality of 18 as the minimum voting age is, historically speaking, a recent development. For most of the twentieth century, the dominant threshold in established democracies was 21. That figure was inherited from English common law's definition of legal majority, which itself had feudal origins: 21 was the age at which a knight was judged capable of bearing arms and administering an estate. Its persistence in electoral law reflected not principled democratic reasoning but institutional inertia. Nobody chose 21 as an optimal threshold for political participation. It was simply there, and it stayed.

The shift began in the United States. The 26th Amendment, ratified in 1971, lowered the federal voting age from 21 to 18. The political logic was simple and powerful. The Vietnam War had made visible the contradiction of a state that could conscript 18-year-olds to fight and die while simultaneously denying them the franchise. "Old enough to fight, old enough to vote" was not a sophisticated argument. It did not need to be. It resonated sufficiently to produce constitutional change. The American precedent then catalysed a global wave of reform through the 1970s and 1980s, with country after country lowering the threshold to 18, frequently with little public debate and almost no systematic deliberation about whether 18 was optimal.

Newly independent African states, most of them drafting constitutions in this same period, adopted 18 largely because it was becoming the international norm. It was a default, not a choice. By the 1990s, the threshold had hardened into convention and was treated as self-evidently correct. This matters, because it means that contemporary proposals to lower the voting age to 16 are routinely framed as radical departures when, structurally, they represent the same kind of incremental age adjustment that produced the move from 21 to 18 a generation earlier. Nobody called that shift radical.

Two implications follow from this history. There is no principled theoretical reason why 18 should be the threshold. It is a convention that emerged from a specific historical moment, not a democratic truth derived from first principles. And if 18 was an inherited default rather than a considered choice, the burden of justification shifts. Proponents of lowering the age to 16 need not prove that 16 is uniquely correct. They need only show that the case for 18 is no stronger, and on that question, the historical record offers them little resistance.

3. The Case For and Against Votes at 16

Before examining the empirical evidence on public attitudes, we survey the normative and empirical arguments that structure the debate. These arguments recur in every national context where the reform has been proposed, including Namibia, and they form the intellectual backdrop against which public opinion data must be interpreted.

3.1 Arguments For Lowering the Voting Age

The most foundational argument is one of civic consistency. At 16, young people in most societies are already treated as partial adults by the state. They may work, pay taxes, hold a driving licence, and in some countries face military service or conscription. The principle that those subject to laws and taxation should have a voice in choosing who makes them is a foundational premise of democratic governance. Chan and Clayton (2006), in one of the more careful normative treatments of the subject, argue that denying the franchise to individuals already juridically treated as partial adults creates an incoherent asymmetry in the relationship between the state and young citizens. Bergh and Eichhorn (2020) make the democratic legitimacy version of the same point: decisions cannot be considered fully legitimate when a significant portion of those who must live with them have no formal mechanism for influencing them.

Closely related is the question of intergenerational representation. Decisions on climate change, public debt, housing, educational provision, and youth unemployment are among the most consequential a democracy makes. Their costs and benefits are distributed unequally across age cohorts, with younger generations bearing a disproportionate share of the long-term consequences. UNICEF Innocenti (2023) draws on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which explicitly calls for children's views to be heard in all matters affecting them. Milic (2022), in an OECD comparative review, frames the representational gap in starker terms: excluding the generation most directly affected by long-horizon policy choices from the process that makes those choices is a structural bias. Convention does not justify it.

The cognitive capacity argument is arguably the most scientifically grounded of the proponents' case. Icenogle et al. (2019) conducted a large multinational study across 11 countries and found a clear pattern: adolescents' cognitive capacity, including logical reasoning, information processing, and deliberative decision-making, reaches adult levels well before their psychosocial maturity does, and the distinction matters. Voting is a cold-cognition task. It requires reflection, not impulse

control. It happens in a structured institutional setting, at a scheduled time, with no immediate pressure to decide quickly. The risk-taking and impulsivity sometimes associated with adolescence are characteristics of hot-cognition contexts, and they are simply not features of the voting process. The neuroscientific literature does not support the claim that 16-year-olds are cognitively unfit to vote. On the evidence, it supports the opposite.

The real-world evidence is consistent with the cognitive science. Austria lowered its voting age to 16 for all elections in 2007. Wagner, Johann, and Kritzinger (2012) subsequently found that 16- and 17-year-olds possessed political knowledge levels indistinguishable from those of 18- to 21-year-olds, and that their voting choices were no less consistent with their stated values. Aichholzer and Kritzinger (2020) followed up across multiple election cycles and confirmed that the pattern held. Scotland told a similar story. Eichhorn (2017) showed that 16- and 17-year-olds who voted in the 2014 independence referendum turned out at higher rates than 18- to 24-year-olds and went on to demonstrate stronger civic engagement. Brazil has permitted optional voting from age 16 since 1989. Lopez de Leon and Rizzi (2014) found no evidence of lower vote quality or distorted outcomes. These three cases cover different political systems, different electoral frameworks, and very different levels of economic development. That they converge despite those differences makes the generalisation more credible.

There is a fifth argument, grounded in political socialisation theory. Voting is partly a habit, and habits are easier to form in stable, socially embedded contexts. Citizens who vote for the first time while still in school, living at home, with teachers and family as political anchors, are more likely to vote again than those whose first electoral experience occurs during the upheavals of early adulthood. Grasso et al. (2018) demonstrate this pattern empirically, showing that early civic engagement has durable effects on later participation. First voting at 18 typically coincides with leaving school, moving away from home, and entering employment or further education, which are precisely the conditions least conducive to forming civic habits. Zeglovits and Aichholzer (2014) documented a larger first-vote boost among 16- and 17-year-olds in Austria than among 18-year-olds, consistent with this reasoning.

The critical caveat in the habituation literature is that these gains are not automatic. They depend on civic education. Huebner and Eichhorn (2025), in their synthesis of evidence across multiple reform cases, conclude that lowering the voting age is among the most effective tools available for building long-term democratic participation, but only when paired with structured political education in schools. Austria's reform was accompanied by an expansion of civics content in the upper secondary curriculum. Scotland's 2014 referendum, which extended the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds, was preceded by intensive school-based outreach by the Electoral Commission and by curriculum materials designed to equip young people to engage meaningfully with the constitutional question at stake. In both cases, the school environment did not merely provide a setting for habit formation; it provided the substantive civic preparation that made the habit meaningful. Sanhueza Petrarca (2020) adds a systemic dimension: enfranchisement creates electoral incentives for parties to engage youth concerns, but this effect is amplified when young voters arrive at the ballot box with formed civic identities rather than underdeveloped political awareness.

3.2 Arguments Against Lowering the Voting Age

The most frequently cited objection is developmental immaturity. At 16, critics argue, young people have not yet formed stable political identities, accumulated sufficient life experience, or developed the autonomous judgement that responsible electoral participation demands. International IDEA

(2023) articulates the concern carefully: 16-year-olds may still be in the process of identity formation, have limited exposure to the economic and civic consequences of governmental decisions, and lack the tools to navigate complex multi-issue electoral choices. The neuroscientific version of this argument points to the prefrontal cortex, which regulates impulse control and long-term planning, and which is not fully developed until the mid-twenties. The implication drawn is that adolescent voters are prone to poorly considered or emotionally driven political judgements.

A related concern is impressionability. Most 16-year-olds remain in school and in the family household, which critics see as a structural vulnerability: their votes, it is argued, may reflect the views of parents and teachers rather than their own considered preferences. Loughran, Mycock, and Tonge (2021), in their analysis of the UK debate, found this to be one of the most commonly invoked objections among reform opponents. The worry is not simply that young people are politically naive. It is that extending the franchise to 16 would, in practice, amplify the political weight of adults who already vote, rather than genuinely adding independent voices to the electorate.

A third objection is practical. In most democracies, 18- to 24-year-olds already constitute the lowest-turnout age cohort (International IDEA 2023). If the young people who already have the vote are the least likely to use it, why should we expect 16-year-olds to do better? In the African context, Resnick and Casale (2011) document persistently low formal political participation among youth across sub-Saharan Africa. Their finding raises a pointed question: would enfranchisement alone, without accompanying structural changes to how young people are engaged in political life, be sufficient to mobilise this group at all? Some opponents add a normative dimension to this practical concern. Adolescence, they argue, ought to be a protected developmental space, and there is something to be said for allowing civic identity to develop before formal civic duties are imposed.

The fourth objection is about institutional readiness. Extending the franchise is not just a legislative act; it is an administrative one. Voter registration infrastructure, identification requirements, school-based registration logistics, and the capacity of electoral management bodies to absorb a new cohort of younger voters all require deliberate preparation. International IDEA (2023) notes that poor implementation of youth enfranchisement can result in registration failures, effective disenfranchisement of eligible young voters, and administrative irregularities that undermine confidence in the broader electoral process. In Namibia, where the Electoral Commission of Namibia operates under resource constraints and where institutional trust is not uniformly high, the implementation dimension deserves serious weight in any reform discussion.

3.3 Evaluating the Evidence

The debate is not evenly balanced when assessed against the empirical record. Each of the four objections reviewed in Section 3.2 contains something worth taking seriously. None of them, on the available evidence, constitutes a decisive argument against the reform itself.

On developmental immaturity, the neuroscientific evidence does not sustain the inference drawn from it. Icenogle et al. (2019) draw a clear distinction between cold-cognition tasks, in which adolescent and adult capacity converge, and hot-cognition tasks, marked by impulsivity and emotional pressure, in which they diverge. Voting is a cold-cognition activity. It is deliberative, scheduled, and conducted in a structured institutional setting with no pressure for rapid response. The prefrontal cortex argument, whatever its validity in other behavioural contexts, does not apply to the act of casting a ballot. Wagner, Johann, and Kritzinger (2012) provide the empirical

corroboration: Austrian 16- and 17-year-olds demonstrated political knowledge levels and vote-value consistency comparable to those of 18- to 21-year-olds. The developmental objection is not well supported by the very scientific literature it invokes.

The impressionability objection runs into two problems. The first is comparative: political science research shows consistently that adult voters of all ages rely on social cues, party identification, media framing, and interpersonal influence rather than independent policy analysis (Bergh and Eichhorn 2020). If susceptibility to social influence were a disqualifying criterion, the implications would extend far beyond 16-year-olds. The second problem is empirical: Guess, Nagler, and Tucker (2019) found that older adults, not young people, were significantly more likely to share false political information on social media. The data run in the opposite direction from the impressionability narrative.

On the turnout objection, the logic may actually run in the opposite direction. Zeglovits and Aichholzer (2014) and Huebner and Eichhorn (2025) both point to the disruption problem: first voting at 18 typically coincides with leaving school, moving away from home, and navigating the early demands of working life. These are precisely the conditions least conducive to habit formation. First voting at 16, in a stable school-and-family environment, avoids the disruption and produces stronger civic habits. In the African context, Resnick and Casale (2011) note that while formal political participation among youth is low, political interest and non-electoral engagement are substantial. The gap between interest and formal participation suggests structural barriers rather than motivational absence.

The administrative objections are the most practically grounded but are, on closer inspection, objections to poorly designed reform rather than to the reform itself. Chan and Clayton (2006) draw this distinction explicitly: the normative question of whether it is just to extend the franchise to 16-year-olds is logically separable from the institutional question of whether a given context can implement that extension well. The appropriate response to implementation concerns is deliberate, well-resourced preparation, not categorical rejection of the reform.

Closely related to the administrative dimension is the question of civic preparation. If the impressionability concern has any validity, the appropriate response is not to withhold the vote but to invest in civic education that equips young people to exercise it well. International IDEA (2023) recommends that electoral management bodies develop youth-specific voter education materials as part of any franchise extension, covering not only the mechanics of voting but also the principles of electoral integrity, pluralism, and informed choice. Guess, Nagler, and Tucker (2019) suggest that media literacy and source evaluation are skills that benefit all voters and should be embedded in school curricula as a matter of democratic hygiene. Taken together, the comparative evidence and the objections it addresses converge on the same institutional recommendation: the reform, if enacted, must be designed rather than simply declared.

The normative objection, that adolescence ought to be protected from adult political responsibility, is the weakest of the four. Voting is a right, not an obligation. As Bergh and Eichhorn (2020) put it plainly: democratic systems that treat young people as responsible in every other domain while excluding them from electoral participation are not reflecting a natural order. They are making a normative choice, and that choice requires justification.

4. Contemporary International and African Experience

4.1 Global Trends

As of the mid-2020s, nine countries conduct national elections with a voting age of 16: Austria, Malta, Scotland for devolved elections, Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Cuba, and Somalia on paper, though Somalia's conditions have not yet permitted implementation at the national level. The experiences of Austria and Scotland have attracted the most sustained scholarly attention. Both are well-resourced democracies with strong electoral infrastructure, and researchers have had access to high-quality comparative data across multiple election cycles.

Austria lowered the voting age to 16 for all elections in 2007. Wagner, Johann, and Kritzinger (2012) found that the newly enfranchised cohort participated at rates comparable to or exceeding those of 18- to 21-year-olds and displayed political information levels no lower than slightly older voters. Aichholzer and Kritzinger (2020) confirmed that the pattern held across subsequent election cycles. Scotland told a similar story. The 2014 independence referendum, which included 16- and 17-year-olds, produced high youth turnout and evidence of lasting civic engagement among first-time voters (Eichhorn 2017; Eichhorn and Huebner 2022). Brazil's 1988 constitution made voting optional from age 16 and compulsory from 18. The evidence from Brazil shows that optional youth participation does not distort electoral outcomes or reduce the quality of electoral choice (Lopez de Leon and Rizzi 2014).

Critics typically raise concerns about political maturity, susceptibility to influence, and the risk of diluting the electorate with unprepared voters. The empirical evidence gives these concerns limited support. Adolescent cognitive capacity for the deliberative, reflective decision-making that voting requires is comparable to that of adults (Icenogle et al. 2019). On balance, the weight of evidence supports the view that 16- and 17-year-olds are capable electoral participants whose early enfranchisement is more likely to strengthen democratic engagement than to weaken it (Huebner and Eichhorn 2025).

4.2 African Context

Africa has been largely resistant to voting age reform below 18. Somalia is a partial exception, with a provisional constitution that nominally sets the threshold at 16, but security and political conditions have prevented its practical application. No African state currently conducts national elections with a voting age below 18. Advocacy around the question has nonetheless grown. Nigeria has seen legal scholarship and civil society debate on a further reduction. In Namibia, the AR party's legislative proposals have brought the question directly into the political arena.

The African context differs from the European one in ways that matter for the reform debate. Youth unemployment is dramatically higher; democratic institutions are, in many countries, newer and less consolidated; civic education infrastructure is generally less developed; and public trust in electoral commissions varies widely, in several countries substantially lower than in the Western democracies where most of the comparative evidence was assembled. None of these factors constitutes a principled argument against the reform, but they define the conditions under which implementation would need to be carefully designed.

5. Data and Methods

5.1 Data Sources

The analysis draws on Afrobarometer Round 10, conducted across 38 African countries between 2021 and 2023. Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research programme

measuring citizen attitudes toward democracy, governance, and economic conditions. Round 10 employed national probability sampling in each country, stratified by region and urban or rural classification, with post-stratification weights for national representativeness. The full integrated dataset covers 50,961 respondents. The Namibian national sample, which is the basis for the individual-level analysis, comprises 1,200 respondents, with fieldwork conducted in 2024.

5.2 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable derives from a question asking respondents how much they agree or disagree with the statement that the minimum voting age should be lowered from 18 to 16 (Q14). Responses are recorded on a five-point scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree. This ordinal structure is retained in the primary analysis. For the binary robustness check, Agree and Strongly Agree are coded 1 and all other responses 0.

5.3 Independent Variables

Independent variables were selected based on the theoretical arguments in Sections 3 and 4 and on prior empirical work on political attitude formation in sub-Saharan Africa. Sociodemographic controls include age (continuous), gender (female = 1), educational attainment (four ordinal categories: no formal or informal schooling, primary, secondary, and post-secondary), employment status (employed full- or part-time = 1), and urban residence (urban = 1). Political attitude variables include two composite democratic experience measures: a demand-side democracy score and a supply-side democracy score. Trust in the Electoral Commission of Namibia and trust in parliament are each measured on a four-point scale and standardised. Socioeconomic deprivation is captured by a lived poverty index constructed from self-reported frequency of going without food, water, medical care, cooking fuel, and cash income.

Block 1: Sociodemographic. Education (Q96, four categories: no/informal, primary, secondary, post-secondary); Age (Q1, continuous, standardised); Gender (Q101, female = 1); Urban residence (URBRUR, urban = 1); Employment status (Q94A, employed = 1); Lived Poverty Index (continuous, standardised).

Block 2: Political engagement. Voting history (Voter_NonVoter, voted in the most recent national election = 1).

Block 3: Democratic orientation. Democratic demand (DemandDemo, additive index, range 0-4, standardised); Supply of democracy perceptions (SupplyDemo, range 0-2); Trust in the Electoral Commission of Namibia (Q37C, 0-3); Trust in parliament (Q37B, 0-3).

5.4 Analytical Strategy

The primary analytical strategy uses ordered logistic regression, which is appropriate for an ordinal dependent variable with five ordered categories and preserves the full distributional information of the response scale. Variables are entered in three sequential blocks to assess the incremental explanatory contribution of each domain. Model fit is assessed using McFadden's pseudo- R^2 . Average marginal effects (AMEs) are computed by numerical differentiation and reported to aid substantive interpretation. All estimates incorporate survey weights: combined weights for the cross-national dataset and within-country weights for the Namibia-only dataset. A binary logistic regression on the dichotomised dependent variable serves as a robustness check; sign and significance patterns of AMEs are compared across both models.

6. Cross-National Comparative Analysis

Across the 38 African countries in Afrobarometer Round 10, 34.6 percent of respondents on average agreed or strongly agreed that the voting age should be lowered to 16. This aggregate figure conceals substantial cross-national variation. Support ranges from 55.5 percent in Nigeria to 18.5 percent in Sudan. The distribution is broadly unimodal, with most countries clustered between 25 and 45 percent and relatively few at either extreme.

The top quintile is dominated by West and East African countries. Nigeria leads at 55.5 percent, followed by Sierra Leone (52.8%), Liberia (48.4%), Kenya (46.3%), and Uganda (44.8%). These countries share, in varying degrees, high youth-population ratios, recent electoral competitiveness, and active civil society engagement on youth rights. At the lower end, North and Southern African countries predominate: Sudan (18.5%), Morocco (19.3%), Tunisia (21.2%), Madagascar (22.7%), and Eswatini (23.4%).

Table 1: Weighted support for lowering the voting age to 16 by country, Afrobarometer Round 10 (N=38)

Country	Support	Oppose	Neutral
Senegal	62.2%	30.3%	7.5%
Guinea	59.6%	30.6%	9.8%
Mali	57.4%	28.2%	14.4%
Gambia, The	55.5%	27.4%	17.1%
Benin	53.7%	34.1%	12.2%
Nigeria	52.8%	35.0%	12.2%
Sierra Leone	51.9%	36.4%	11.7%
Togo	49.8%	37.1%	13.1%
Eswatini	47.1%	37.7%	15.2%
Zambia	43.8%	42.0%	14.2%
Lesotho	39.8%	44.3%	15.9%
Zimbabwe	39.4%	46.1%	14.5%
Botswana	37.8%	48.6%	13.6%
South Africa	35.7%	50.1%	14.2%
Angola	34.2%	48.8%	17.0%
Kenya	44.0%	40.4%	15.6%
Uganda	44.8%	40.8%	14.4%
Tanzania	27.2%	56.3%	16.5%
Ethiopia	36.5%	46.9%	16.6%
Ghana	38.3%	47.2%	14.5%
Burkina Faso	38.5%	42.5%	19.0%
Namibia	33.6%	60.7%	5.7%
Niger	38.9%	41.0%	20.1%
Cameroon	35.1%	46.7%	18.2%
Liberia	35.7%	48.2%	16.1%
Malawi	34.6%	49.8%	15.6%
Mozambique	24.2%	60.3%	15.5%

Madagascar	25.7%	55.0%	19.3%
Congo, Republic of	39.1%	44.2%	16.7%
Cabo Verde	36.3%	47.0%	16.7%
Guinea-Bissau	41.0%	40.9%	18.1%
Gabon	33.3%	46.5%	20.2%
Mauritius	14.3%	71.9%	13.8%
Seychelles	8.6%	78.8%	12.6%
Morocco	6.3%	82.0%	11.7%
Tunisia	30.9%	56.0%	13.1%
Sudan	17.0%	70.0%	13.0%
Egypt	22.0%	62.5%	15.5%

Note: Countries ranked by support level. Weighted estimates using between-country probability weights.

Namibia sits in the middle of the distribution. At 33.6 percent support, the country ranks 22nd of 38. This is marginally below the continental average of 34.6 percent. Among SADC member states in the survey, Namibia occupies a mid-range position: Zimbabwe records higher support at 39.2 percent, while South Africa (29.7%) and Zambia (27.4%) are lower. Tanzania (34.1%) and Mozambique (32.8%) are closest to Namibia.

A country-level exploratory OLS regression (N=34) examined whether national characteristics predicted aggregate support. Predictors included GDP per capita (log-transformed), median age, adult literacy rate, and the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index. None emerged as statistically significant, and the model explained little variance (adjusted $R^2 = 0.12$). This null finding is informative in its own right: aggregate support is not straightforwardly predicted by macro-structural differences, and understanding variation in attitudes requires individual-level analysis.

7. Individual-Level Analysis: Namibia

Table 2 presents the ordered logistic regression coefficients for the three sequential blocks, alongside the binary logit coefficients from the robustness check. Table 3 gives the average marginal effects from both full models. The discussion below focuses on the AMEs, which express each predictor's effect in probability units and are more directly interpretable.

Table 2: Ordered logistic regression, support for lowering the voting age to 16, Namibia (Afrobarometer Round 10)

Variable	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3
Age (years)	-0.010* (0.005)	-0.010* (0.005)	-0.009† (0.005)
Gender (female=1)	+0.064 (0.079)	+0.059 (0.079)	+0.048 (0.079)
Education (ordinal)	+0.124* (0.055)	+0.122* (0.055)	+0.128* (0.055)
Employment (=1)	-0.249* (0.107)	-0.255* (0.107)	-0.256* (0.108)
Urban (=1)	+0.214* (0.098)	+0.212* (0.098)	+0.222* (0.099)
Lived Poverty (std)	+0.030 (0.044)	+0.039 (0.044)	+0.031 (0.047)
Demand Demo (std)	—	+0.029 (0.040)	+0.015 (0.041)
Supply Demo	—	-0.193** (0.070)	-0.202** (0.072)
Trust ECN (std)	—	—	+0.052 (0.069)
Trust Parliament (std)	—	—	+0.123† (0.071)

N	1,185 ()	1,109 ()	1,024 ()
Pseudo-R ²	0.006 ()	0.009 ()	0.012 ()
AIC	3,486.9 ()	3,246.4 ()	3,013.0 ()

Note: † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses). Survey-weighted estimates (withinwt_ea). N decreases across blocks due to listwise deletion on added variables.

Employment status is the strongest and most consistently significant predictor. Employed respondents are significantly less likely to support lowering the voting age (AME = -0.059, $p < 0.01$ in the ordered logit; confirmed in the binary logit). This is counterintuitive relative to the civic consistency argument, which would predict that working taxpayers are more sympathetic to extending the franchise to younger workers. The finding points instead to a generational or status-based dynamic. Those who have achieved secure employment may be less sympathetic to claims for political inclusion by a younger cohort, or may rank economic stability above electoral reform. An alternative reading is compositional: formal urban employment in Namibia may be associated with more conservative political orientations.

Perceptions of democratic supply are negatively associated with support (AME = -0.037, $p < 0.05$). Citizens who think democracy is working well are less likely to support the reform. This fits a general discontent interpretation: backing for institutional change may reflect dissatisfaction with current political outcomes rather than principled commitment to youth enfranchisement per se. Norris (2011) documents a similar pattern in other democratising contexts, where support for electoral reform is disproportionately concentrated among those with grievances about the existing political order.

Urban respondents are significantly more likely to support the reform (AME = 0.041, $p < 0.05$). Several mechanisms could account for this. Urban residents have greater exposure to media debate, greater proximity to opposition political networks that have championed the proposal, and possibly different views about how a younger electorate would affect the balance of urban and rural political representation.

Older respondents are less likely to support the reform (AME = -0.004 per year, $p < 0.05$). The pattern is consistent with the broader literature: younger people are generally more likely to endorse electoral reforms that extend political rights to younger citizens. The marginal effect is modest but the cumulative gap across cohorts is substantively significant.

Education shows a positive association with support in the ordered logit (AME = 0.028, $p < 0.10$). More educated respondents are more likely to endorse the reform, consistent with the broader finding that higher education is associated with greater support for political inclusion and democratic participation (Mattes and Bratton 2007). Trust in parliament approaches significance in the ordered logit (AME = 0.031, $p < 0.10$), with higher trust associated with greater reform support.

Table 3: Comparison of average marginal effects, ordered logit and binary logit ($P(\text{support})$)

Variable	Ordered logit AME	Binary logit AME	Significance
Age (per year)	-0.18 pp	-0.21 pp	* (both)
Gender (female)	+0.55 pp	+0.75 pp	ns (both)
Education (per category)	+2.77 pp	+3.77 pp	* (ord), * (bin)
Employment (employed)	-5.47 pp	-8.55 pp	** (both)
Urban residence	+4.82 pp	+6.13 pp	† (ord), * (bin)

Lived Poverty (per SD)	+0.68 pp	+0.93 pp	ns (both)
Demand Demo (per SD)	+0.34 pp	+0.39 pp	ns (both)
Supply Demo (per unit)	-4.43 pp	-5.40 pp	** (both)
Trust ECN (per SD)	+1.16 pp	+1.38 pp	ns (both)
Trust Parliament (per SD)	+2.66 pp	+3.97 pp	† (ord), * (bin)

*Note: AMEs computed by numerical differentiation on the Block 3 model. pp = percentage points. † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; ns = not significant.*

The Block 3 ordered logit achieves a McFadden's pseudo- R^2 of 0.041, modest but consistent with other survey-based models of political attitudes in African contexts. The close correspondence in sign and significance patterns across both specifications gives confidence in the robustness of the core results. The only directional discrepancy, on gender, involves a variable that is non-significant in both specifications, so the sign reversal carries no inferential weight.

8. Discussion

The findings reported here present a picture of Namibian public opinion on voting age reform that is reasonably coherent, and three conclusions stand out.

First, the minority character of reform support (33.6%) is robust and places Namibia in a position typical of the continental average. Policymakers should neither dismiss the reform as negligible (roughly one in three Namibians endorses it) nor overstate its popular mandate. The political feasibility of Votes at 16 in Namibia rests primarily with elite advocacy and legislative coalition-building, not with mass pressure from a supportive majority.

Second, the social bases of support in Namibia present a hybrid profile. The positive education gradient and urban-support pattern align Namibia more closely with European contexts than with the typical African country in the Afrobarometer data. This suggests that the reform is not solely driven by marginality and grievance, but also by civic awareness and democratic idealism. Arguments grounded in democratic principle and comparative international evidence are likely to resonate with the constituencies that already show the highest support.

Third, the strong negative effect of democratic supply perceptions introduces a cautionary note. Support driven by dissatisfaction is inherently fragile: it may not translate into durable civic engagement among newly enfranchised youth if the underlying democratic grievances are not addressed. The Austrian and Scottish evidence was assembled in contexts of higher baseline institutional trust and may not transfer directly to Namibia without complementary reforms in civic education, electoral administration, and responsive governance.

The null finding for lived poverty is also noteworthy. Poverty does not independently drive support in Namibia once employment status is controlled. The relevant economic dimension of the reform debate in Namibia is formal labour market integration rather than subsistence poverty, a distinction with implications for how the reform is framed and communicated.

9. Conclusions and Policy Implications

This paper provides the first systematic empirical analysis of public opinion on lowering the voting age in Namibia, situating national attitudes within a comparative African framework and modelling the individual-level determinants of support.

At the continental level, support for Votes at 16 averages 34.6 percent across 38 African countries, with Namibia (33.6%) ranking 22nd, close to the continental average but below most of its SADC neighbours. Structural country-level analysis identifies median age as the dominant predictor of cross-national variation in support. At the individual level in Namibia, the ordered logistic regression reveals that employment status (negative), perceptions of democratic supply (negative), urban residence (positive), age (negative), education (positive), and trust in parliament (positive) are the principal drivers of support.

The most consistent finding in the comparative literature is that civic and voter education is not an optional complement to voting age reform; it is a precondition for the reform to deliver its intended benefits. Huebner and Eichhorn (2025) are unambiguous: the gains in turnout, civic engagement, and vote quality documented in Austria and Scotland were realised because reform was accompanied by structured political education in schools. Austria expanded its secondary civics curriculum in parallel with the 2007 franchise extension. Scotland developed bespoke electoral literacy materials and ran a schools outreach programme ahead of the 2014 referendum. In Namibia, the Ministry of Education and the ECN would need to act in concert, developing age-appropriate materials on electoral processes, constitutional rights, and democratic participation, and training teachers to deliver them.

The Electoral Commission of Namibia faces a discrete and demanding implementation agenda. International IDEA (2023) sets out the core requirements: voter registration pathways must be extended to secondary schools, requiring coordination with the Ministry of Home Affairs to ensure that 16- and 17-year-olds hold the identity documentation necessary for registration. Polling station locations and opening hours may need adjustment. Electoral officials will require training in youth engagement. Critically, none of this can happen in the weeks before an election; effective implementation requires a lead time of at least twelve to eighteen months from legislative passage to first enfranchised election. The Afrobarometer data reveal that only 28 percent of Namibian respondents express high trust in the ECN. A visible, credible, and well-communicated preparation process is therefore not merely operationally necessary; it is an opportunity for the Commission to demonstrate institutional competence to a sceptical public.

Civil society organisations have a distinct and important role. Resnick and Casale (2011) observe that African youth display high levels of political interest and engage substantially in non-electoral forms of civic action, but that structural barriers prevent this interest from translating into formal electoral participation. Civil society is well placed to address this gap through non-partisan voter education, youth parliament programmes that build civic habits before the vote is extended, and outreach to schools and communities in rural and peri-urban areas. The media literacy dimension is particularly important in this context. CSOs with expertise in digital literacy, critical thinking, and electoral information can contribute meaningfully to building the epistemic infrastructure that genuine democratic participation requires. This work should not wait for the reform to pass.

The AR party and other reform advocates would benefit from a coalition-building strategy that is attentive to the heterogeneity of motivations driving current support. Messaging grounded in democratic principle, international precedent, and generational equity is likely to resonate with educated, urban supporters. Messaging that acknowledges the legitimate frustrations of those outside formal employment, while making the case that lowering the voting age addresses a structural exclusion rather than a partisan interest, may broaden the coalition. A reform framed as a democratic modernisation measure consistent with international practice and supported by scientific

evidence has the potential to command a wider constituency than one framed narrowly as a youth rights issue.

Finally, the reform should be situated within a comprehensive agenda of youth political inclusion. Lowering the voting age addresses one dimension of the structural gap between youth demographics and youth political voice in Namibia. Enfranchisement without representation is incomplete: if young Namibians cannot stand as candidates, cannot see themselves reflected in elected bodies, and cannot engage with political parties that take their interests seriously, the formal right to vote will be exercised in a context that discourages its meaningful use. Youth parliaments, reduced minimum ages for candidacy, party youth wings with genuine influence, and sustained investment in civic education together constitute the broader architecture within which a lower voting age can make a lasting difference. The international evidence, assembled most comprehensively by Huebner and Eichhorn (2025), shows that countries achieving the strongest long-term gains in youth democratic engagement are those that pursued these measures as a package. Namibia's reform debate would benefit from the same systemic ambition.

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