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# VOTING AT 16 - TWO DECADES AFTER LOWERING THE VOTING AGE IN AUSTRIA

## 1. The electoral reform 2007

In 2007 Austria implemented an electoral reform that included lowering the voting age for all elections. Austria thus became one of the pioneers in the EU for youth suffrage. In the meantime, a couple of countries have lowered the voting age to 16, including Malta and Estonia. In other countries as amongst others Denmark or Luxembourg, the issue of lowering the voting age has been discussed, but has not succeeded yet. So, how did youth enfranchisement happen in Austria?

Interestingly enough, opinion polls in 2007 showed that the majority of the voters did not support youth enfranchisement, even among 14-17-year olds there were as many supporters as opponents of the reform [1]. This does not come totally unexpected. If women had had to wait until a majority of men supported women's suffrage, they might still not be eligible to vote. The lowering of the voting age was achieved in a top-down process. Some political players, including the Social Democratic Party, the Green Party and some youth organizations, supported a general voting age of 16 for all elections in Austria. In fact, the voting age has been lowered to 16 step by step, beginning with the municipal and the provincial levels in the early 2000s. After the federal election in 2006 the then formed coalition between the Social Democrats and the Peoples Party agreed on an electoral reform that encompassed lowering the voting age, but also the introduction of absentee voting (postal voting) and a change in the length of the legislative period. Political commentators interpreted it as a give-and-take deal between the two coalition partners, with the Social Democrats supporting the lowering of the voting age, and the Peoples Party supporting the absentee voting.

Thus, since the electoral reform in 2007, 16- and 17-year-olds with Austrian citizenship have had the right to vote in all elections (including the European parliamentary elections), referenda and plebiscites. Nearly two decades later, the case of Austria might provide insights as to, what happens if young people are eligible to vote. To understand the context, one has to know that the electoral reform was accompanied by several measures for the newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds: Most importantly, civic education was introduced as a subject in the eighth grade (students aged 13-14). Moreover, for the first federal election (2008) there was a large scale awareness-raising campaign including projects and mock elections in schools. Similar activities had been implemented on the regional level earlier and were evaluated to have a positive effect on political interest and turnout.

## 2. Empirical findings of outc

A lot of research was conducted in Austria, especially by the team of the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), located at the University of Vienna. The findings give answers to a lot of questions and doubts that had been raised when the voting age was lowered. Most prominently, opponents of lowering the voting age were afraid that young people would not use their right to vote and abstain from the election. Moreover, it was questioned if young people were mature enough, knowledgeable enough to responsibly make the right choice (whatever the right choice is meant to be) – an issue that rarely is raised when it comes to older voters. In total, one could say, that most of the empirical results support the arguments in favor of youth suffrage and reduce the doubts raised.

- Turnout was higher for 16- and 17-year-olds than for older first-time voters (18 to 20) [2] [3].
- Political interest of 16- and 17-year-olds increased after they had been enfranchised. Moreover, the impact of parents was reduced while the impact of schools was increased [4].
- Satisfaction with democracy was particularly high among 16- and 17-year-olds in 2017. Moreover, the age gap of internal political efficacy – i.e. the feeling that one is able to participate in politics – between 16- and 17-year-olds and older voters vanished between 2013 and 2017 [5].
- The quality of the vote – meaning the congruence between a voter's position and the party's position he or she voted for – was not worse for 16- and 17-year-olds than for older voters [6][7].
- Accompanying measures were successful: Young people who were addressed by schools had a higher political interest and young people with higher political interest had a higher turnout [8]. However, students in schools are more often reached by such measures than young people in vocational training [9].

Schools have direct and indirect effects: As schools are places of learning, schools contribute to knowledge. But schools are also a place where socialization takes place, where habits are established, where peers engage in discussions and where democracy can be experienced. Results for Austria show that (self-assessed) knowledge increased turnout [10].

The Austrian experience indicated that youth suffrage can increase participation and strengthen democratic values. This holds true when young people are addressed by (school-based) civic education.

### 3. New challenges

Most of the research on youth suffrage in Austria was done in the first decade after its introduction. However, circumstances have somewhat changed, thus one has to put the results in context.

Austria faces at least two challenges: one is the proportion of young people eligible to vote, and the second is the existence and distribution of accompanying measures.

Demographic developments and a rather restricted accessibility to Austrian citizenship (subject to *jus sanguinis*) have led to a challenging situation in the past years in Austria: An increasingly high proportion of young people is not eligible to vote in Austria. This is particularly high in Vienna and other big cities. For example, 42% of 16- to 24-year-olds in Vienna do not have the Austrian citizenship and thus are not eligible to vote [11]. This introduces quite some challenges. Research shows that turnout is low where eligible voters are surrounded by a lot of people who are not eligible to vote. Imagine a scenario where half of your class, your peers in a sporting club or your colleagues at work are not eligible to vote. Suddenly, the election might become a not-so-interesting topic to discuss. The high proportion of young people who are excluded from the right to vote might have consequences for those who are eligible to vote.

Second, as voting at the age of 16 has become quite normal and lacks the thrill and the attention of something new, one has to be careful of whether or not accompanying measures, that have been proven to be successful, will still be implemented, and if yes, if they are distributed evenly. Even the data from the early years of youth enfranchisement in Austria indicate that pupils attending higher schools were reached much more frequently than young people in vocational training. The few young people who do not attend any education (be it schools or vocational training) will definitely be untouched by such measures.

This is potentially introducing a participation gap at a very early age.

Thus, the case of Austria shows that the introduction of youth enfranchisement was a success – at least in the first decade – but faces new challenges, that have not been properly addressed now.

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#### Footnotes

[1] “Wählen ab 16: Jugend skeptisch”, *Die Presse*

[2] Eva Zeglovits et Julian Aichholzer, “Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18? Evidence for the First-Time Voting Boost Among 16- to 25-Year-Olds in Austria”, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 24, no 3 (2014) : 351-361

[3] Julian Aichholzer et Sylvia Kritzing, “Voting at 16 in Practice: A Review of the Austrian Case”, in *Lowering the Voting Age to 16: Learning from Real Experiences Worldwide*, dir. Jan Eichhorn et Johannes Bergh (Cham : Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 81-101,

[4] Eva Zeglovits et Martina Zandonella, “Political Interest of Adolescents Before and After Lowering the Voting Age: The Case of Austria”, *Journal of Youth Studies* 16, no 8 (2013) : 1084-1104,

[5] Aicholzer & Kritzing (2019).

[6] Markus Wagner, David Johann et Sylvia Kritzing, “Voting at 16: Turnout and the Quality of Vote Choice”, *Electoral Studies* 31, no 2 (2012) : 372-383,

[7] Aicholzer & Kritzing (2019).

[8] Sylvia Kritzing, Eva Zeglovits et Philipp Oberluggauer, Wählen mit 16 bei der Nationalratswahl 2013 (Vienne: Österreichisches Jugendinstitut, 2013).

[9] Steve Schwarzer et Eva Zeglovits, “The Role of Schools in Preparing 16- and 17-Year-Old Austrian First-Time Voters for the Election”, dans *Growing into Politics: Contexts and Timing of Political Socialisation*, dir. Simone Abendschön (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2013), 73-89.

[10] Sylvia Kritzing, Eva Zeglovits et Patricia Oberluggauer, Wählen mit 16 bei der Nationalratswahl 2013 (Vienne: Université de Vienne, Institut für Staatswissenschaft, 2013), 39 p.,

[11] Nicht wahlberechtigte junge Wiener\*innen, Ville de Vienne – Partizipation junger Wiener\*innen,