

Voting at 16 in Austria: a possible model for the EU?

Paul Schmidt | Secretary General, Austrian Society for European Politics
@_PaulSchmidt 

Johanna Edthofer | Analyst, Austrian Society for European Politics
@JohannaEdthofer 

Theme

Austria has been the only country in the EU that allows voting at the age of 16 at all political levels. Could this be a future model for the EU?

Summary

For the past decade Austria has been the only country in the EU that allows voting at the age of 16 at all political levels. A year before the next elections to the European Parliament and more than 10 years after lowering the voting age in Austria, it seems useful to take a closer look at the Austrian experience. With an increasingly ageing society, energising youth participation seems an ever more urgent topic. Austria has not yet achieved the goal of a sustainably high and rising youth turnout, but the best way to make a path is to walk it. There is a positive trend becoming apparent as regards both political interest and turnout among Austria's youth, but translating it into a sustainable higher youth turnout requires providing permanent curricular and extra-curricular support measures. In this context, the long-term commitment of educational centres and of political decision-makers and opinion leaders is important. Embedded in a long-term strategy, voting at 16 could be introduced into other EU-member states as well. According to both EU-wide and Austrian surveys, the younger generation are generally more pro-European than their predecessors. Still, especially young people frequently feel uninformed about the EU and European developments. European political education could close the gap, transforming the pro-European impetus of the next generation into a well-informed debate about the EU and the challenges ahead. Europe's youth should have a bigger say in determining its own future.

Analysis

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that Europe is currently undergoing a dramatic demographic change. Declining fertility rates combined with a rising average life expectancy inevitably lead to population ageing and its attendant consequences for the Union's economic, social and political systems.¹

¹ Berlin-Institut für Bevölkerung und Entwicklung (2017), *Europas Demographische Zukunft. Wie sich die Regionen nach einem Jahrzehnt der Krisen Entwickeln*.

Against such a background, youth participation becomes an ever more urgent topic. Europe's ageing population poses a challenge not only from a demographic and economic point of view, but also from a democratic one. If no measures are taken, the older generation could soon be heavily overrepresented at the political level, with the younger generation having relatively little to say. A recent example is the referendum in the UK on its EU membership. If only those aged 50 had voted, the country would have remained in the Union.²

One of the instruments to increase youth participation is lowering the voting-age. Twelve months before the elections to the European Parliament might be a good time for reflecting on the topic. Supporters point out that the early integration of young people in the political process leads to heightened political interest and knowledge. In the long run, this should have a positive effect on general voter turnout as well as in the representation of the interests of young people. Both factors are considered essential to a properly functioning democracy. On the other hand, critics warn that 16-to-17-year olds are not mature enough to take politically informed and well-considered decisions.³ Lowering the voting age alone is clearly not enough to secure their active participation.

The Austrian experience

In 2007 the voting-age in Austria was lowered from 18 to 16 years in the course of a broader reform of the electoral law. Since then, at the age of 16 youngsters are allowed to vote in general, municipal, federal and presidential elections as well as in the elections to the European Parliament.⁴ In that respect, Austria is definitely a pioneer in the EU and an interesting case study to examine. Malta is the only other country to have lowered the general voting age to 16, and that only recently.⁵

More than 10 years after the change it is time to take stock. What are the empirical data on the early integration of young people into Austria's political processes? And what conclusions can be drawn for other EU countries?

² <http://orf.at/stories/2346533/2346466/> and <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/brexit-alt-ueberstimmt-jung-1.3049467>, 31/1/2018. Simultaneously, the Brexit referendum shows that especially young voters frequently do not participate in elections (see the more detailed explanation below). See <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article156576085/Unfassbar-niedrige-Wahlbeteiligung-junger-Briten.html>.

³ Sylvia Kritzinger (2014), 'Ready to vote? Eine Betrachtung der Jüngsten Wählerinnen und Wähler in Österreich', *ÖGfE Policy Brief*, nr 11/2014; and Ferdinand Karhofer (2007), 'Wählen mit 16: Erwartungen und Perspektiven', *Informationen zur Politischen Bildung*, Bd. 27, Innsbruck-Bozen-Vienna.

⁴ Federal Ministry for Families and Youth (2017), 'Voting at 16', <https://www.bmfj.gv.at/jugend/beteiligung-engagement/waehlen-mit-16.html>, 22/XI/2017.

⁵ At the beginning of March 2018 Malta became the second EU-member state to lower the voting-age from 18 to 16 years. In Germany, young people at the age of 16 are allowed to vote in municipal and federal state elections in some federal states. In Scotland, 16-year-olds can cast their vote in elections to the Scottish Parliament and this was also the case for the referendum on Scottish independence. Werner T. Bauer & OGPP (2017), 'Wahlsysteme in den Mitgliedstaaten der EU & Wählen ab 16 in Deutschland', <http://www.machs-ab-16.de/waehlen-ab-16/waehlen-ab-16-deutschland>, 28/II/2018.

(cont.)

Given the existing trends favouring a break-up in Europe, the debate about the direction of EU integration is becoming increasingly important. Lowering the voting-age and fostering youth participation in general are possible methods to give Europe's youth a bigger say on the future of European integration. Drawing on Austria's empirical experience, lowering the voting age could also be an option for other EU member states. This could be an interesting topic to discuss at the forthcoming Austrian EU Council Presidency starting on 1 July 2018.

Ten years of voting at 16 in Austria

At the 2008 general election –the first at the national level at which 16-year olds were allowed to vote– the reported turnout of first-time voters was 88%. This corresponds to the average voter turnout and indicates a positive starting effect.⁶

At the next general election in 2013 though, the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES) confirmed that first-time voters went to the polls far less than older voters.⁷ The reported turnout of the 16-to-17-year olds was 63%, which is significantly lower than the reported general turnout of 80%. Furthermore, the political interest of first-time voters was also significantly lower than that of older voting groups.⁸ Compared to the general election in 2008, the second general election in Austria yielded less euphoric results as regards first-time and younger voters. Both their political interest and their voter participation had declined.⁹

Nevertheless, between 2013 and 2017 the political interest of Austria's youth rose again. Whereas in 2013 only a quarter of first-time and young voters defined themselves as very or quite interested in politics, the figure more than doubled ahead of the general election in 2017 and their likelihood of voting also increases.¹⁰ According to the AUTNES pre-election survey, an overall 86.9% of the 16-to-17-year olds were inclined to participate in the election.¹¹

One correlation seems obvious: voter participation of youngsters depends very much on their interest in politics. The more they are interested in politics, the more likely they are to vote. Nearly nine out of every 10 youngsters who defined themselves as very or quite

⁶ Ulrike Kozeluh, Flooh Perlot (ISA), Steve Schwarzer, Martina Zandonella & Eva Zeglovits (SORA) (2009), 'Wählen mit 16. Eine Post Election Study zur Nationalratswahl 2008', Befragung-Fokusgruppen-Tiefeninterviews, Vienna.

⁷ In the context of the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), a team of scientists from the Viennese Institute of Political Science analysed the Austrian general elections since 2009. Among other issues, the focus was on the voter participation of first-time and young voters. Based on pre- and post-election surveys, empirical data about the electoral behaviour, political interest and reported voter turnout of this age group was collected in the course of the Austrian general elections of 2008, 2013 and 2017.

⁸ Sylvia Kritzinger, Eva Zeglovits & Patricia Oberluggauer (2013), 'Wählen mit 16 bei der Nationalratswahl 2013', Vienna.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Sylvia Kritzinger, Markus Wagner & Josef Glavanovits (2017), 'ErstwählerInnen bei der Nationalratswahl 2017', Vienna.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

(cont.)

interested in politics had the intention of casting a vote in the Austrian general election of 2017.¹²

Austrian teens and their opinion of the EU

The regularly conducted school surveys of the Austrian Society for European Politics give an idea of the young Austrian's opinion of the EU and recent European developments.¹³ According to these surveys, most young people perceive EU membership to be positive. Up to 67% of respondents are of the opinion that Austria's membership is good" whereas 7% consider it bad and 26% neither good nor bad. The younger the respondents, the more EU-friendly their attitude: 75% of respondents under the age of 15 sympathise with EU membership, with only 5% regarding it as something bad. Among those aged 16 to 18, 66% sympathise with EU membership, while only 7% have a negative attitude. Among young people over the age of 19, 57% sympathise with Austria's EU membership, while 10% see it as something negative.¹⁴

Austrian youngsters also identify fairly strongly with the EU. A total of 83% consider themselves EU citizens, while this does not apply to 17% of respondents. The younger the respondent, the stronger the identification with Europe. Up to 89% of respondents under the age of 15 view themselves as EU citizens. Among the 16-to-18 age group, 82% do so. In the group of those aged 19+, only 76% of respondents perceive themselves to be citizens of the EU.

Despite their pro-European attitude, youngsters are more interested in national politics than in developments at the European level. A total of 80% indicate they are interested in political events taking place in Austria. By comparison, only 57% of respondents are interested in European politics.

Most of the Austrian youngsters surveyed believe the EU should play a more important role, with 58% indicating that in the future a greater number of decisions should be taken at the European level. The strongest supporters of common European decisions are again in the group of the youngest respondents: 64% of those aged under 15 support common European decisions. Among the 16-to-18-year olds, 59% do so. The support for common European decisions drops to 52% among age groups above 19 years of age.¹⁵

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ On behalf of the Austrian Society for European Politics, the Sozialwissenschaftliche Studiengesellschaft (SWS) conducted four non-representative youth surveys from September 2013 to June 2017 (total sample: 10.767 pupils aged 15 to 19): youth survey 2014 (September 2013-May 2014, n=4.278); youth survey 2015 (September 2014-April 2015, n=2.267); youth survey 2016 (September 2015-June 2016, n=1.712); and youth survey 2017 (September 2016-June 2017, n=2.510).

¹⁴ The following percentage rates were taken from the most current youth survey (2017). Nevertheless, the trend reflected by these figures can be found in all four youth surveys.

¹⁵ Youth survey 2016.

(cont.)

According to these surveys, pupils in vocational schools are on average more EU-sceptical than their colleagues in grammar schools and in vocational schools with higher entrance qualification: 78% of pupils attending grammar schools and 67% attending vocational schools with higher entrance qualification consider EU membership good. In contrast, only 52% of pupils in vocational schools see EU membership in a positive light; 88% of pupils in grammar schools and 84% in vocational schools with higher entrance qualification feel they are EU citizens; on the other hand, only 74% of pupils attending vocational schools describe themselves as such.¹⁶

European youngsters and their opinion of the EU

Apart from various Eurobarometer surveys, the EU-wide study 'What millennials think about the future of the EU and the euro' gives some insight regarding the views on the EU of those aged 14 to 35.¹⁷

The 'young millennials', aged 14 to 25 –about half of whom are still at school–, have a more favourable view about the EU and the euro than the 'old millennials', aged 26 to 35, who have already entered the labour market. Respectively 52% and 55% of the 'young millennials' are of the opinion that the EU and the euro are good. In the group of the 'old millennials', only 43% and 46% respectively regard the EU and the euro positive. The 'old millennials' are even more sceptical than the older generation, of which at least 46% and 49% respectively consider the EU and the euro positive.

The 'young millennials' are also stronger supporters of the EU membership of their respective countries. If a referendum on EU membership were to take place, 63% of 'young millennials' would vote to stay in the EU, while 21% would vote to leave. Among the 'old millennials' 57% would vote to stay and 32% to leave.

Generally, a high level of knowledge of the EU correlates with a positive attitude towards European integration. This also applies to the older generation: only 44% of elderly people who know little about the EU are in favour of staying. Among those who believe they have a high level of knowledge, 69% approve of their country's EU membership.

On the contrary, a high level of EU knowledge and approval of European integration are not linked among the 'young millennials'. Although they honestly say they know less about the EU, they are still more pro-European than the older generations: 53% of them admit to not knowing very much about the EU, but 60% of those who feel uninformed about the EU approve of their country's EU.

Thus, the ignorance of 'young millennials' concerning the EU seems to make them generally more pro-European. On the other hand, the majority of the mostly already

¹⁶ Youth survey 2017. The trend can be found in the four other youth-surveys as well.

¹⁷ Anna Auf dem Brinke, Katharina Gnath & Philipp Ständer (2016), 'What millennials think about the future of the EU and the euro', Jacques Delors Institut Berlin, Bertelsmann Stiftung. The study is based on an opinion survey comprising a total of 10.992 people aged 14 to 65 (April 2016). The sample was split into three different groups: the 'young millennials' (aged 14 to 25, n=2.413), approximately half of them still attending school; the 'old millennials' (26 to 35, n=2.455), most of them already working; and the 'older generation' (36 to 65, n=6.124) as a comparison group.

working 'old millennials' feel quite often disillusioned by the EU. Therefore, they are more often opposed to European integration than 'young millennials'. The youth surveys of the Austrian Society for European Politics reach similar conclusions: the highest rate of EU scepticism can be found among pupils in vocational schools, who are already in first-time jobs.

The hypothesis of the Bertelsmann/Delors-study 'Ignorance is bliss' corresponds to one of the main results of the youth studies conducted by the Austrian Society for European Politics: youngsters are positive about the EU and approve membership. The younger the respondents the stronger their pro-European attitude. On the other hand, their interest in European politics, as well as their level of knowledge about the EU, seems quite low. The EU is seen to be remote and complicated.

The electoral analysis of the Brexit referendum also shows that approval of the EU drops with increasing age. Among those aged 18 to 24, 75% voted for the UK to stay. Among those aged 25 to 49, 56% voted to stay but in the age group of people over 65, only 39% voted to stay in the Union.¹⁸ Concerning voter participation, there is a diametrically opposite trend: only 36% of youngsters (aged 18 to 24) participated in the referendum. Among those aged 25 to 34 the turnout was 58%. In the group of people aged between 45 to 54 the turnout was 75% and among people those older than 55 more than 81% participated in the referendum.¹⁹

Conclusions

Ten years after the reform of the election law in Austria, the aim of a continuously high voter participation of Austrian youngsters has not yet been fully achieved. The turnout of first-time and young voters is subject to fluctuations depending on different factors. The general election in 2008 saw a 'first-time boost' of young voter participation, which did not see a repeat in the subsequent general election in 2013.²⁰ The decline in voter participation between the general elections of 2008 and 2013 can be related to the fact that in the course of the second general election, politics, educational institutions and the media paid less attention to mobilising first-time voters.²¹

Nevertheless, the data of the current Flash Eurobarometer European Youth suggest the beginning of a positive trend. Alongside Italy, Austria is ranked first in the turnout of young people aged 15 to 30. Up to 79% of young Austrian voters said they had participated in

¹⁸ See <http://orf.at/stories/2346533/2346466/> & <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/brexit-alt-ueberstimmt-jung-1.3049467>, 31/11/2018.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Jan Eichhorn (2017), 'Beyond anecdotes on lowering the voting age: new evidence from Scotland', LSE Blog, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/votes-at-16-new-evidence-from-scotland/>, 2/11/2018.

²¹ Sylvia Kritzinger, Eva Zeglovits & Patricia Oberluggauer (2013), 'Wählen mit 16 bei der Nationalratswahl 2013', Vienna.

local, regional or national elections in the previous three years, the European average being 64%.²²

The increase in political interest among Austrian youth between the general elections of 2013 and 2017 could indicate the development of a 'voting habit' that might evolve due to their early integration into the political process. In the medium-to-long terms it is likely to lead to an increase in the general turnout.²³

In order to foster this trend, permanent curricular and extra-curricular accompanying measures and the provision of information could be of help. In addition, educational establishments, political decision-makers and the media should develop a long-term strategy to permanently integrate young people into the political process. The introduction of political education as a specific subject for all school types together with an adequate apprenticeship and in-service training for teachers in this field has long been recommended and should accompany these changes.

Since the younger generation is on average more pro-European than the older one it would be beneficial for the cohesion of the EU if young people were to be integrated into the political process at an already early stage. Their positive attitude towards the EU should not be interpreted as naivety resulting from ignorance, but rather as juvenile enthusiasm. Educational establishments would be particularly well advised to close the information gap by providing adequate European political education. The intuitive pro-European attitude of the coming generations is an asset to enable well-informed and much-demanded debate about the direction of European integration.

Voting at 16 together with the necessary supporting measures could be introduced in other EU member states as well. Austria would be well placed to initiate a dialogue on this topic in the context of its upcoming EU Council Presidency. Yet it is also the quality of information that matters. To enable a more inclusive European debate, the EU needs to be presented in a balanced way, emphasising its numerous advantages without ignoring current problems. The next generation should be given the appropriate tools to participate in the political process in all EU member states and particularly in the much-needed debate on the future of Europe and the challenges lying ahead. Europe's youth should have a bigger say in determining its own future.

²² European Commission (2017), 'European Youth Report 2018', Flash Eurobarometer 455, September.

²³ Sylvia Kritzinger (2014), *op. cit.*