



16 YEARS.
**OLD ENOUGH TO DECIDE ON EDUCATION,
LIVING SITUATION AND CAREER. TOO YOUNG
TO CO-DECIDE ABOUT OUR FUTURE.**



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A contribution

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Lowering the Voting Age 16 – what other countries can learn from Austria

Elections are crucial for democracies; the question, who has a right to vote is thus of highest importance and is usually discussed heatedly. Austria was the first country in the European Union (EU) that lowered the general voting age to 16 in 2007. Supporters hoped that this measure would give young people a louder voice. Critics soon raised many questions, e.g.: Are young people mature enough to vote? Do they know enough to make a correct choice? Will they use their newly gained right at all or will they abstain?

Discussions on lowering the voting age follow a similar path in many countries, among them Slovenia, Denmark, Norway or Scotland. Evidence from Austria might provide valuable input for the debates.

Voting rights for young people are evidently on the agenda in a lot of countries. The Council of Europe supported lowering the voting age in 2011, Scotland enfranchised 16- and 17-year olds for the independence referendum in 2014 and Malta lowered the general voting age to 16 in 2018. Several countries, among them Estonia, lowered the voting age for local elections to 16. On the other hand, a large majority of the citizens of Luxemburg voted against lowering the voting age in 2015.

In total, evidence from Austria rather backs the supporters of lowering the voting age.

First, turnout of 16- and 17-year olds in Austria was found to be higher than of older first time voters. Living at one's parents' home, attending school means being prepared for the first election in a more sheltered environment. This gives reason to hope that in the long run, this will help to stabilize turnout. If you start as a voter, you are more likely to remain a voter.

Second, 16- and 17-year olds are not less politically mature than older first time voters. In terms of political interest and political knowledge, they do not differ from other young voters. And preparation matters. Schools' impact on political interest increased after lowering the voting age. Accompanying measures, often organised via schools, help to increase turnout. The importance of civic education is strengthened. However, this also means, that if there was no preparation in schools, political interest and knowledge, and in consequence turnout, would not be as high as they are.

In Austria, different opportunities of preparation result in alarmingly high gaps in political interest, knowledge and turnout between students in full-time schooling and young people in the dual system, who work as apprentices and attend vocational schools. Social gaps in participation start to occur even at the age of 16 and 17. Among the great challenges identified in Austria, reducing the social gaps in political interest and political participation might be the toughest to overcome.

This leads to the question if lowering the voting age has changed the political parties and their agendas as well. By now, there is no evidence that political parties have shifted their agenda towards young people's interests.

Young people in Austria have proven to handle their voting rights responsibly. Political parties are yet to change.