



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



FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
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 **Renner** Institut

A contribution

by

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Voting right at the age of 16? – An opportunity to expand the circle of democracy

Political participation of youth is an important issue that is not being addressed only by the experts, but lately also by politicians, who have realised that the ever-decreasing turnout of voters – which is especially low among the youth – has an effect on legitimacy of their election and consequently on legitimacy of their decisions and the system of democracy.

One of the measures addressing turnout of the youth in the election is the lowering of voting age, which has lately in some countries already appeared on the political agenda, and this theme will undoubtedly spring up at least in most western democracies.

One of the questions, which comes into our minds, is: 'Would legal regulation of lowering active voting age have an effect on turnout of voters?' Undoubtedly there is no single answer to that question. However, we can get some answers by using the data that has been obtained from the example of the Republic of Austria, which already has legislation according to which everyone who has turned 16 has an active voting right. It is evident from the data that the lowering of voting age has an effect on turnout of voters. Voters aged 16 and 17 have recorded the highest turnout among young voters, which has almost bordered on general turnout. Therefore, the predictions of experts have in fact turned out to be true, i.e. that the voting experience in adolescence and while in high-school, when the young people are less burdened and live in a stable environment, engraves more strongly into their awareness and becomes a habit quicker, which is then applied at the mature age. This hypothesis was confirmed when checking the turnout of your voters who voted for the second time. The results show that the voters who voted for the first time at the age of 16 and 17 participate more often in the following elections as compared to the voters who voted for the first time at the age of 18 or later.

The general evaluation of the lowering of voting age and its consequential influence on turnout of voters is positive, as it has turned out that earlier voting in the election among the youth promotes higher participation. Turnout is still below the general turnout of voters; however it is considerably higher than the average turnout of young voters. In relation to this issue we also need to realise that young people more and more often use other forms of political participation instead of classic forms, such as the election.

The next relevant question related to the lowering of voting age is whether the lowering of voting age would influence democracy of the political system. Particularly relevant discussion on this point is the discussion about the 'ability' of young voters to vote, and this is most frequently pointed out as the opposing argument to the voting right at the age of 16. It is clear that the positions about maturity, knowledge and motivation of minor voters vary both among the professionals and politicians. Judging from their motivation, interest, knowledge and consciousness I can assume that they possess sufficient 'quantity' of the aforementioned to be able to cast their vote responsibly and express their will, which is not the will of somebody else.

Should young people not be motivated and informed enough about the politics, they could have been misused by adults, but young people do show interest into making their own decisions. It is important to introduce into politics the will of the section of the population that is practically disqualified from the circle of making decisions. This includes minors, who are not allowed to express their will.

Voting right is uniform and general. By lowering the voting age, we will not put anyone in danger; on the contrary, we will make voting right even more general by expanding the circle of eligible voters. Of course, we should not forget to mention other factors that will arise with the lowering of the voting age and will influence democratic legitimacy of the political system. By lowering the voting age, we will improve intergenerational balance and cohesion of the society, as the voice of young people will be strengthened and will thus contribute to the increased regard to the issues concerning the youth and to the refreshment of the politics.

From the historic point of view, we can see that the circle of eligible voters has always been expanding and that it eventually stopped at the voting right of all citizens who have turned 18 (in most countries). It is time to make a step forward and once again open the door to the possibility of expanding the circle of democracy.