



Voting at 16? Youth suffrage is up for debate

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Abstract In the debate on lowering the voting age, possible consequences have been discussed, among which are turn-out and the quality of the vote choice of newly enfranchised teenagers. Although findings on the turn-out of 16- and 17-year-olds are encouraging to supporters of youth suffrage, the results on political maturity are somewhat mixed. Most results stem from the case of Austria, where the voting age was lowered to 16 in 2007. They are supplemented with results of the Norwegian Voting Age Trial.

Keywords Youth suffrage · Voting age · Turn-out · Quality of the vote choice · Political interest

Introduction

While in South America youth suffrage seems to be spreading from one country to the other—Argentina has recently lowered the voting age to 16—Europe seems to be more hesitant. Lowering the voting age to 16 has been debated in several European countries, among them Denmark, Norway and the UK. There are limited voting rights for 16- and 17-year-olds on various levels of government in Germany, Switzerland and Croatia; Norway has recently been experimenting with trial elections on the municipal level; and Scotland announced that 16- and 17-year-olds will be enfranchised for the referendum

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on independence in 2014. But so far Austria is the only country in Europe that has a general voting age of 16.

In Austria, the voting age was lowered step by step, starting with the local and the regional levels in the first years of this millennium. Since an electoral reform in 2007, 16- and 17-year-olds have had the right to vote in all elections, referenda and plebiscites. Evidence from Austria thus contributes to the debate on youth franchise.

What are the main arguments in the debate? Supporters, such as the European Youth Forum (2013), argue that lowering the voting age would help to close the gap between young people and (formal) politics and to match rights and duties, because teenagers also pay taxes or get convicted for crimes they commit. Their position is strengthened by the Council of Europe, where the Parliamentary Assembly agreed on a resolution stressing the importance of youth suffrage (Council of Europe 2011). In the resolution it is argued that youth suffrage will help to represent young people's interests in politics and will prevent their political marginalisation. Moreover, the resolution argues that teenage voters have a higher turn-out than among older first-time voters. However, opponents doubt if 16- and 17-year-olds are mature enough to be given the right to vote. In order to shed light on which arguments hold true, this paper discusses findings from the scientific debate on voters' behaviour after the voting age was lowered and draws conclusions about possible consequences. Although the expectations of the Council of Europe and the European Youth Forum at least implicitly include changes in party behaviour—as parties respond to meet the needs of the newly enfranchised—parties are not the focus of this article, but voters.

Lowering the voting age: pros and cons discussed in political science

The scientific debate is focused on the turn-out of young people and the quality of their vote choice. The main concern addresses findings that young people are less interested in politics and less knowledgeable than older people are (e.g. Blais et al. 2004; Wattenberg 2008) and that this lack of interest and knowledge might lead to low participation rates or an ill-qualified vote choice (e.g. Chan and Clayton 2006; Electoral Commission 2004). Others, however, argue that teenagers still live in their parents' homes, and most of them attend schools and could thus learn to vote in a more sheltered environment (Franklin 2004). The focus is on the comparison between 16- and 17-year-olds, who benefit from the lowering of the voting age, and older first-time voters (usually aged 18–20), who are also participating in their first election and having their first experiences in voting but are older and would have been eligible to vote anyway.

It is crucial to verify which of these presumptions hold true if the voting age is in fact lowered. Below is a summary of findings on political interest, political knowledge, turn-out and the quality of the vote choice. There is evidence from Norway and Austria, and the results from one country contradict the results from the other.

To better understand the different results, it is necessary to know some more about the context: the lowering of the voting age in Austria was accompanied by several measures for the newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds. Austria introduced some changes in the school curricula, introduced civic education as a subject in the eighth grade (students aged 12–13) and implemented awareness-raising campaigns or projects and mock elections in schools. In the electoral campaign preceding the first federal election with enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds in 2008, there was much speculation about the turn-out and vote choice of the newly enfranchised (Schwarzer and Zeglovits 2013 give an overview). In Norway, in contrast, municipalities could apply to take part in the trial elections, and 20 were selected by the government. Due to the application and selection process, it is very likely that the municipalities participating in the trial elections had implemented several activities to involve young people in social and political matters. At the most local level, 16- and 17-year-olds were given the right to vote (Bergh 2013). To sum up, Norwegian youth voters participated in trial elections in some selected municipalities, whereas the Austrian youth were fully enfranchised.

Which arguments hold true? Evidence from Austria and Norway

Let us start with political interest and political knowledge, two factors that are known to influence electoral participation and voting behaviour. Usually, political interest and political knowledge increase the chances of participation in an election. The Norwegian results find a significant gap in the political interest of 16–17-year-olds compared to older first-time voters in the trial elections (Bergh 2013), supporting the idea that political interest is a matter of age. However, the Austrian results are quite different. According to recent data from the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES),¹ there is no significant difference between 16- and 17-year-olds and older first-time voters aged 18 to 21 in political interest (Glantschnigg et al. 2013). In other words, in both countries, first-time voters are less interested in politics than older voters are, but in Norway there are differences due to age among first-time voters, and in Austria there are not. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is that enfranchising young people increases their interest: in Austria, the political interest of 16- and 17-year-olds was higher after the electoral reform than it was before. Moreover, political interest had been a matter of parental background before the electoral reform; the political interest of young people was mostly determined by that of their parents. After the voting age had been lowered, the role of schools in raising political interest was strengthened (Zeglovits and Zandonella 2013).

A similar pattern can be found for political knowledge: there is no knowledge gap in Austria between 16- and 17-year-olds and older first-time voters, whether in knowledge of the political system or in knowledge of political actors (Glantschnigg et al. 2013). At least for Austria, the argument about the lack of knowledge and interest of 16- and 17-year-olds does not hold true.

¹ The website for AUTNES can be accessed at <http://www.autnes.at>.



Next, the argument on turn-out was of particular interest. Here, the findings are quite consistent: as assumed by supporters of youth suffrage, the turn-out of 16- and 17-year-olds was substantially higher than that of older first-time voters aged 18–21 in two regional elections analysed in Austria (Zeglovits and Aichholzer forthcoming). The same pattern was found in the Norwegian trial elections (Bergh 2013). The gap between 16- and 17-year-olds and older first-time voters was quite impressive, 8–10 percentage points in Austria, 12 percentage points in Norway. At the same time, the turn-out rate of 16- and 17-year-olds did not differ that much from the overall turn-out rate. Interestingly, the turn-out patterns did not necessarily fit the patterns of political interest. Although the political interest of 16- and 17-year-olds was lower than that of older voters, turn-out was about the same. Thus, the fear that the widely observed low levels of political interest would translate into low turn-out was unfounded.

This observed turn-out pattern is particularly important, because voting is assumed to be habit-forming (e.g. Dinas 2012). The first few elections are the ones in which people learn how to handle elections. It is always easier to repeat behaviour than to start behaving in a different way. If someone starts as a voter, she or he will most likely vote again. If someone starts as a non-voter, she or he will probably develop the habit of non-voting. The first elections leave a footprint on one's voting biography. High turn-out rates among 16- and 17-year-olds thus might raise hopes for future turn-out rates.

There are also survey-based results for Austria (Wagner et al. 2012), showing that self-reported turn-out increases with age, and 16- and 17-year-olds are the least likely to take part in an election, contradicting the results above. However, as self-reported turn-out induces some methodological problems, in particular over-reporting (people saying that they voted although they did not), the Austrian and Norwegian results discussed above are more reliable. They are based on electoral lists, the best possible data source.

Finally, given the high turn-out of young voters, it is important to know if they are able to make a well-qualified choice. There is more or less agreement in political science that a well-qualified choice means that the voter chooses the party or candidate that best represents his or her positions and that the attitudes a voter has should somehow be reflected in the vote choice. Voting is time consuming the first time someone votes, because voters have to get informed about parties or candidates, about their ideas and positions on various issues. They also have to orient themselves and reflect on their own positions and needs. This is not always simple for young people, and it takes some effort to fulfil this task, in particular if their lives are undergoing some important changes, such as moving from one city to another, starting a new job or starting a family. Scholars argue that getting informed and discerning a person's own needs is easier if he or she still attends school and lives with the family. This is why the quality of the vote choice should be higher for 16- and 17-year-olds than for older first-time voters. However, it has been argued that the less interested, less sophisticated 16- and 17-year-olds will not be able to come up with a vote choice that reflects their positions and needs.

Evidence from two different elections in Austria shows that the quality of the vote choice is *not* lower for 16- and 17-year-olds than for older first-time voters, meaning that 16- and 17-year-olds come up with a vote choice that best represents

their own political attitudes as often as older voters do (Glantschnigg et al. 2013; Wagner et al. 2012). However, the Norwegian results report less consistency between attitudes and vote choice for 16- and 17-year-olds than for older voters. This means that, among the youngest voters in Norway, political attitudes and vote choice do not match in the same way as they match in older age groups.

Conclusions

What do all these results tell us? Is it or is it not a good idea to lower the voting age to 16? Is it expanding democracy, or improving the quality of democracy as the Council of Europe promotes it?

There is some evidence from two countries on how newly enfranchised young voters behave. The consistent finding is that 16- and 17-year-olds have a higher turn-out than older first-time voters do, a finding that might inspire speculation about higher turn-out in the long run, if we assume that voting is habit forming. This is particularly interesting given that political interest and political knowledge are not higher for 16- and 17-year-olds. This discrepancy rather supports the idea that learning to vote in a more sheltered environment—still living at home and attending school—increases turn-out.

Moreover, the equal levels of political interest and political knowledge among 16–17-year-olds compared to older first-time voters in Austria are a notable result as such, because usually interest and knowledge increase with age. It is possible that the implemented changes in school curricula and awareness-raising measures do have a share in this phenomenon, although there is no proof. At least, this was what these measures had aimed at.

Whereas evidence from Austria contradicts the concerns about a lack of maturity and an ill-qualified vote choice, Norwegian evidence rather supports the concerns, in particular about less congruence between attitudes and vote choice, which is problematic from a normative point of view. There is no similar conclusion regarding whether the lowering of the voting age is problematic in the quality of the vote choice or not, although one might argue that the evidence from 'real' elections is assessed differently from the evidence from trial elections.

However, the findings on voters' behaviours have some important limitations: first of all, we do not know if the findings will be stable in the long run. Maybe they so far are due to a novelty effect and might disappear sooner or later. In a few years, voters and politicians might get used to the fact that 16- and 17-year-olds have the right to vote, and media attention and the accompanying measures might stop. One can only speculate about possible consequences. We can never be sure if 16- and 17-year-olds will continue to participate in elections if people no longer pay attention to turn-out. Second, evidence will be more convincing if more countries can be included in the analysis. It is hoped that the case of Scotland will shed light on the issue of lowering the voting age.

We also lack research on parties' and candidates' reactions to lowering the voting age, to answer the question of whether lowering the voting age means a better representation of young people's interests in politics, as supporters



assume. To sum up, results available so far are rather encouraging for the supporters of lowering the voting age, in particular with the observed high turnout of 16- and 17-year-olds.

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