



A vote for the young people

Photo: Juan Vrijdag

The first countries in Europe have lowered the voting age to 16 years, and the debate has spread to more countries. This magazine focuses on voting rights of young people in Europe.

By **Mette Kirstine Schmidt**

“There are very specific challenges we must meet on engaging young people and improving citizenship education.”

*Gordon Brown,
Prime Minister, Great Britain*

As the first country in Europe, Austria has given 16-year-olds the right to vote. In Germany 16 and 17-year-olds can vote in a number of constituent states, and more countries – including Great Britain – are debating the subject:

“There are very specific challenges we must meet on engaging young people and improving citizenship education. And while the voting age has been 18 since 1969, it is right to examine, and hear from young people themselves, whether lowering that age would increase participation in the political process,” the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, said in July 2007, as the British House of Commons discussed voting rights at the age of 16.

And there are many arguments for lowering the voting age to 16 years – among other things an aging Europe creates a ‘democratic problem’, and the connection between the obligations and the rights of young people is missing:

- 16-year-olds can pay taxes, however, they cannot decide what the money should be used for.

- The population of Europe is getting older and older which creates a democratic imbalance so that young people have less say in things.
- Austrians at the age of 16 can vote at all elections of the European Parliament, whereas other Europeans of the same age have to stay at home.

In this magazine we examine the situation of voting rights in Europe where youth councils and politicians have brought up voting rights for discussion in several countries. We will look further into the experiences in Austria and Germany, focus on the fight for voting rights to 16-year-olds in the rest of Europe, and go through the arguments for and against voting rights at the age of 16.

The Magazine provides the material for a debate about lowering the voting age in Europe. We call upon all youth organizations and politicians to engage in the debate.

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The Danish Youth Council has prepared a logo regarding voting rights at the age of 16. The logo is available in various language versions and can be used freely by anyone. Read more or download the logo on the web site www.duf.dk/16.

Voting rights for debate in Europe

In Austria and several German constituent states young people of 16 and 17 years have obtained voting rights. In a number of European countries it awakens a new debate about lowering the voting age.



Photo: EU Commission

By Mathilde Mostrup

In the summer 2007 and as the first country in Europe, Austria gave young people of 16 and 17 years voting rights at all elections. This has created a new debate about lowering the voting age.

Also Germany and Switzerland have lowered the voting age to 16 years – however, only partially. In several German constituent states these young people can vote at local elections, and in Switzerland the constituent state Glarus has also lowered the voting age to 16 years.

The development means that a voting age of 18 years is no longer a matter of course in the European countries. In Switzerland more constituent states are considering to let the 16-year-olds enter the polling booths, as the constituent state Glarus lowered the voting age in May 2007. And in Germany, where almost half of the constituent states have given 16 and 17-year-olds access to the ballot boxes at municipal and regional elections, the national youth council is now working on voting rights for 14-year-olds.

Yet another decisive step toward a reduction of the voting age was taken in Great Britain in July this year, where Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, wanted to examine whether a reduction of the voting age will make young people participate more actively in the social

debate. At the moment, a commission is working on a report with advantages and drawbacks of giving 16-year-olds voting rights.

In several other European countries the issue is being discussed among national politicians as well as the general public. A. o. it takes place in Norway and Ireland where the National Youth Council of Ireland pressed for a lowering of the voting age.

COUNTRIES WITH VOTING RIGHTS AT THE AGE OF 16:

Austria: 16 and 17-year-olds can vote at all elections: local, regional, national and elections of the European Parliament.

Germany: Seven out of 16 constituent states have granted voting rights at the age of 16 at municipal and regional elections.

Switzerland: The constituent state Glarus has granted voting rights at the age of 16 at municipal and regional elections.

Sweden: has granted voting rights at the age of 16 at parochial church council elections. Otherwise the voting age is 18 years.



Austria takes the democratic lead

As the first EU country, Austria has lowered the voting age to 16 years at all elections. Positive experiences from the local elections resulted in the law reform in 2007.

By Arne Simonsen



Photo: Peter Rigaud

“Young people are absolutely willing to participate actively in the society. A reduction of the voting age to 16 years gives young people a great possibility of participating in the decision making.”

*Alfred Gusenbauer,
Federal Chancellor in Austria*

 In Europe, Austria is the pioneer when it comes to granting young people the right to vote. In five out of Austria’s nine constituent states 16- and 17-year-olds have voted at local elections for several years. The experiences have been so great that the federal government took the initiative in lowering the voting age to 16 years both at national and EU elections.

“So far, the experiences show that young people are absolutely willing to participate actively in the society. A reduction of the voting age to 16 years gives young people a great possibility of participating in the decision making,” Federal Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer said as the new coalition Government launched its politics after the election in 2006.

The Social Democratic and Christian Democratic governmental coalition lowered the voting rights as a part of an electoral reform where the citizens get the opportunity to vote by post and the electoral period in the legislative assembly can be prolonged from four to five years. Politically, complete agreement was reached about the electoral reform which came into force on 1 July 2007.

“Young people can do business, go to jail, and make responsible decisions. Therefore, they also ought to have the right to vote. It is important to listen to young people as they have special needs and wishes,” says Member of Parliament, Barbara Zwerschitz from the party “The Greens”. The party “The Greens” has fought for a lower voting age in Austria since 1989.



Photo: Sissi Fungler

Austria is the first country in the EU which lets 16-year-olds vote at national elections and this is due to positive experiences from local elections. In the period 2000-2005, five of the nine constituent states of the country lowered the voting age at municipal elections. In addition, three of the constituent states have lowered the voting age at regional elections.

“The positive experiences show that young voters participate to the same extent as people who are older than 18,” says the political consultant, Marco Rossegger from the Christian Democratic Government party, ÖVP.

Examinations from local and regional elections in Austria show that the poll of the 16- to 17-year-olds is typically 70-80 percent which is a bit lower than the average. However, the 16- to 17-year-olds have a much higher poll than voters who are older than the age of 50.

German young people in polling booths



Photo: Burke-Triolo

In almost half of the German constituent states 16- and 17-year-olds can vote at local elections. Young people use their voting rights and are not tempted by extremist parties.

By Arne Simonsen

Since 1996 seven German constituent states have granted young people at the age of 16 and 17 the right to vote at local elections. Several constituent states have lowered the voting age at both municipal and regional elections.

"It is important to us that these young people are willing and ready to participate in the elections. In Germany we are facing an age heaviness and therefore we are compelled to involve young people," says Anke Spoorendonk, who is the group leader of the party SSW. The party took part in granting young people voting rights in the constituent state Schleswig-Holstein.

Several examples show that the 16-year-olds have a higher poll than normal first-time voters. But typically young people vote to nearly the same extent as the average voter. An election investigation from the third largest city Hannover in Northern Germany shows the pattern. 56.5 percent of the youngest voters found their way to the polling booths, while the total poll was 57.0.

"Normally, young people – or people in general –

do not crowd to the ballot boxes. However, the developments show that a considerable group of young people employs this right," says Anke Spoorendonk, who is a member of the land parliament in Kiel.

Critics of voting rights at the age of 16 feared that young people would vote according to trends and populism. However, ten years of experience show that young people do not disturb the political balance.

"The fear was that young people would vote for extremist parties, but statistically this has proven not to be the case. Young people are neither worse nor better than the rest of the population," Anke Spoorendonk states.

In Germany approx. 700,000 young people at the age of 16 and 17 have gained the possibility of voting at local elections. Only the party "The Greens" will grant young people voting rights at national elections. However a few Social Democrats believe that Germany ought to follow Austria where the voting age has been lowered at all elections.



"It is important to us that these young people are willing and ready to participate in the elections."

*Anke Spoorendonk,
member of the land parliament,
Schleswig-Holstein*



The democratic imbalance

Photo: Mikal Schlosser

The population of Europe is continuously getting older, so young people have a growing responsibility to ensure the welfare of the future. The first EU countries have lowered the voting age to avoid a democratic distortion.

By Arne Simonsen

 The number of young people in Europe is decreasing and they will be burdened with more and more social tasks. The development of the population therefore confronts Europe with a democratic challenge.

"The aging in Europe will in the years to come be so drastic that it will call for quite considerable readjustments. A reduction of the voting age will therefore be justified as well as evident and necessary," says Hans Kornø Rasmussen who is an expert on the development of the European population.

The part of young people at the age of 15-24 will fall dramatically until year 2050, while the part of older people will increase drastically. This is explained in a

forecast from the statistical department of the European Commission, Eurostat.

In future decades the age group over 55 years will grow steadily in the EU countries. According to the population projection the age group from 65 to 79 years will grow with 45 percent, while the number of persons over the age of 80 will grow with 172 percent.

Therefore young Europeans have to accomplish more tasks in the society and provide the manpower and economy which make it possible for us to take care of the older people and to develop the welfare society

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"A reduction of the voting age will therefore be justified as well as evident and necessary."

*Hans Kornø Rasmussen,
expert on European demography*

 ... continued from page 6

of the future. This development forces the European countries to focus on how young people to a greater extent can obtain contributory influence on the development of society.

Exactly this democratic imbalance in an aging society is contributing strongly to the fact that Austria, as the first country in Europe, has granted voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds at all elections.

"One of the main reasons for lowering the voting age is that there has to be a balance in an ageing society like Austria. The young generation should actively take part in questions of democracy and society," says the political consultant Marco Rossegger from the Christian Democratic Government party ÖVP in Austria.

One of the most important arguments for lowering the voting age in a number of German constituent states was also that it is necessary to do something special to involve young people as they get fewer and fewer.

According to the statistics of the EU, the population figure will decrease from approx. 460 million Europeans to 450 million people in 2050. The number covers

25 EU countries not including Bulgaria and Rumania.

Toward 2050 the population figure of the EU countries will decrease by 48 million people, but an immigration of scarcely 40 million people is expected. Despite the aging and the immigration, the total population figure will decrease because the youth is shrinking so drastically.

The development of the population in Europe may create major democratic problems, Hans Kornø Rasmussen evaluates. He has a PhD in international economy from the University of Copenhagen and is the author of a number of books about migration and the development of the population in Europe:

"Democratically this confronts Europe with several evident challenges. The European countries have to attract immigrants and make them feel as indispensable as they are and will be. The countries have to remove the general support to older people so that the funds are allocated according to needs and not only based on age. And you have to make sure that young people are represented in a society where older people form a continuously growing part."

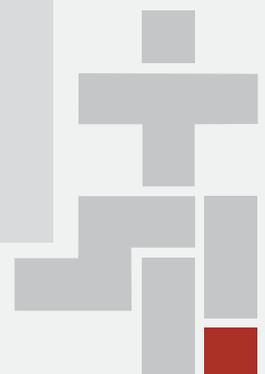
EUROPEAN DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

2005 459.5 millions
2050 449.8 millions

PROJECTIONS FOR EU'S POPULATION TREND 2005-2050:

	In millions	Percentage change
• Total population	- 8.7	- 1.9 %
• Children (0-14)	- 13.8	- 18.6 %
• Young people (15-24)	- 14.0	- 24.3 %
• Young adults (25-39)	- 24.9	- 25.0 %
• Adults (40-54)	- 18.7	- 19.0 %
• Older workers (55-64)	4.7	9.1 %
• Elderly people (65-79)	25.7	44.5 %
• Frail elderly (80+)	32.3	171.6 %

Source: EUROSTAT, 2004



Voting rights up for discussion

A number of members of the European Parliament are willing to grant 16-year-olds voting rights. The voting age is a national matter but several European politicians and groups of the European Parliament have made up their minds:



Photo: Mikal Schliesser

By Mette Kirstine Schmidt

The Greens – The European Free Alliance (EFA)

The European Free Alliance broadly supports lowering of the voting age to 16. The increase of the electoral participation is a necessity and any measure contributing to it should be envisaged.

José Luis Linazasoro, Deputy Secretary General, EFA

Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN)

The UEN Group has no joint attitude but my own party believes that there has to be a connection between the full age (18 years) and the right to vote. EU is a vast and almost impossible area to get an overall view of and therefore it is probably sensible to have a certain age to be able to embrace it.

Mogens Camre, member of the European Parliament, Danish People's Party, member of the UEN Group

The Independence/Democracy Group

My group has no joint attitude towards voting age. I have personally participated in campaigns to lower the age limit – and would like to lower it to 16 as soon as possible, both at national elections and European elections.

Jens-Peter Bonde, Co-president, Independence/Democracy Group

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)

It is not something that has been formally considered in the European Parliament so the ALDE group has never had to take a position. However the Liberal and Democrat group leader, Graham Watson, believes such a proposal has a lot of merit by involving young people in politics and giving them a stake and responsibility in society.

Neil Corlett, Spokesperson, ALDE

4 ARGUMENTS FOR VOTING RIGHTS AT THE AGE OF 16

If young people are granted voting rights they will become more responsible and feel like participating in the democracy.

More young people have to vote to avoid a democratic imbalance as the population of Europe is getting older and older.

Young people have to pay taxes, they can get married and sent off to war. Therefore they should also have influence on how politicians are controlling their lives.

Some of the countries in Europe have succeeded in granting voting rights to 16-year-olds and therefore other countries ought to follow suit.

4 ARGUMENTS AGAINST VOTING RIGHTS AT THE AGE OF 16

Young people at the age of 16 are not mature enough to vote. They will be too impressionable by the media, friends and parents.

According to some opinion polls young people are themselves against lowering the voting rights.

Young people do not know enough about the EU, politics and social conditions to be able to vote.

The voting rights are a great responsibility. Young people should be allowed to be young without having to be made responsible as grown-ups.

Voting rights around the world

In the western countries the voting age is typically 18 years but several countries have already lowered the age limit or are considering it. Several development countries are letting young people at the age of 16 and 17 vote.



Photo: Martin Lehmann

By Arne Simonsen

■ When are you old enough to vote? 21 years was the answer in many countries until the 1970s where the voting age was typically lowered to 18 years.

In 1969 Great Britain lowered the voting age as the first country in Western Europe. This started an avalanche with some of the world's leading democracies and countries like the USA, Canada, Australia and France followed rapidly. In most countries in the world the voting age has been lowered to 18 years and Japan and the Maldives are considering doing the same.

After the start of the new millennium a number of countries are considering to lower the voting age further, so that young people at the age of 16 and 17 can obtain access to the polling booths. As the first country in Europe, Austria has granted the 16-year-olds voting rights and young Germans can vote at local elections in several constituent states. In 2005 in Great Britain it was proposed to grant 16-year-olds voting rights, however, the proposal was defeated in the House of Commons with the votes 136-128. At the moment, however, a commission is making a hearing about voting rights at the age of 16.

In Canada, New Zealand and in a number of states in the USA and Australia, proposals have also been on

the table about granting 16-year-olds voting rights. In 2006-07 The British islands Man and Jersey reduced the voting age to 16 years.

A number of development countries give young people the possibility of marking ballot papers at elections. Among others Indonesia, North Korea and Sudan have lowered the voting age to 17 years. And in Brazil, on Cuba and in Nicaragua 16-year-olds can also vote. In Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro 16- to 18-year-olds can vote if they have jobs.

Many of the politicians of the post-war era have been reluctant to lower the voting age. From a historical point of view, several belligerent powers have lowered the voting age because they wanted to mobilize young people. During the First World War Russia lowered the voting age from 24 to 18 years, during the 1940s the teenagers of China were trained with Socialism so that they could vote as 18-year-olds and the Nazis also granted young people voting rights.

In the western countries the discussion about voting rights accelerated again at the end of the 1960s. The youth revolution, the increasing social commitment of young people, increasing school attendance, focus on human rights and a more free upbringing started a wave where many countries lowered the voting age.

On the way to voting rights at the age of 16

The first EU countries have granted 16- and 17-year-olds voting rights. A number of European youth councils are fighting to make the other countries follow.

By Arne Simonsen



Photo: Thomas Borberg

16-year-olds are old enough to pay taxes, go to jail, ride a moped, drink alcohol and have sex. But even though young people are contributing to the cash box of society, are giving birth to children and can be punished, they have no influence on the way we organize our society.

The youth councils in Europe played a crucial part when the voting rights were lowered from 21 to 18 years in many countries in the 1970s. And according to several European youth councils the time has now come again to lower the voting rights.

"Young people are affected by many rules and laws which they have no influence on, and that is a problem. If young people are to be democratic fellow players instead of political spectators, they need to have the voting rights," says Jeppe Bruus Christensen, the chairman of the Danish Youth Council.

In Great Britain young people succeeded in placing voting rights high on the political agenda. The House of Commons has discussed voting rights at the age of 16 and a commission is working on the issue. The British Youth Council, which is behind the campaign 'Votes at 16', is focusing on the fact that the connection between the obligations and the rights of young people is missing:

"If a young person is earning enough, they can even pay tax - and yet they do not have the right to vote or to have a role in deciding who will make law and govern the country," Johanna Field says, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, the British Youth Council.

The European youth councils have improved their fighting spirit after Austria gave 16-year-olds access to the polling booths. The voting rights are also valid

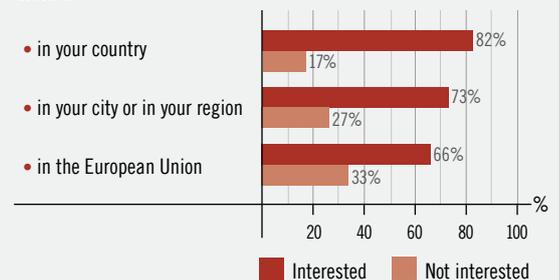
at elections for the European Parliament. Therefore 16-year-old Austrians have influence on European politics. Several European youth councils believe that it is a logical consequence to grant all European young people voting rights. In addition, they point out that the populations of Europe are getting older and older which can create a democratic imbalance.

"If we want to preserve a democratic balance between older people and young people, the voting age has to be lowered. Young people have to be able to elect the politicians who are forming the framework of their lives many years ahead," says Jeppe Bruus Christensen from the Danish Youth Council. He believes that a lower voting age will strengthen the democracy:

"Young people at the age of 16 and 17 are less engaged in parties and political discussions than other age groups. The motivation is smaller when you have no real influence. But young people are interested in society to a great extent and they will rise with the responsibility if they obtain voting rights."

Interest in politics and current affairs

Would you say, you are very interested, interested, not interested or not at all interested in what is going on in politics and current affairs?



Source: Flash Eurobarometer 2007, Young Europeans



Photo: Mikal Schibye

"If young people are to be democratic fellow players instead of political spectators, they need to have the voting rights."

Jeppe Bruus Christensen,
the chairman of
the Danish Youth Council



A number of European youth councils have brought up voting rights at the age of 16 for discussion, and several youth councils are working actively to lower the voting age.

Photo: EU Commission



The National Youth Council of Ireland

Has conducted campaigns about voting rights at the age of 16 both nationally and on a local level.

The National Council of Youth Organizations of Georgia

Has voted for a resolution in the European Youth Forum about voting rights at the age of 16 but is not conducting any campaigns in their homeland.

The National Council of Swedish Youth Organizations

Is hosting a seminar about voting rights at the age of 16 in October 2007.

The National Youth Council of Switzerland

Supports the regional groups of the organization in their lobby work on a regional level, after the constituent state Glarus has introduced voting rights at the age of 16.

The Norwegian Children and Youth Council

In the summer of 2007 the voting age was a part of the public debate and the youth council participated actively in this.

The Council of Lithuanian Youth Organizations

Voting rights at the age of 16 have been discussed several times and at the moment the issue has come up for discussion again.

The National Youth Council of Slovenia

Has not yet made a decision but among the member organizations of the youth council there are both supporters and opponents of voting rights at the age of 16.

The Danish Youth Council

Is working on voting rights at the age of 16 and is making information campaigns about the subject.

The Finnish Youth Co-operation Allianssi

Has no official politics in this area, however, the youth council has brought up the subject for discussion.

The British Youth Council

Has conducted the campaign 'Votes at 16', which raised the subject on a national level.

The German National Committee for International Youth Work

Is working on voting rights at the age of 14 at all elections. Has made merchandise material for the campaign: voting rights at the age of 14, and is meeting with parties and organizations to discuss the subject.



Photo: Mikhal Schlosser

While young people are often seen as those most susceptible to influence and of having their opinions and ideas swayed by trends, it is we, in fact, that can provide a sense of stability and cling to a long-held vision of freedom and democracy. We are too often reminded that to be heard one must have a vote, thus to fulfil our roles as active citizens, a fundamental right is missing for many young people: the right to vote in elections.

In most European countries, 16 and 17 year-olds are deemed competent enough to leave home, enter full time employment, pay taxes, raise children, join the army and to drive, yet they are excluded from elections. Lowering the voting age could thus play a huge role in helping young people feel more connected with political processes.

Voting at sixteen is the logical step beyond citizenship education, which has been a compulsory subject in many countries; yet despite this, school leavers must often wait two years or longer before they can enter a voting booth. Young people want the right to vote and many youth-led organizations have been actively campaigning for the voting age to be reduced.

It is highly doubtful whether the exclusion of 16 and 17 year-olds helps maintain the integrity and

effectiveness of electoral procedures – in fact, it seems to alienate further generations of young people from participation in the democratic process.

Happily, it seems politicians may be taking note: in summer 2007 the Austrian Parliament overhauled national electoral legislation, with the new legislation giving 16 year-olds the right to vote in national elections. Some provinces have already introduced the measure, and evaluation of the first elections including 16 and 17 year old voters has been generally positive.

*Bettina Schwarzmayr, President,
European Youth Forum*



Photo: European Youth Forum

Therefore, it is evident that the European Youth Forum supports the lowering of the voting age to sixteen at all level in Europe.

*Bettina Schwarzmayr,
President,
European Youth Forum*

WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN YOUTH FORUM?

Independently established by youth organizations, the European Youth Forum is made up of more than 90 National Youth Councils and International Non-Governmental Youth Organizations, which are federations of youth organizations in themselves. It brings together tens of millions of young people from all over Europe, organized in order to represent their common interests.