

The Effects of Lowering the Voting Age on Political Engagement and Extremist Movements in the European Context: the Comparative Analysis of Austria and Czech Republic

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Summary: This paper investigates the impact of varying voting ages on electoral outcomes and democratic participation by comparing Austria, where the voting age is 16, and the Czech Republic, where it remains 18. Focusing on the European Parliament elections, the study explores to what extent the age threshold might affect youth engagement and electoral results. The research utilizes data from the June 2024 EP elections to analyse the impacts of different minimum voting ages by observing voter turnout and the distribution of mandates. The paper highlights the shifts in political dynamics and the rise of extremist parties among young voters that underscores the need for improved European political education to better inform and ensure the implications of the voting process for sustainable and democratic representation. The study emphasizes the importance of addressing educational and engagement gaps to strengthen European democracy.

Keywords: voting age, European Parliament, Austria, Czech Republic, elections

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1. Introduction

Throughout the last five European Parliament (EP) elections, the participation and preferences of young people have undergone significant shifts due to various socio-economic, political, and cultural factors. The 2019 European elections witnessed a record-high turnout, primarily attributable to the increased engagement of young voters¹. In May 2024, the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) were directly elected for the tenth time. Given the European Union's (EU) political and social diversity, this trend has manifested differently across member states, reflecting a broad spectrum of local issues and socio-economic contexts.

Shortly before the EP Elections European Commission (EC) published a survey² on the engagement, awareness, and participation of young people aged 15-30 in public issues. This survey disclosed that a significant proportion of young individuals are actively engaged in civic activities. The outcomes reported that 64% or respondents participate in the activities of one or more organizations within the past 12 months. Moreover, 48% indicated they had undertaken actions aimed at effecting societal change, such as signing petitions, participating in rallies, or corresponding with political representatives. Notably, young people exhibited substantial activism concerning issues related to human rights, climate change and environmental concerns, health and wellbeing, and the promotion of equal rights regardless of gender, race, or sexuality. Apparently, young individuals within the EU demonstrate an increasingly pronounced interest in political and social issues that directly impact their future. Moreover, research conducted at ten secondary schools substantiates these outcomes³. Yet, these findings demonstrate the need to pay adequate attention to the age group comprising both first-time voters and those intending to repeat their initial choice to cast a ballot.

In democratic systems, the right to vote in elections is supposed to be inherent to every citizen, so restrictions on voting rights in local elections, whether based on age or any other criterion, lie with the legislative authority or mandate. The EU stands uniquely as the only international organization with a directly elected Parliament since 1979⁴. The guidelines for EP elections in the EU are established through regulations, directives, and national laws. A set of basic principles establishes certain fundamental rules that apply to all member states, such as the requirement for direct elections and the

¹ BRAUN, D. *The Europeanness of the 2019 European Parliament elections and the mobilising power of European issues*. Politics, 2021, vol. 41, no. 4, pp. 451–466.

² European Commission. Youth and democracy 2024 [online]. Available: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3181>

³ ONDRUŠKOVÁ, D., POSPÍŠIL, R. European Parliament Elections Incentives for First-Time Voters: Evidence from the Secondary Schools. *European Studies – The Review of European Law, Economics and Politics*. 2024, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 15–32.

⁴ European Communities. *Act concerning the election of the representatives of the Assembly by direct universal suffrage*. 1976, Official Journal (OJ) L 278.

right to vote for EU citizens residing in another member state⁵. These legal instruments help to standardize and unify the common aspects of the electoral process in all EU member countries. They ensure a common framework for parliamentary elections both at the EU and the national level, lay down the principle of proportional representation⁶ and the overall composition of the EP⁷, and set the timing of elections and a number of incompatibilities between national and European mandates. Statute and Funding of European Political Parties and European Political Foundations govern the status and funding of European political parties and foundations⁸, which can be involved in election campaigns for the EP. Many other important issues, such as the exact electoral system used or the number of constituencies, are specified by national laws⁹. One of the most important amendments to the 1976 Electoral Act adopted a set of important provisions on the possibility of different voting methods, such as electronic or postal voting¹⁰. This can impact the overall composition of the legislative body. Several regulations and directives supplement the Electoral Act and elaborate on electoral processes regarding campaign expenses and reimbursement of election expenses¹¹ to ensure transparency and accountability in campaign financing, detailed arrangements for the exercise of the right to vote, and standing as a candidate in elections to the EP¹². Other recent amendments concern for example the protection of personal data¹³. Since the penultimate elections in 2014 and the last in 2019 much has changed concerning new challenges facing disinformation and potential manipulation of voters through online communications¹⁴.

⁵ EU. *Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on EU and the Treaty establishing the European Community*. 2007, OJ C 306.

⁶ Council of the European Union. *Council Decision 2002/772/EC, amending the Act concerning the election of the representatives of the EP by direct universal suffrage*. 2002, OJ L 283.

⁷ EU. *Treaty on European Union*. 1992, OJ C 191, Article 14. EU. *Treaty on the Functioning of the EU*. 2007, OJ C 306, Articles 20, 22 and 223, European Union. *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU*. 2007, 2007/C 303/01, Article 39.

⁸ EU. *Regulation No. 1141/2014 of the EP and of the Council on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations*. 2014, OJ L 317.

⁹ See HAMULÁK, O. Penetration of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union into the Constitutional Order of the Czech Republic – Basic Scenarios. *European Studies – The Review of European law, Economics and Politics*. 2020, vol. 7, pp. 108–124.

¹⁰ Council of the EU. *Council Decision amending Decision 76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage*. 2018, OJ, L 177.

¹¹ EP, Council of the EU. *Regulation (EU) 2019/788 of the EP and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the citizens' initiative*. 2019, OJ, L 130.

¹² Council of the EU. *Directive 93/109/EC laying down the rules governing the elections to the EP by direct universal suffrage*. OJ, L 329.

¹³ Cf. ANDRAŠKO, J., MESARČÍK, M., HAMULÁK, O. The regulatory intersections between artificial intelligence, data protection and cyber security: challenges and opportunities for the EU legal framework. *AI & SOCIETY*. 2021, 36, pp. 623–636.

¹⁴ EP and Council of the EU. *Regulation (EU) 2018/1725 of the EP and of the Council on the protection of personal data by the EU institutions, bodies, offices, and agencies and on the free movement of such data*. 2018, OJ, L 295.

2. Overall concept and goals of the article

The research aims to examine the implications of lowering the voting age to 16 with a specific focus on the Czech Republic and Austria. Under current EU legislation, Member States retain discretion over their minimum voting age, resulting in variations across countries. Austria's experience with a voting age of 16 offers valuable insights, as research shows that political engagement among Austrian youth increased after they were granted the right to vote. This suggests that early involvement in the political process can foster a lifelong voting habit and enhance voter turnout, potentially contributing to greater EU cohesion, given the pro-European sentiment among younger generations. This paper examines the results of the elections to the EP focusing on the results in Austria and the Czech Republic. These two countries were selected due to their geographical proximity, economic similarities, and shared historical and cultural backgrounds. By analysing the voter turnout and the distribution of mandates in the EP, this study aims to shed light on the partial impact of the lowering the voting age to 16 years on electoral outcomes and democratic participation.

Based on the results of the EP elections in June 2024, this study aims to understand the manner in which differences in the minimum voting age influence the distribution of mandates in the EP. This comparison seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding the appropriate age for active electoral participation with regard to the current challenges associated with lowering the voting age. Recent surveys indicate a rise in support for radical right-wing parties among young voters in both Austria and the Czech Republic. The research is based on the assumption, held by most of the cited literature, that individuals who actively participate in elections intend to use their vote to influence decisions affecting their lives and are equipped with key political beliefs. It is presumed that at the age of 16, young people are capable of dealing with their life planning, and deciding on their educational path and their professional future.

This paper is structured as follows. First, a short overview of European electoral system is given, consequently, the overview of significant scientific studies related to research on voter turnout and the involvement of minors in the electoral process is presented. A short overview of the Austrian way to enfranchise voters aged 16 is going follows, including some of the accompanying legal measures. A brief assessment of the constitutional changes in other European countries is provided. Consequently, the attention is to be directed at indicators of participation and election results using official records from the Eurostat database. The attention is drawn to the voting turnout and distribution of mandates in the EP. The main differences between the two neighbouring countries are emphasised. In the final part of the paper, the findings are contextualized with existing research papers to draw an important call for future strategies concerning the education of young people in their life attitudes, and decision-making processes related to public elections. This paper is closed by discussing

potential implications for policy-makers in the Czech Republic as well as avenues for further research.

In the course of the research, official sources from the Eurostat database were employed as well as online databases that provides access to European Union (EU) and nationals' law.

3. European and national electoral systems

As stated above while the general legal framework to participate in the elections is primarily determined by national legislation, the elections to the EP have been based on the Treaty on EU¹⁵ (TEU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU¹⁶ (TFEU) since the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon¹⁷ in 2009. These treaties establish the legal framework for the EU, including provisions on the composition, election, and functioning of the EP. Together, these provisions ensure democratic representation, transparency, and accountability in EU decision-making processes. Article 6(1) TEU is particularly significant as it establishes the foundational principles of the Union: liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. Article 7 TEU outlines mechanisms to address violations of Article 6 TEU, ranging from sanctions to potential suspension of voting rights, although these measures have not been invoked to date. Since 1993, the EU has also set forth criteria known as the Copenhagen criteria¹⁸ for prospective members, emphasizing stable democratic institutions, adherence to the rule of law, protection of human rights and minority rights, a functional market economy, and administrative capacity. These instruments ensure that while the detailed processes may vary across member states, the fundamental principles of free and fair elections, proportional representation, and direct universal suffrage are upheld uniformly across the EU. Beyond being a foundational pillar, democracy is ingrained in the EU's structure, as articulated in Article 10(1) TEU, which mandates that "*the functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy*". Alongside representative democracy, the EU embraces forms of direct democracy such as the citizens' initiative and petition processes.

Specific articles relevant to elections include Article 14 TEU and Articles 223-234 TFEU. Article 14 TEU outlines the principles and procedures related to the composition and functioning of the European Parliament (EP), defines the number of MEPs and the distribution of seats among member states, based on proportional representation, and establishes that MEPs are elected by direct universal suffrage in free and

¹⁵ EU. *Treaty on European Union*. 1992, OJ C 191.

¹⁶ EU. *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*. 2007, OJ C 306.

¹⁷ Treaty of Lisbon imposes the right to vote and to stand as a candidate.

¹⁸ European Council. *Conclusions of the Presidency (Copenhagen Summit)*. 1993 [online]. Available: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/73842.pdf

fair elections. Article 14 TEU lays down the foundational principles that elections should be conducted democratically, ensuring transparency, fairness, and equal rights for EU citizens to participate. Articles 225–229 TFEU establish the principles and procedures for the election of MEPs, including the electoral system, electoral rights, and eligibility criteria. These articles ensure that elections are conducted under democratic principles, ensuring fair representation of EU citizens.

EP introduced a proposal for a Council regulation concerning the election of MEPs by direct universal suffrage, intended to replace the current European Electoral Act of 1976¹⁹. The proposal seeks to standardize several rules governing European elections, including the voting age. Recital 17²⁰ of the proposal suggests that a “*uniform voting age across the Union... should be established to ensure equality and prevent discrimination*”. Article 4(1) of the proposal sets this age at 16, but allows exceptions for “*existing constitutional orders that set a minimum voting age of 18 or 17 years*”. For the regulation to come into effect, it requires unanimous approval by the Council and ratification by all Member States in accordance with their constitutional procedures.

The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) interprets and applies EU law, including provisions related to EP elections. Its decisions contribute to the clarification and implementation of electoral rules across member states. The CJEU ruled that EU law requires member states to ensure that EU citizens have the right to vote and stand as candidates in elections to the EP under conditions that are not stricter than those governing the exercise of national voting rights. The CJEU emphasized that any restriction on the right to vote must be proportionate and respect the fundamental rights guaranteed by EU law. The CJEU’s interpretation underscored the importance of ensuring that EU citizens’ voting rights are protected and that any limitations on these rights must be justified and proportionate. This decision has contributed to shaping the framework for electoral procedures in EU member states, emphasizing the need for consistency and adherence to EU principles regarding democratic rights and freedoms.

National legislation of each member state plays a critical role in determining the specific modalities and administrative details of conducting elections. This includes the eligibility criteria for voters and candidates, the organization of electoral districts, and the mechanisms for casting and counting votes. It sets out procedures for registration, voting methods, and eligibility criteria and is modified by an amendment²¹

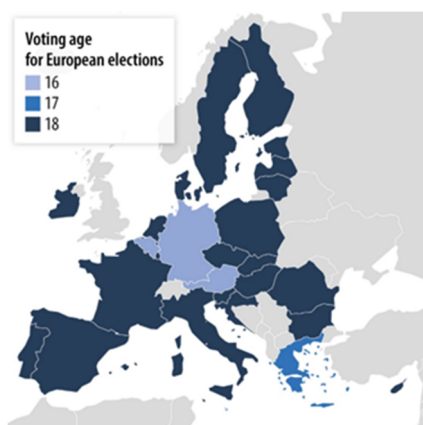
¹⁹ EP legislative resolution on the proposal for a Council Regulation on the election of the MEP by direct universal suffrage, repealing Council Decision (76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom) and the Act concerning the election of the members of the EP annexed to that Decision (2020/2220(INL) – 2022/0902(APP).

²⁰ EP. *Proposal for a Council regulation on the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage*. 2018, COM (2018) 640 final [online]. Available: eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018PC0640

²¹ EP and Council of the EU. *Directive (EU) 2018/1865 of the EP and of the Council on the right to information in criminal proceedings*. 2018, OJ L 303.

comprising the modalities for the exercise of the right to vote and stand as a candidate in EP elections by EU citizens residing in a Member State of which they are not nationals. In Belgium, a 2022 law²² lowered the voting age to 16. Initially, 16- and 17-year-old voters were required to submit a request to their local municipality to vote. However, in July 2023, the Belgian Constitutional Court ruled this requirement unconstitutional²³, meaning the voting age is now simply 16 without any additional conditions. Similarly, in Germany, legislation passed in early 2023²⁴ reduced the voting age for European elections from 18 to 16. Malta's Constitution²⁵, amended in 2018, establishes 16 as the standard voting age, including for European elections. Greece has set the voting age at 17²⁶, while Austria, since 2007, has fixed it at 16. In all other EU Member States, the voting age remains 18, see Figure 1.

Figure 1: Voting age for elections to EP 2024



Source: [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/749767/EPRS_ATA\(2023\)749767_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/749767/EPRS_ATA(2023)749767_EN.pdf)

²² Belgian Official Journal, *Law 2022032290 allowing the citizens the option to vote from the age of 16* [online]. Available: https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi_loi/change_lg.pl?language=fr&la=F&table_name=loi&cn=2022060106

²³ Court of Justice of the EU. Judgment No. 116/2023, 2023. Case No. 7883.

²⁴ Federal Ministry of Justice. Bundesgesetzblatt Teil I, 2023, Document No. 11.

²⁵ Malta's Constitution, cf. legislation.mt/eli/const/eng.

²⁶ Greek Constitution, cf. <https://www.kodiko.gr/nomothesia>

4. Current state of knowledge

The voting age remains a contentious issue, sparking debates among scholars, policymakers, and citizens, reflecting diverse perspectives on democratic participation, civic responsibility, and the potential impact on voter engagement. The age at which an individual attains active voting rights denotes the juncture or phase where it is presumed that the person possesses adequate maturity to participate in the electoral process. Given that every voter should be acquainted with the facts and understand the impact of their vote national legislations establish a legal presumption that individuals below a certain age lack the maturity and ability to understand the significance and effect of elections. Such a presumption is arbitrarily set, and the age limit also varies across different jurisdictions. Age serves as a justifiable criterion for voting eligibility, as it functions as a proxy for possessing a comprehensive range of cognitive and motivational capacities²⁷. There is an extensive discussion regarding the appropriate age for acquiring active voting rights²⁸. The voters are expected to exercise this right judiciously by making informed decisions, choosing options that align closely with their personal beliefs and reflect their interests within the local community²⁹.

Advocates for lowering the voting age argue that extending suffrage to 16-year-olds could bolster youth political engagement³⁰. Young people already actively participate in societal debates through social media, engage in work, rent accommodations, and in some nations, serve in the armed forces and pay taxes. They contend that since youth contribute to society, they should have the right to vote and influence decisions affecting their lives. *“During adolescence, roughly between the ages of 13 and 18, you develop democratic norms and values, as well as your key political beliefs. This is also the period in your life when your political engagement is shaped. However, at this age, you have limited opportunities to express this engagement because you cannot vote yet. Research shows that lowering the voting age makes it easier to encourage this involvement. In schools, for example.”*³¹ Pupils seem to exhibit greater interest in politics, a higher level of political sophistication, and greater turnout compared to those already working. Young people gain experience with political

²⁷ NELKIN, D. K. What Should the Voting Age Be? *Journal of Practical Ethics*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 1–29.

²⁸ PETO, T. Why the voting age should be lowered to 16. *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*. 2018, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 277–297.

²⁹ HINZE, J. Democracy, Epistocracy, and the Voting Age. *Social Theory and Practice*, 2023, vol. 49, no. 1, pp. 105–129.

³⁰ Cf. GHEAUS, A. *Let them be children? Age limits in voting and conceptions of childhood*. In: BOGNAR, Greg, GOSSERIES, A. (eds.). *Ageing Without Ageism: Conceptual Puzzles and Policy Proposals*. Oxford University Press, 2023.

³¹ PETO, T. Why the voting age should be lowered to 16. *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*. 2018, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 277–297.

participation during a formative phase in their lives, increasing the likelihood that they will vote later on³². Research also tells us that those who vote for the first time when they become eligible to do so are more likely to vote in subsequent elections. Therefore, raising youth voter turnout through a lower voting age can lead to higher overall voter turnout in the future. This is a compelling argument for granting 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote³³. Several studies were carried out concluding that political knowledge, along with political interest, is one of the driving forces of voter turnout³⁴. The project Voting at 16³⁵ reported the conclusion that the lowering of the voting age had positive effects: first-time voters aged 16-17 were well prepared to participate in elections and the high turnout in this age group may lead to long-term positive effects on voter turnout.

Any legislative change that lowers the voting age threshold strengthens the democratic system of both state and local communities by enhancing the representation of the electorate relative to the entire population and expanding the pool of eligible voters. This, in turn, reinforces the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and proportionally increases voter turnout³⁶. The acquisition of suffrage is typically associated with reaching the voting age and the capacity to understand the significance and impact of elections, often linked to attaining full legal capacity. However, full legal capacity can occasionally be achieved before reaching the voting age³⁷. Nevertheless, the right to vote is granted upon reaching the voting age without necessarily coinciding with full legal capacity. Therefore, the notion that age signifies full legal capability does not always hold true. Consequently, the voting age cannot be regarded as an absolute restriction without potential exceptions. Some Constitutional Courts argue that legal capacity at age 16 should not be equated with the capacity to acquire voting rights³⁸.

In the Czech Republic, the issue of lowering the voting age is not widely debated or considered politically attractive. There have been discussions by representatives from STAN and the Green Party regarding proposals to lower the voting age for

³² Cf. PICKARD, S. *Young People, the Voting Age and Votes at 16*. In: Politics, Protest and Young People. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 273–310.

³³ Cf. KRITZINGER, S., WAGNER, M., GLAVANOVITS, J. *ErstwählerInnen bei der Nationalratswahl*. University of Vienna, 2017.

³⁴ FILZMAIER, P., KLEPP, C. Far more than Voting at the Age a 16: Empirical Findings on Youth and Civic Education. *Osterreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*. 2009, vol. 38. pp. 341–355.

³⁵ BRONNER, L., IFKOVITS, D. Voting at 16: Intended and unintended consequences of Austria's electoral reform. *Electoral Studies*. 2019, vol. 61.

³⁶ STIERS, D., HOOGHE, M., GOUBIN, S. Are 16-Year-Olds Able to Cast a Congruent Vote? Evidence from a "Voting at 16" Initiative in the City of Ghent (Belgium). *Electoral Studies*. 2020, vol. 63.

³⁷ i. e. Emancipation, marriage

³⁸ Cf. Federal Constitutional Court of Germany. BVerfG, 2007, Judgment 2 BvR 1250/07. Constitutional Court of Austria. VfGH, 2002 B 2532/01.

municipal elections³⁹. Austria, as a neighbouring country, could provide a valuable model for the Czech Republic in this context.

5. Austrian way to lowering the voting age

The following part assesses the Austrian implementation of the voting age of 16 in 2007. Overall, Austria's pioneering decision in 2007 to lower the voting age has established a precedent within the EU, illustrating the potential advantages of involving younger citizens in the democratic process at an earlier stage. The Federal Constitutional Law on Elections⁴⁰ precisely delineates the criteria for electoral eligibility in municipal, provincial, national, and EU elections, thereby enabling participation for citizens aged 16 and older.

Austria introduced active voting rights from the age of 16 through the following legislative measures: Constitutional Law of 2007⁴¹. This electoral reform enabled Austrian citizens aged 16 and above to participate in all types of elections and elements of direct democracy. The explanatory memorandum for the Constitutional Amendment addresses several key points. First, the rationale for reform explains the need for constitutional reforms to modernize the legal framework in line with contemporary requirements and sets the objective of the amendment. The primary objective of the amendment was: *“to improve the democratic process by making the constitutional provisions more relevant and efficient”*⁴². It aims to facilitate better representation and participation in the political system. The National Council (Nationalrat) has decided to grant young people from the age of 16 the right to participate in political decision-making processes and to decide on their living space and their future. Having been approved by the National Council, the proposed constitutional amendment granting the right to vote from the age of 16, was subsequently also ratified by the Federal Council (Bundesrat).

During the deliberations on lowering the voting age to 16 in Austria in 2007, several political parties and individuals opposed the change. Specific opposition came from members of the Austrian People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP). Some ÖVP members expressed doubts about the readiness and maturity of 16-year-olds to participate in the political process. The primary arguments against the proposal included concerns about political maturity, experience, and logistical challenges. Critics argued

³⁹ Cf. Český rozhlas. *Starostové chtějí snížit volební věk*. 2019 [online]. Available: www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/pro-a-proti-volebni-pravo-snizeni-veku-16-let-vit-rakusan-stan-tatana-mala-ano_1904241644_pla

⁴⁰ Bundes-Verfassungsgesetz B-VG

⁴¹ Cf. Constitutional Amendment: Austrian Constitutional Law of 2007, Art. 26 [online]. Available: https://www.verfassungsvergleich.de/au00000_.html

⁴² Bundesgesetzblatt, Teil I Nr. 87/2007, Begründung zur Verfassungsänderung: Verfassungsrechtsänderungsgesetz 2007, Art. 26.

that 16-year-olds lacked the necessary maturity and information to make responsible and informed voting decisions. They believed that younger voters could be easily influenced by parents, teachers, or peers, potentially compromising the independence of their votes⁴³. Additionally, opponents highlighted the lack of real-life experience and interest in politics among many young people. They contended that 16-year-olds often do not have a deep understanding of political and economic issues, which could result in voting based on superficial or populist opinions. Nonetheless, the party ultimately supported the proposal as part of a broader electoral reform agreement. Additionally, individual conservative politicians and members of smaller parties opposed the proposal for the aforementioned reasons⁴⁴. Anyhow, there were no major legal challenges directly against the constitutionality of this voting age reform. The Austrian Constitutional Court (Verfassungsgerichtshof) has not issued significant rulings overturning or challenging this legislation, indicating broad acceptance and legal stability of the lowered voting age.

More than 15 years after the changes in the election law in Austria, the objective of maintaining consistently high voter participation among Austrian youth has not yet been fully realized. The turnout of first-time and young voters has exhibited fluctuations influenced by various factors. For instance, the general elections of 2009 experienced a 'first-time boost' in young voter participation, which was not replicated in the subsequent 2014 general election⁴⁵. This decline in voter participation between 2009 and 2014 can be attributed to reduced efforts by politics, educational institutions, and the media to mobilize first-time voters during the latter election. However, recent data from the Flash Eurobarometer European Youth survey⁴⁶ indicate the onset of a positive trend. Alongside Italy, Austria ranks highest in the turnout of young people aged 15 to 30, with up to 79% of young Austrian voters reporting their participation in elections. The European elections 2019 brought a record high turnout due to an increase in turnout among young people. In Austria, the increase in the two young voter categories was 19% for people aged under 25 and 16% for people aged 25 to 39. The total turnout in the two categories was 48% (under 25) and 56% (25 to 39) according to the Eurobarometer survey. To sum up 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.

⁴³ Cf. Parlamentskorrespondenz Nr. 510 vom 21.06.2007.

Wahlrechtsreform 2007 passiert den Bundesrat https://www.parlament.gv.at/aktuelles/pk/jahr_2007/pk0510 [online]. Available at: www.parlament.gv.at/aktuelles/pk/jahr_2007/pk0510

⁴⁴ STARKBAUM, J., AUEL, K., BOBI, V., FUGLSANG, S. *Endbericht Ursachenstudie zu Ambivalenzen und Skepsis in Österreich in Bezug auf Wissenschaft und Demokratie*. Wien: Institute for Advanced Studies, 2023.

⁴⁵ BRONNER, Laura, IFKOVITS, David. Voting at 16: Intended and unintended consequences of Austria's electoral reform. *Electoral Studies*. 2019, vol. 61.

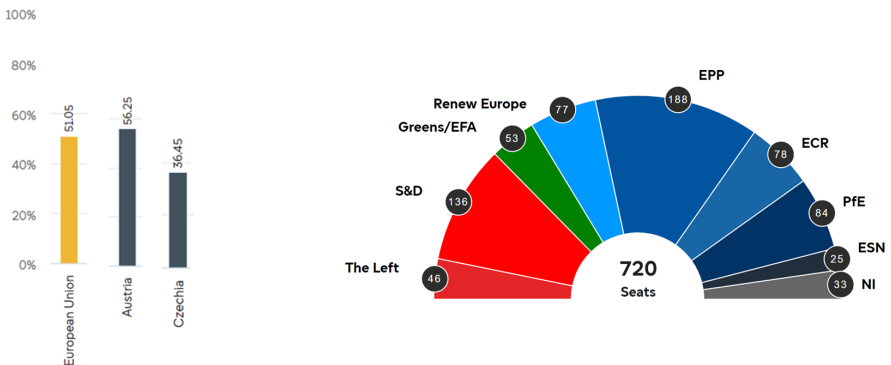
⁴⁶ EP. Closer to the Citizens, Closer to the Ballot [online]. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/closer-to-the-citizens-closer-to-the-ballot>

6. EP elections 2024 – results and impacts

For the past five years, the EP has been governed by a majority coalition comprising three groups: the centre-right European People’s Party, the centre-left Socialists and Democrats, and the liberals from Renew Europe. Voters across the 27 member states of the EU manifested a notable shift to the right in June 2024, evidenced by gains for the centre-right and nationalist parties⁴⁷. The overall distribution of mandates after the June elections 2024 and voter turnout in analysed countries are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Distribution of mandates in EP (Constitutive session), voter turnout in EU, CZ, Austria

Figure 2: Distribution of mandates in EP (Constitutive session), voter turnout in EU, CZ, Austria



Source: <https://elections.europa.eu/en>

In the 2024 EP elections, voter turnout exceeded 50 percent among eligible citizens across the 27 EU member states, marking the highest participation rate since 1994. In the two compared countries Czechia and Austria, the turnout ranged from 36,45 to more than 56%. This significant disparity in voter turnout already suggests considerable differences in citizen engagement and their perception of the importance of the EP. Czechia remains substantially below the EU average. In comparison with the 2014 EP elections, voter turnout in Czechia was the second-lowest among all 28 EU member states, standing at 18,20%.

Before analysing the outcomes received by political parties in both countries attention is devoted to the mandates secured by the various factions in the EP. The new

⁴⁷ EP. 2024 *European election results* [online]. Available at: <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/index.html>

overall distribution of the mandates is as follows: The European People's Party (EPP), led by Ursula von der Leyen, secured the highest number of seats in the European Parliament. Pro-EU centrist, liberal (Renew Europe), social democratic (S&D), and environmentalist parties experienced losses Greens/EFA, while anti-EU right-wing populist parties (Pfe, ESN, NI) saw gains. The right-wing European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group surpassed the centrist Renew Europe group to become the fourth-largest bloc, while a new faction, Patriots for Europe (Pfe), the successor to Identity and Democracy, achieved the third-largest number of seats. Additionally, another right-wing coalition, Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN), was established as the smallest group in the Parliament. Several new or Non-Inscrits (NI) parties also increased their representation. Figure 3 shows detailed election results by national parties in Austria and Czechia.

Figure 3: Election results by national parties in Austria and Czechia



Source: <https://elections.europa.eu/en>

The 2024 EP elections in Austria were characterized by a substantial shift towards the FPÖ, which for example consistently advocated for the repeal of anti-Russian sanctions or criticized efforts to reduce dependence on Russian gas, a decline for the governing ÖVP, stable results for the SPÖ, and mixed outcomes for the Greens and Neos. The FPÖ's significant gain in votes positions it ahead of the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ).

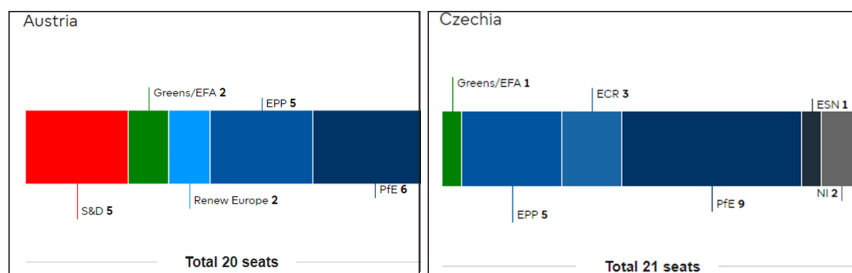
The ruling ÖVP experienced a notable decline, losing nearly ten percentage points to settle at 24,7%. ÖVP leader and Chancellor Karl Nehammer announced intentions to address the palpable dissatisfaction among citizens, focusing on issues such as illegal migration and overregulation to better align with public sentiment. The SPÖ saw a slight decrease, obtaining 23,3% of the vote, consistent with their performance in the previous EP elections. The Green Party's results were highly anticipated, particularly given the controversies surrounding their leading candidate, 23-year-old climate activist Lena Schilling. Despite the challenges, the Greens secured approximately 10,9% of the vote, reflecting a loss of about three percentage points. Conversely, the liberal Neos were among the winners, achieving a slight increase in votes and reaching 10,1%⁴⁸.

Czechs voted for Euroscepticism and distributed their votes among the candidates for Members of the European Parliament as follows. The winner was the opposition movement ANO, followed by the SPOLU coalition. In third place was the coalition of Přísaha and Motoristé, ahead of the STAČILO! candidate. Subsequently, STAN and the Pirates secured positions, with the SPD being the last party to surpass the 5% threshold and obtain a mandate. Significantly below the required threshold were PRO, the Social Democrats, the Libertarians, and the Green Party. The electoral success of Přísaha and Motoristé, who started the cooperation after the 2022 Czech municipal elections, was undoubtedly the biggest surprise. The campaign was focused heavily on the person of leader of Motoristé, whose success was underpinned by a traditional campaign involving direct voter engagement. His ability to simplify complex issues, such as the Green Deal and migration, resonated with a broad electorate. The combination of his natural communication style, relevant topics, and the coalition's novelty contributed to their surprising third-place result and the attraction of voters from SPD. Under the newly established brand STAČILO!, far-left parties, primarily led by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), united strategically. Their anti-government, pro-Russian, and anti-EU stance resonated with nearly 10% of dissatisfied voters.⁴⁹

Shortly after the elections, leader of the winner movement ANO, former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, announced the formation of a new alliance Pře for the EP. For the time being, in addition to the ANO movement, it consists of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz and Herbert Kickl's Austrian FPÖ party, with both election winners in the compared countries. Moreover, members of EP from 14 right-leaning parties have joined the political group Pře. This far-right group advocates nationalist, populist, and eurosceptic policies.

⁴⁸ *Nachrichten und Hintergründe, Europawahl 2024. FPÖ gewinnt in Österreich* [online]. Available at: www.tagesschau.de/europawahl/oesterreich-europawahl-100.html

⁴⁹ KONRÁD, J. *Analýza voleb do Evropského parlamentu v roce 2024. Institut pro politiku a společnost*, 2024, [online]. Available at: https://www.politikaspolecnost.cz/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/6_2024_Volby-do-evropskeho-parlamentu_IPPS_Jakub-Konrad_.pdf

Seats by political groups⁵⁰

Both countries are faced with overcoming the consequences of an increasingly limited welfare state. In Czechia established structures have crumbled and the Austrian welfare state is increasingly geared to a neoliberal orientation⁵¹. Like other European countries both observed countries have experienced a new strengthening of an extremist right-wing parties and the re-emergence of xenophobia and nationalism. These parties' campaign emphasized EU scepticism, they portrayed the EU as a warmongering entity in the Ukraine conflict, which resonated with a substantial portion of the electorate.⁵²

Another point of interest is that similar to the ANO movement, the FPÖ being an opposition party in the Nationalrat, the lower chamber of the Austrian Parliament, they are both in a comfortable, even hegemonic position, not only on the issue of immigration, but also on other key themes and issues making impact on society, such as Austria's relations with Russia, or the measures taken to control the immigration and during Covid pandemic. Similarly, to ANO movement and Motoristé a Přísaha the FPÖ has effectively engaged a significant portion of voters by addressing their frustrations, benefiting from the current focus on these contentious issues.⁵³

So far, there has not been any official data collection on the turnout of young people in the EU 2024 elections. There are evaluations provided by research institutes

⁵⁰ EPP - Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats), S&D – Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament, PfE – Patriots for Europe, ECR – European Conservatives and Reformists Group, ESN – Europe of Sovereign Nations, NI – Non-attached Members

⁵¹ WEISS, H. A Cross-National Comparison of Nationalism in Austria, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Hungary, and Poland. *Political Psychology*. Special Issue: National Identity in Europe. 2003, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 377–401.

⁵² WAX, E. Patriots for Europe becomes EU parliament's 3rd-largest group, picks Jordan Bardella as president. *Politico* [online]. Available at: www.politico.eu/article/patriots-for-europe-jordan-bardella-viktor-orban-marine-le-pen/.

⁵³ Cf. MOREAU, P. Le FPÖ au défi de l'Europe : radicalité idéologique et contrainte électorale en Autriche [online]. Available at: www.fondapol.org/etude/patrick-moreau-lautriche-des-populistes/.

concerning the attitudes of young voters⁵⁴ According to the ORF election survey⁵⁵ the FPÖ garnered 28% of votes from those aged 30 and above, compared to 20% from younger voters. Young people are also moving away from the “old” parties, and gravitating towards the FPÖ and the Greens. In the recent election, young voters showed notable patterns. The FPÖ attracted substantial support from older individuals and workers, benefiting from their focus on immigration, security, and EU scepticism. In contrast, younger voters favoured parties like the Neos and KPÖ⁵⁶.

7. Discussion

As written above, under existing EU legislation EU Member States possess the discretion to establish their minimum voting age for European elections. In the Czech Republic, the minimum voting age stays at 18 whereas this age is set at 16 in Austria, and is lowered as well in some other EU countries. The proposal for a Council regulation introduced in 2022 by the EP seeks to standardize several rules governing European elections, including the voting age. As per cited research documents, in Austria, the political interest among young people aged 16 and 17 increased after they were granted the right to vote. Cited scientific papers have confirmed that voting is a habit acquired early on in life, and is rarely broken once it has been formed⁵⁷. The rise in political engagement among Austrian youth between the 2013 and 2017 general elections may suggest the formation of this habit, potentially stemming from their early involvement in the political process. This may be also one of the reason of the higher voter turnout in Austria. According to cited surveys younger generations generally exhibit greater pro-European sentiments compared to their predecessors. Given that the younger generation tends to be more pro-European on average than their older counterparts, integrating young people into the political process at an early stage would contribute positively to the cohesion of the EU. Their favourable attitude towards the EU should not be seen as mere naivety due to a lack of knowledge but rather as genuine enthusiasm characteristic of youth⁵⁸.

On the other hand, in many EU countries, including both observed countries – Austria and Czechia, radical right-wing parties have successfully mobilized their

⁵⁴ Cf. KERMER, M. *Wahlpräferenz. Wie rechts sind Jungwähler?* Der Standard, 2024 [online]. Available at: www.derstandard.at/story/3000000221157/wie-rechts-sind-jungwaehler

⁵⁵ Die Presse. *Wer hat für die FPÖ gestimmt? Und wer für die anderen?* 2024 [online]. Available at: www.diepresse.com/18548940/wer-hat-fuer-die-fpoe-gestimmt-und-wer-fuer-die-anderen

⁵⁶ Communist party in Austria, Kommunistische Partei Österreichs.

⁵⁷ FILZMAIER, P., KLEPP, C. Far more than Voting at the Age a 16: Empirical Findings on Youth and Civic Education. *Osterreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*. 2009, vol. 38. pp. 341–355.

⁵⁸ Cf. PICKARD, S. Young People, the Voting Age and Votes at 16. In: *Politics, Protest and Young People*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 273–310.

voters. Recent surveys and public opinion polls⁵⁹ have suggested that young voters are increasingly turning to parties and movements holding extremist views right-wing parties, including the FPÖ in Austria, Prísaha a Motoristé in Czechia. Both parties effectively use controversial topics to reach disillusioned youths, presenting themselves as champions against perceived societal neglect. This engagement includes addressing negative emotions and offering easy solutions by effectively making use of social media, direct campaigns. This engagement with disenchanted youth, offering them a sense of community and addressing their grievances with emotive and interactive content finds a receptive audience. Presently, fears of potential conflict in Europe have led many to seek protection through authoritarian measures offered by the far right.

It was observed that especially young people often tend to incorporate their concerns, fears, and the negative campaign tactics of extremist political parties into their voting decisions, which is reflected in their choice to support radical extremist parties⁶⁰. Moreover, following the survey⁶¹ young individuals often feel inadequately informed about the EU and its developments. Between the ages of 16 and 18, individuals undergo a pivotal transition from late adolescence to early adulthood. Enhancing European political education could bridge this gap, converting the pro-European inclination of the younger generation into an informed discourse about the EU and its forthcoming challenges. Educational institutions are ideally situated to bridge the information gap by providing thorough European political education. It is essential for democratic nations to engage these young people in discussions about politics and democracy during this formative period, as they are simultaneously navigating their roles and identities within society and the broader world. The inherent pro-European orientation of emerging generations constitutes a significant asset for facilitating well-informed and essential discourse regarding the future of European integration. However, the quality of information is also crucial. For a more inclusive European discourse, the EU must be portrayed in a balanced manner, highlighting its numerous benefits while also addressing existing challenges.

It is essential that Europe's youth be given a more substantial role in shaping their own future. Before lowering the voting age, the forthcoming generation should be equipped with the necessary tools to engage effectively in the political process across all EU member states, particularly in the crucial discussions regarding the future of Europe and the challenges that lie ahead.

⁵⁹ Die Presse. Wer hat für die FPÖ gestimmt? Und wer für die anderen? 2024 [online]. Available at: www.diepresse.com/18548940/wer-hat-fuer-die-fpoe-gestimmt-und-wer-fuer-die-anderen.

⁶⁰ Cf. GHEAUS, A. *Let them be children? Age limits in voting and conceptions of childhood*. In: BOGNAR, Greg, GOSSERIES, Axel (eds.). *Ageing Without Ageism: Conceptual Puzzles and Policy Proposals*. Oxford University Press, 2023.

⁶¹ ONDRUŠKOVÁ, D., POSPÍŠIL, R. *European Parliament Elections Incentives for First-Time Voters: Evidence from the Secondary Schools*. *European Studies – The Review of European Law, Economics and Politics*. 2024, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 15–32.

8. Conclusion

The present study underscores the complexities surrounding the issue of lowering the voting age within the EU. Research from Austria reveals that lowering the voting age can enhance political interest and participation among young people, potentially fostering a lasting voting habit and contributing to higher voter turnout. However, the rise of radical right-wing parties exploiting disillusioned youth and the observed trend of young voters supporting extremist views necessitates a cautious approach. This phenomenon underscores the critical need for comprehensive political education that can equip young individuals with the knowledge and tools to make informed decisions and engage constructively in the democratic process.

The inherent pro-European sentiment among younger generations presents a valuable opportunity for strengthening EU cohesion. Yet, for this potential to be realized, educational institutions must play a pivotal role in bridging the information gap and fostering a well-rounded understanding of European integration. As such, any movement towards lowering the voting age must be accompanied by robust educational initiatives that address both the benefits and challenges of the EU. Ensuring that Europe's youth are actively and effectively involved in shaping their future requires a balanced approach that integrates early political engagement with high-quality informed education. This will not only enhance democratic participation but also support the development of a more cohesive and informed EU.

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