



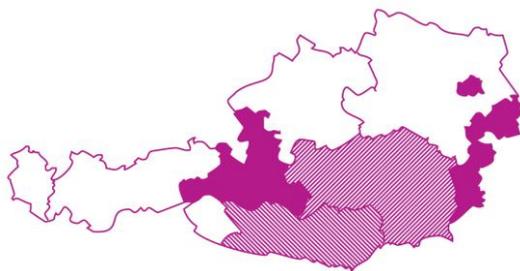
## FACT SHEET – LOWERING THE VOTING AGE

### Introduction

This fact sheet provides information regarding the lowered electoral age in Austria, the lobbying campaigns organised by the **Austrian National Youth Council** and the results of recent post-election studies.

The Austrian National Youth Council (Österreichische Kinder- und Jugendvertretung – ÖJV) is the representative body of children and young people in Austria. ÖJV provides young people with a strong collective voice towards policy and decision-makers at all levels and actively advocates for their interests. ÖJV promotes the development of services for all young people and promotes and safeguards their interests and concerns and is, as a legally recognised organisation, the legitimate lobby organisation for young people in Austria. You can find more information on [www.jugendvertretung.at](http://www.jugendvertretung.at).

### Development – Legal Situation



Until the year 2007 the situation regarding the electoral age in Austria was not uniformly regulated (elections on the local and the regional level are ruled by the laws of the Federal States).<sup>1</sup> In those Federal States where the electoral age had already been lowered the experiences were good and the voter participation among young

people was high.

In 2005 the Austrian NYC initiated an analysis of the voting behaviour of young people (between 16 and 18 years old) at the regional elections in Vienna.

The results of this analysis showed that the common arguments against lowering the electoral age are no longer plausible (for PROs and CONs see below).

### **Common arguments against the lowering of the electoral age (CONs):**

- Young people are (politically) immature.
- Young people do have a more radical voting behaviour.
- Young people do not want to vote by themselves.
- Young people do have enough possibilities to participate.

---

<sup>1</sup> In three of nine Federal States (Vienna, Burgenland, Salzburg) the voting age was already lowered some years ago (for both levels: local and regional); in two Federal States (Carinthia, Styria) the voting age for either regional or local elections was 16 years and in four Federal States (Lower Austria, Upper Austria, Tyrol, Vorarlberg) the voting age stayed at 18 years in general.



### **Arguments for the lowering of the electoral age (PROs):**

- + Young people are able to act responsibly and to reflect their own behaviour.
- + Young people make knowledge-based decisions.
- + Young people are interested in politics and want to get reliable information.
- + Young people should have rights that fit their duties.

### **Campaigns**

In the last years the Austrian NYC organised several campaigns in order to lobby for the lowering of the electoral age. Besides the campaigns the close contact to politicians and decision makers was crucial for the success of the lobbying activities.

**16+**

### **Wal (16) – Geht zu den Wahlen/Go to the elections! (2005)**

2005 the NYC published a booklet with the following content:

- situation in the Federal States
- positions of the political parties regarding the lowering of the electoral age
- PROs and CONs

The slogan of the campaign is based on a wordplay in German: “Wal“ (meaning whale) and „Wahl“ (meaning election). Posters and stickers visualised the slogan of the campaign.

### **vote4future**

The aim of the campaign (2002-2006) was to motivate young people to vote and to spread information about the voting rights in Austria. The campaign was also used to lobby for the lowering of the voting age. A central tool of the campaign was the website [www.vote4future.at](http://www.vote4future.at). vote4future was organised six times (first round: 2002, last round: 2006); the biggest project was a bus tour through Austria (Tour d’Autriche, elections of the European Parliament 2004).

### **JUGENDAGENDA06**

A catalogue of demands for the future youth minister respectively government was presented and discussed in public talks with the top candidates of the parties running for parliament. Lowering the electoral age and improving the possibilities of political participation for young people was a high-priority-demand.

### **EU-Stars ’09 – get the vote!**

In May 2009, Austria was the first country where young people from the age of 16 to 18 years were allowed to vote for the European Parliament. Therefore the Austrian NYC started the information and motivation campaign „EU-Stars ’09 – get the vote!“.



The website [www.eustars.at](http://www.eustars.at) provided adequate information for young voters and tackled issues that are relevant for young people. It aimed at motivating young voters to take part in the elections. The possibility to send questions to the top candidates was one of the interactive elements of the campaign website. Another one was an online game combined with a quiz that provided a quite entertaining approach to EU politics.

### **Lowering the voting age in 2007**

The lowering of the electoral age was mentioned in two chapters of the government policy statement which was signed in January 2007. For its implementation a number of laws had to be changed to include all areas of participation through voting: e.g. elections of members of national and European Parliament, presidential elections, petitions for referendum.

The Council of Ministers adopted the lowering of the electoral age in March 2007, the Parliament in June 2007. According to the Austrian Constitution all Federal States had to adopt their laws and to lower the voting age to 16.

### **Consequences and side effects**

- Young people became a target group for political parties and politicians
- Lowering the voting age was used as an argument to demand more support for youth work and youth NGOs.
- Concrete measures in the field of „political education“ (= civic education/education for democratic citizenship) were implemented.

### **Measures**

- Reformation of the laws regarding the school organisation: implementation of the school subject „Political Education“ (in combination with „History“)
- Creation of a professorship for didactics of political education at the University of Vienna
- Demokratie-Werkstatt (= Democracy-Workshops): The Austrian Parliament provides workshops for school students including on-site-visits. Every workshop is documented on the interactive website [www.demokratiewerkstatt.at](http://www.demokratiewerkstatt.at).

### **Results of the studies – VOTING BEHAVIOUR OF YOUNG VOTERS**

- Young voters participate in elections nearly as often as the average.
- Big differences in voting behaviour are related to the socio-economic and the educational background.
- Young voters are motivated to vote by the opportunity to participate as well of the fact that they have the right to vote and the see voting as a “democratic obligation“.
- Young voters have doubts regarding the political parties and their programmes (not in elections themselves) which lead to distance from the political institutions and parties.



- Young voters make their decision based on information; they criticise the lack of information and are annoyed by airy slogans.
- Young voters are interested in the following issues: education and training, youth unemployment, equal rights and poverty.

### Studies on the topic (in English)

Institute SORA: <http://www.sora.at/en/topics/electoral-behavior/voting-with-16.html>

Austrian National Election Study: <http://autnes.at/?q=node/57>

### Conclusions

#### → Votes@16 – what for?

Obviously to put young people in the focus: Young voters become a topic of public interest via media and politicians and parties need to address them and pick up issues that are relevant for them.

#### Measures in the field of civic education

The lowering of the voting age needs additional guiding measures in the field of civic education. Besides school the non-formal sector of education, namely youth organisations, plays an important role in providing civic education. Therefore adequate (financial) support for youth work is needed more than ever and should also be seen as an additional investment in democratic participation of young people.

#### Do young people vote more radical?

It is shown that the voting decision of young voters is based on information. Young people want to have more information and politicians and parties that pick up the issues that are relevant for them.

If there is a problem with radical parties this shouldn't be an obstacle for the lowering of the voting age because it won't influence the situation neither in a positive nor in a negative way. Like for "older" people, the voting behaviour of young people depends upon the messages of the political parties. If parties do not adopt their messages to their potential voters (i.e. also young people), it seems logical that young people will cast their vote in a different direction. Thus, lowering the voting age will bring more focus on issues that are relevant for young people.

#### All in all: Are young people interested in politics?

Young people are definitely interested in politics and say that the lowering of the voting age raises their interest in politics. Studies show that young voters are really aware of whether politicians tackle their concerns and needs or not.