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## Around the World: Children's Suffrage: Giving 16 Year Olds the Right to Vote

Carrie Seleman

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*Around the World:*  
**Children's Suffrage: Giving 16 Year Olds the Right to Vote**  
*By: Carrie Seleman*

**I. INTRODUCTION**

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by *universal and equal suffrage*” (emphasis added). But what constitutes equal suffrage? Although the majority of the international community restricts this equality requirement to adults, countries across the globe are slowly beginning to extend the right of suffrage to their younger citizenry.

The first recorded proposition in favor of youth suffrage was made by Nelson Mandela in 1994, who recommended lowering the voting age to 14 in recognition of youth who fought against Apartheid. Since then, 26 countries have decided to allow 16-year-olds, 17-year-olds, or both to vote in some capacity, many with conditions attached, such as being employed, being married, or limiting the right to local elections only. Additionally, since the turn of the century, there have been at least 33 movements and proposals across 17 countries to lower the voting age.

Malta, for one, just joined the ranks of nine other countries across the world that allow 16-year-olds to vote in national elections, no strings attached (a few countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Slovenia – only allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote if they are employed). The sentiment that these teenagers can contribute to the Maltese political agenda is one held across party lines. The first official recommendation to lower the voting age in Malta to 16 came from the Ministry for Family and Social Solidarity in September 2016, contained within a draft National Children's Policy document. One and a half years later, on March 5, 2018, the Maltese Parliament made suffrage a reality for 16- and 17-year-olds. The Parliament surpassed the two-thirds majority vote needed to pass the Constitutional amendment, voting unanimously in favor of lowering the age for citizens to participate at the polls. As a result, an additional 8,500 Maltese citizens will have their first opportunity to vote during the 2019 European Parliament elections.

Only one other European country, Austria, currently allows this younger age group to vote in national elections, although it is part of a small global group consisting of Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Guernsey, Isle of Man, Jersey, and Nicaragua. Proponents of lowering the voting age to 16 argue that it would have a positive impact on electoral participation, saying that voters under the age of 18 are likely to be in school and live with their families, two factors shown to encourage turnout through socialization mechanisms. Proponents also argue that lowering the voting age may facilitate early development of a habit of voting and see children's suffrage as a way to ensure that interests of young citizens are represented in the political system. Opponents of allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote claim that people under the age of 18 lack the ability and motivation to participate effectively in the electoral process, which would lower turnout rates. Opponents also believe that citizens under the age of 18 would not make use of their vote as effectively as older voters and would not challenge the government to respond to their interests.

Existing literature on the issue of children's suffrage shows that no neurological evidence has been offered to prove that the teenage brain is not ready to vote at age 16. Academics have further shown that teenage citizens possess the same cognitive sophistication as that of young adults. Although it is too soon to know how Malta's constitutional amendment will affect the country's political atmosphere, this article will look at how 16- and 17-year-olds have affected elections in Austria, the more comparable of countries that have lowered the national voting age.

## II. THE CASE OF AUSTRIA

In 2007, Austria lowered the voting age for national elections to 16 and followed this legislative change with measures such as awareness-raising campaigns and enhanced status of civic and citizenship education in schools in order to encourage participation in elections. The change sought to counterbalance the increasing percentage of voters 65 years and older, and to ensure that the government would not become less responsive to the interests of the nation's younger population. Since then, studies have been conducted assessing the effects of the lowered voting age in the country. Two studies in particular answer key questions in the debate about children's suffrage.

### *A. Willingness and ability to participate, and quality of vote choice*

In 2012, a study was published to analyze the effect of lowering the Austrian voting age on voter turnout. The study was conducted using information from the national parliament election in 2008, the European Parliament election in 2009, and the presidential elections in 2010. After dividing young voters into four age groups – 16- and 17-year-olds; 18 to 21-year-olds; 22 to 25-year-olds; and 26 to 30-year-olds – the study was broken down to address two critical concerns of opponents of children's suffrage: (1) the willingness or ability to participate in politics, and (2) the ability to make a quality choice of vote.

The study found that 16- and 17-year-olds have the second highest average interest in politics of the four age groups under 30 years of age. Regarding political knowledge, 16- and 17-year-olds ranked somewhat lower compared to the other three groups of young voters, although that difference was statistically insignificant when compared with all groups except the 22- to 25-year-olds. Additionally, although voting is the primary concern, the study had a clear finding that the youngest citizens' willingness to participate in non-electoral politics, such as volunteering on campaigns and participating in marches and rallies, is relatively high and no different from the overall mean of young voters.

Trust in governmental institutions plays a large role in voters' motivation to participate in elections. The study found that this trust is significantly higher among citizens under the age of 18 than the overall mean among all citizens, indicating no disaffection of 16- and 17-year-olds toward politics and elections. Additionally, these younger citizens have a significantly higher satisfaction with national and European democracy than citizens above the age of 18, although they do not differ from older citizens in saying that either the national parliament or the European Parliament has a strong impact on them personally. Overall, the study found strong evidence that these younger citizens of Austria are not particularly uninterested in electoral politics, democracy and

political institutions, as opponents have argued, and therefore there is little indication that citizens under 18 are less motivated to participate effectively in politics.

Quality of vote choice was measured by comparing citizens' own political opinions with the agendas of the candidates that they cast their votes for. While the study did find that the mean distance in quality of vote among the younger voters is slightly higher than that of the older voters, the difference is minimal. The study found no convincing evidence that the voting decisions of voters under the age of 18 are in any way of lesser quality or less congruent than that of older groups of voters.

### ***B. First-time voter boost and turnout rate***

A second study of Austrian voting, published in 2014, utilized official data to address two key questions. These questions surrounded the theory of the first-time voter boost, the idea that first-time voters, usually 18- to 19-year-olds, vote more often than their slightly older counterparts, 20- to 21-year-olds, a group that exhibits a markedly low turnout rate. The two questions addressed in the study were: (1) whether the first-time voter boost can be observed for 16- and 17-year-olds, and (2) how the turnout rate of 16- and 17-year-olds compares to that of other first-time voters.

The study found that the turnout rate of 16- and 17-year-olds was not significantly lower than the overall turnout rate of voters up to 25 years of age. Rather, the study observed that, as age increases from 16 to 20, voter turnout decreases at a nearly linear proportion. Therefore, the first-time voting boost was found to be progressively less for older first-time voters than for 16- and 17-year-olds.

Looking at the overall turnout rate of 16- and 17-year-olds as compared to that of first-time 18 to 20-year-olds, the younger voters turned out at significantly and substantially higher rates – almost ten percent. Sixteen- and 17-year-old Austrian voters are an exception to the general trend that turnout of young voters is far lower than in the overall electorate.

## **III. CONCLUSION**

There seems to be little support for arguments in opposition to children's suffrage. Based on the Austrian studies assessed above, 16-year-olds are just as interested and motivated to participate in politics as their slightly older counterparts. The results of the studies discussed above contradict predictions that assume low electoral participation of 16- and 17-year-olds. Although too soon to tell, in the coming years, academics will be able to answer yet another question about Austria's young voters: whether starting to vote at age 16 facilitates a long-term voting habit. In the meantime, Malta is helping to pave the way for expanded children's rights, specifically, a right that is coming to light as being worthy and deserved.

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