

A major focus of the work of AUTNES has been on turnout among voters under 18. Austria is unique among advanced industrialized countries in giving citizens the right to vote at the age of 16 at national elections. Our research has shown that the consequences of lowering the voting age are largely positive.

Turnout among this age group is high. For example, in the 2010 Vienna regional elections, 16- and 17-year-old first time voters had significantly higher turnout rates than older first time voters (Figure 1). As the voting age was already lowered to 16 for the 2005 Vienna regional elections, in 2010 we could analyze the turnout of 2005's first

time voters. We found indications that among the higher level of turnout among the youngest voters persisted in their second election, so there is more than just a first-time voter boost. So, there is some early evidence in favor of the possibility that those who vote for the first time when they are younger than 18 are more likely to develop a habit of voting than those who are 18 and older (Zeglovits 2011).

Beyond the question of the *level* of turnout among voters under 18, we have shown that the **political interest** of citizens younger than 18 increased after the voting age was lowered. In addition, the impact of schools on political interest was stronger than before the electoral reform (Zeglovits &

Zandonella 2011). For the youngest voters, the main sources of information on the election were schools and parents (Schwarzer and Zeglovits, forthcoming). A large proportion of newly enfranchised voters under 18 reported activities in schools related to the elections. Moreover, schools not only provided information but also opportunities to discuss and reflect on political views.

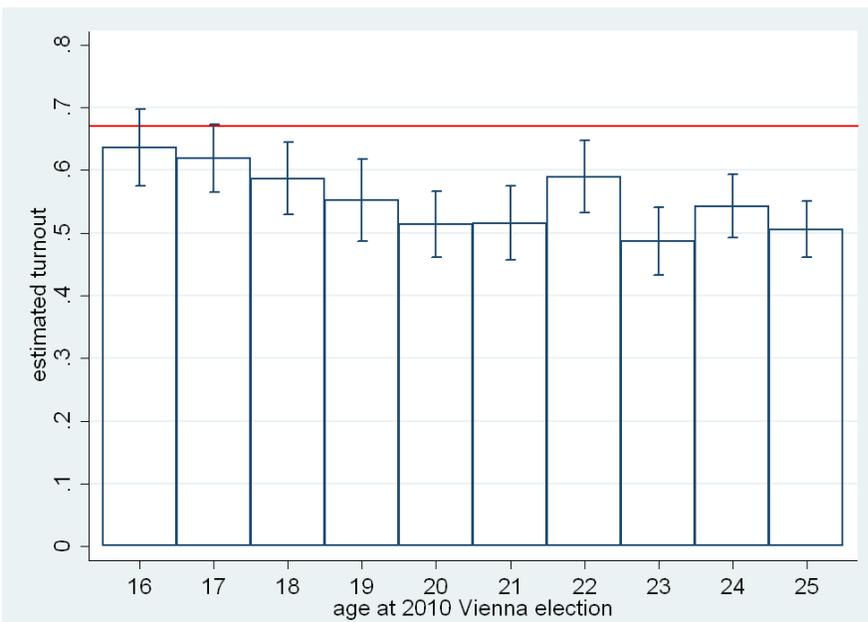


Figure 1: Turnout in Vienna 2010 regional elections (low rated estimation), by age compared to overall turnout of 67.6% (Zeglovits 2011).

We also found that it is not the case that young voters' decision to abstain is driven by a lack of interest in or engagement with politics (Wagner et al. 2012). As Figure 2 illustrates, 16- and 17-year olds are comparable to older citizens in terms of

their interest and knowledge. Their trust and satisfaction with democracy is even higher.

Finally, there is no evidence that the **quality of vote choice** among voters under 18 is any lower

than that of older age groups (Wagner et al. 2012). The vote choices of the youngest voters reflect their preferences as well as those of older voters do. Specifically, the ideological distances between young voters and the parties they choose are not higher than in older age groups.

These cumulative findings indicate that the consequences of lowering the voting age in Austria have been largely positive in all examined aspects.

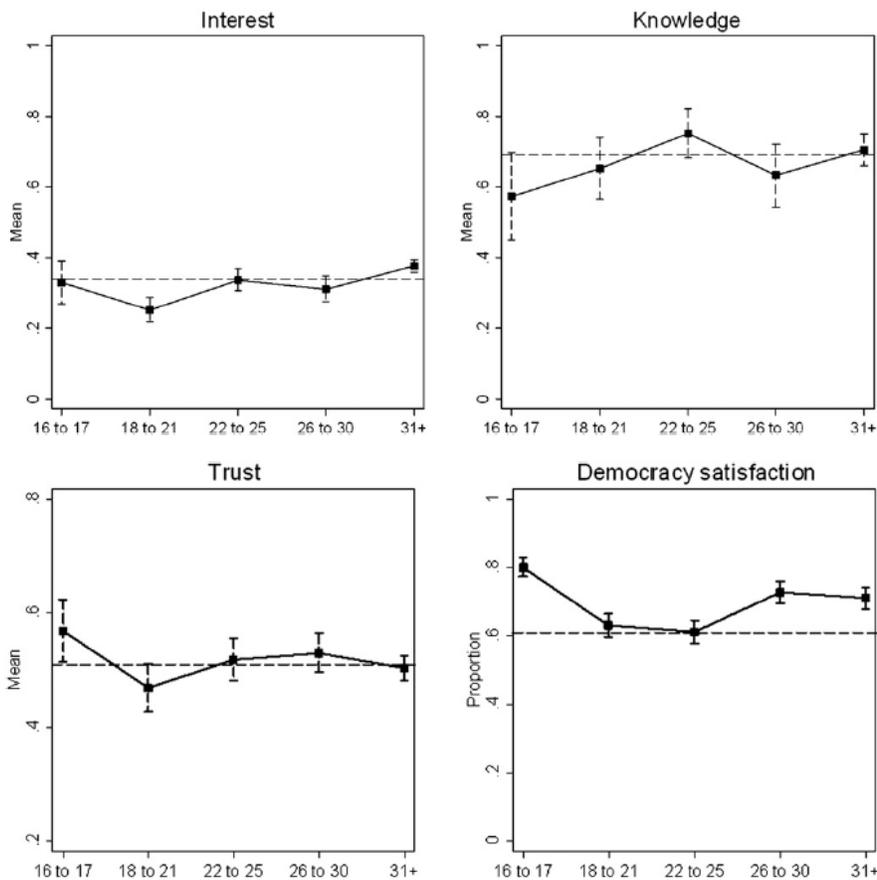


Figure 2: Interest, knowledge, trust and satisfaction with democracy (from Wagner et al. 2012). Mean values by age group shown; bars indicate 95% confidence intervals; dashed line indicates overall mean.

Schwarzer, Steve, and Zeglovits, Eva (forthcoming). ‘“If you don’t come across it in your family or in school, where else?” – How 16- and 17-year old Austrian first time voters perceive the role of schools in preparing them for the election’, in Abendschoen, Simone (ed.), *Old and New Challenges of Political Socialization Research*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

Wagner, Markus, Johann, David, and Kritzing, Sylvia (2012). ‘Voting at 16: Turnout and the quality of vote choice.’ *Electoral Studies*, 31(2): 372–383.

Zeglovits, Eva (2011). ‘Votes at 16: Turnout of the youngest voters’. Paper presented at the ÖGPW Conference ‘Tag der Politikwissenschaft’, Salzburg, Dec 2.

Zeglovits, Eva, and Zandonella, Martina (2011). ‘Political interest of adolescents before and after lowering the voting age: the case of Austria.’ Paper presented at the 6th ECPR General Conference, Reykjavik, Aug 25-27.