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Political interest of adolescents before and after lowering the voting age: the case of Austria

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Young people are said to be uninterested in politics. This lack of political interest among adolescents has been used as an argument against lowering the voting age. But why should someone be interested in politics if he or she is not eligible to vote? In this paper, we examine the differences in political interest of 16- and 17-year-old Austrians before and after lowering the voting age to 16, using cross-sectional survey data. Doing so, we capture a broad concept of political interest, including situational and individual interest. We observe that political interest of 16- and 17-year-olds was higher after lowering the voting age. In addition, the patterns concerning the determinants of political interest changed as well: study findings indicate that parents were of utmost importance in influencing political interest of young people who were not yet enfranchised. The impact of schools on political interest among young people emerged after the voting age had been lowered. In the specific societal and situational context of Austria, the development of political interest among young people seems to be associated with the 'life event' of enfranchisement.

Keywords: voting age; political interest; political socialization; youth suffrage

1. Introduction

A lowering of the voting age has not only been debated among policy-makers and interest groups recently but has also been discussed in scientific research (Franklin 2004; Chan and Clayton 2006; Wattenberg 2008; Hart and Atkins 2011; Bergh 2013). In this context, political interest of young people, or more precisely the lack of it, is used as an argument against lowering the voting age (Electoral Commission 2004; Chan and Clayton 2006).

In the debate over lowering the voting age, political interest is in fact a crucial point, as it is an important explanatory variable for political behavior in electoral research (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1960; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Blais 2000). The lack of political interest has been described as one important cause for low participation rates, especially among young voters (Strate et al. 1989; Electoral Commission 2002; Fieldhouse, Tranmer, and Russel 2007). Blais, Gidengil, and Nevitte (2004) were able to show that attention to politics – including interest in politics – is a powerful predictor of electoral participation. Moreover they demonstrated that the generational gap in turnout

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can be explained by lower levels of civic duty and political interest of the younger cohorts. Recently, in their discussion concerning the rational choice approach, Blais and Labbè St-Vincent (2011) named political interest as 'the best individual-level predictor of perceiving high benefits and low cost in voting, as well as having an opinion about which is the best candidate or party in an election' (395). If political interest is not evenly distributed among the electorate, normative questions e.g. about unequal participation arise (van Deth 1989).

When it comes to lowering the voting age, the dilemma concerning political interest is quite simple: On the one hand, the gap between the generations might be increased as political interest among adolescents who have not yet reached voting age has been shown to be particularly low in different regions, including the USA and several European countries (e.g. Park 2004; Wattenberg 2008; Lauglo 2011). Following this approach, lowering the voting age might, therefore, integrate even more apathetic and uninformed young voters into the electorate (Bergh 2013). On the other hand, one might ask, What comes first, rights or responsibilities? As citizenship is considered to be linked to responsibility, young people who are not necessarily regarded as being mature or responsible are denied the right to vote (e.g. Such and Walker 2005; Lister 2008). However, the question arises why someone should be interested in politics if he or she is not allowed to participate in elections (Park 2004; Chan and Clayton 2006).

In this paper, we take a closer look at the levels and patterns of political interest among 16- and 17-year-olds to improve our knowledge as to when and how political interest is developed and fostered. We start with a brief reflection on the concept of political interest and derive our hypotheses following a discussion of the literature on the development of political interest. In the empirical part of this paper, we test the hypotheses for the case of Austria, where the voting age was lowered to 16 in 2007. We examine the levels of political interest before and after lowering the voting age, using survey data from two cross-sectional surveys, analyze individual-level key factors that support or hinder the development of political interest among adolescents and evaluate if these factors are similar or different for adolescents, depending on whether they are enfranchised or not in the specific societal context of Austria. Thus, we apply a micro-level perspective[1] for framing the process of developing political interest and compare two points of time that exemplify two different political contexts due to a macro-level change.

2. Background: what is political interest?

In electoral research, political interest is a commonly used variable to explain political behavior. Despite its popularity, little attention has been paid to the concept itself (van Deth 1989; Prior 2010). This section briefly discusses the different perceptions of political interest and provides a broad conceptualization to work with in this paper.

Political interest often works as a link between social and psychological drivers of political attitudes or behaviors. It has been considered to be a starting point of an activation process (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1960). Others used political interest as one indicator for broader concepts, like political involvement (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960; Sigel and Hoskin 1981), political motivation (e.g. Klingemann

1979) or political engagement (e.g. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Park 2004). While the terms involvement and engagement suggest that political interest is hard to separate from political behavior (van Deth 1989), Klingemann (1979) acknowledges the possibility that political interest might *not* imply political motivation, and that levels of political interest might be unstable and dependent on the situation. Only occasionally authors provide a definition what they mean when using the term political interest, one of them is van Deth, who explicitly defines interest as 'the degree to which politics arouse a citizen's curiosity' (1989, 278).

For a better understanding of political interest and its possible relations to political behavior, it seems suitable to include ideas of psychological interest research. Most importantly, there are qualitatively different kinds of interest: individual and situational interest (e.g. Hidi, Renninger, and Krapp 1992; Tobias 1994). Situational interest refers to the focused attention and affective reaction that is triggered momentarily by environmental stimuli and it may or may not last over time (Hidi 1990; Krapp 2002; Hidi and Renninger 2006). Situational interest, therefore, fits Klingemann's (1979) observation that political interest can be 'elastic and situation-bound' (264). Individual interest, on the other hand, captures a person's relatively enduring predisposition to re-engage with particular content over time as well as to the immediate psychological state when this predisposition was activated (Renninger, Ewen, and Lasher 2002; Hidi and Renninger 2006). Additionally, individual interest requires substantial knowledge of a topic and valuing that knowledge (Renninger 2000). Only individual interest can be validly linked to behavior (Hidi and Renninger 2006). Applied to political interest, some people, therefore, might have situational interest, maybe triggered by a campaign, a discussion among friends or a certain issue at the agenda, which might not be lasting. Others in contrast might have individual interest including consistent re-engagement with the topic.

Usually, political interest is measured with a single indicator – 'How interested would you say you are in politics?', typically to be answered on a four- or five-point scale. Quite obviously, this well-known indicator cannot capture the above-mentioned different types of interest properly. We, therefore, try to cover a broader concept of political interest than political science usually does, and explicitly include both situational and individual interest. First of all, we rely on the above-mentioned definition from van Deth (1989), which refers to political interest as the degree of curiosity evoked by politics and which seems to be able to capture both situational and individual interest. Second, we reconsider the measurement of political interest via including an indicator of re-engagement with the topic of politics. Following van Deth (1989), including behavioral items into a political interest scale reduces the analytical power of the scale but clarifies the conceptual meaning. Applied to the distinction of individual and situational interest, this approach explicitly includes individual interest.

Discussing political interest of young people, one has to add that there is evidence that young people might have a different understanding of politics. They understand 'politics' in a narrower sense than older people. Differences between older and younger people might be due to the biases induced by a researcher's top-down approach (e.g. Henn, Weinstein, and Wring 2002; Henn, Weinstein, and Forrest 2005; O'Toole et al. 2003; Rheingans and Hollands 2012). As we do not compare age groups in this article, these important findings will not bias our results.

3. Study hypotheses: political interest and its development

Considering the high importance of political interest for explaining political behavior, the question arises, when and under what circumstances political interest starts to develop. Most findings presented in the consecutive section touch at least some aspect of our understanding of political interest.

Early research identified the starting point of political interest in early adulthood and reported an increase into old age (Glenn and Grimes 1968). Jennings and Niemi (1974) found that political interest rises among young adults during their attendance of high school. After that period of life, political interest was reported to fluctuate to some extent. In a review of findings on the antecedents of adult political behavior, Niemi and Hepburn (1995) conclude that the period of greatest importance for the development of political interest lies between 14 and the mid-20s. In Germany, more recent work (Neundorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete 2013) shows that political interest increases up to the age of 25 and remains stable afterward. Other studies define an even shorter period of time: Chan and Clayton (2006) compared British panel data from 1991 to 2001 and found an increase in political interest within this time span only among those respondents who were 16–19 in 1991. More recently, Prior (2010) raised the question of the stability of political interest and showed that political interest is quite stable during lifetime and that the formation of political interest must occur during adolescence. He furthermore stresses the importance of understanding, how political interest is formed among young adults. To sum up these results, political interest starts to arise during adolescence and emerging adulthood, and its development seems to be more or less completed by one's mid-20s.

Considering that the young people who participated in these studies were enfranchised to vote at the age of 18 or later, the starting point for the development of political interest can be located shortly before being enfranchised. Yet, based on the given results, we are not able to distinguish whether political interest arises because of some maturation or life cycle effect as, for example, cognitive maturation that allows abstract thinking and reasoning (Oerter and Montada 2002), or if it arises because young people and their social environment (as parents or teachers) anticipate a 'life event' in becoming an enfranchised voter.

The literature on changes in political interest and behaviors after the suffrage of a so far not enfranchised group is limited (e.g. Bergh 2013), although there is literature on the turnout of the newly enfranchised group (e.g. Franklin 2004). Interestingly, the debate about female suffrage in the 1920s shows some similarities with the debate over youth suffrage, especially when it comes to the concerns expressed at that time about lack of interest and knowledge as well as possible low turnout rates (e.g. Corder and Wolbrecht 2006). Again, these studies do not discuss women's political interest but focus on turnout (e.g. Christy 1987). A study by Niemi, Stanley, and Evans (1984) analyses turnout among newly enfranchised voters (including females in Germany and Sweden after the First World War, southern blacks in the USA after the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Spanish after Franco's regime), confronting a 'life cycle hypothesis' with an 'experience hypothesis'. While their life cycle hypotheses explains certain developments as a result of aging and maturing, their experience hypotheses explains developments in terms of experiences independent of age, such as the experience of having been disenfranchised for a long time. We adopt this approach of two confronting hypothesis for our study on political interest among

adolescents: Our life cycle hypotheses follows the studies on adolescents conducted so far and assumes that the development of political interest is explained by age-dependent maturation, keeping all other factors equal:

> Hypothesis 1 – 'life cycle hypothesis': Political interest is a matter of age. Political interest among 16- and 17-year-olds therefore is the same for enfranchised and for non-enfranchised adolescents.

On the other hand, we take up the recent findings on reciprocal relationships of political attitudes and behaviors. Quintelier and Hooghe (2012) show in a cross-lagged effects model for adolescents in Belgium that the effect from political participation on political interest is larger than from political interest to political participation. This suggests that participation triggers interest more than vice versa. For Austria, qualitative findings showed that newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-old voters felt the need to get informed once the voting age was lowered (Schwarzer and Zeglovits, forthcoming). Thus, we assume – and this goes beyond most of the studies conducted so far – what we call a 'life event effect', meaning that the development of political interest is connected to being enfranchised. For the specific situation of lowering voting age, enfranchisement itself would constitute an event because of the public discussion and attention accompanying it.

> Hypothesis 2 – 'life event hypothesis': Youth suffrage comes with an increase in political interest of the newly enfranchised: The political interest of 16- and 17-year-old newly enfranchised voters is higher than that of 16- and 17-year-old non-enfranchised voters.

We are aware that our life event hypothesis is limited to describing a change in the level of interest without distinguishing possible reasons for it. In addition to the idea that becoming an enfranchised voter per se increases political interest of young people, one could also assume a 'Hawthorne-effect[2]' for 16- and 17-year-olds who start getting interested in politics because they realize public observation. The first election after the lowering of the voting age might have come with a novelty effect, and we cannot be sure if a possible change in political interest will be maintained, once voting at 16 becomes established.

After discussing the crucial time period concerning the initial formation of political interest among adolescents, the next step is to identify factors which encourage or hinder this formation. Most studies of political socialization research agree that parents and schools are the most important agents of political socialization (Butler and Stokes 1974; Jennings and Niemi 1974; Niemi and Sobieszek 1977; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Andolina et al. 2003).

The family is of high importance for value formation because it is the initial social surrounding for a child growing up and its first important reference group (Oerter and Montada 2002). Concerning the field of politics, studies have shown that parents' and children's partisanships are very much alike (Butler and Stokes 1974; Niemi and Sobieszek 1977). More recently, it was demonstrated that these transmission processes between parents and offspring still work (Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009), and that they are not limited to partisanship but can also be applied to political participation (Torney-Purta, Barber, and Richardson 2004). We will thus apply these findings to political interest.

School is young peoples' most important non-private environment. It has several functions: Above all, school is a place where young people are supposed to get information, to gather knowledge, and to accumulate resources. But school is also a place where they are confronted with the norms and values of the society they live in (Henkenborg 2005). Flanagan et al. (1998) describe the function of schools as providing a place where one can learn dealing with a community: 'Schools are like mini polities where children can explore what it means to be a member of a community beyond their families' (462). School democracy has the potential to be a field of practice for young people because there they can have their first experiences with collective decision-making processes or even elections. This again is associated with a deeper understanding of political processes, or higher levels of political efficacy (Torney-Purta 2002).

Research findings concerning the role of teachers within schools are, however, puzzling. Following Torney-Purta (2002), teachers have important roles as they are in the position to influence knowledge, attitudes and behavior. On the other hand, Dostie-Goulet (2009) showed that, for Canadian high school students, teachers' influence on the development of political interest is not significant. In her study, parents had the most important influence on the development of political interest among high school students. The influence of peers is usually also seen within the context of schools (Campbell 1980; Yates and Youniss 1998), as classmates are most likely to form crucial parts of the peer group. This is why we will not discuss peers separately.

Debating on lowering the voting age, Franklin (2004) highlights the importance of schools. Taking up Plutzer's (2002) developmental theory of turnout, he emphasizes the point that the first election is crucial, as people tend to get set in their ways. Turnout in the first election, he argues, is particularly important, as it leaves a 'footprint' on one's voting career. Therefore, he favors a voting age where people are well embedded in their initial social environment:

> The most promising reform that might restore higher turnout would be to lower the voting age still further, perhaps to fifteen. (...) They could then learn to vote in the context of a civic class project where they were graded on their ability to discover relevant information (...). (Franklin 2004, 213)

Franklin's assumption was supported by qualitative results from Austria: 16- and 17-year-old enfranchised voters assigned an important role to schools in preparing them for the elections, including triggering interest and encouraging information behavior (Schwarzer and Zeglovits, forthcoming).

We thus assume that the importance of school for the development of political interest increases when adolescents are enfranchised. This results in a third hypothesis.

> Hypothesis 3: School has a higher effect on political interest among enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds compared to non-enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds.

Beyond parents and school, every adolescent is embedded in a broader societal and historical context. Political socialization as a process of social learning cannot be examined only from the individuals' perspective but needs to be reflected within the social environment and societal demands (Sigel 1989). In this context, social class is

known as a key explanatory variable for political behavior (e.g. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1960; Lipset 1983); gender, race, ethnicity, and social class were identified as 'initial characteristics' that resemble the roots of participatory factors (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). More recent studies also emphasized the importance of class divides when observing political participation of young adults, identifying college attendance as crucial in the US context (Flanagan 2009; Finlay, Flanagan and Wray-Lake 2011).

Applied to the study of political interest, the most important socioeconomic factors for the level and persistence of political interest were found to be age, birth cohort, gender and education (e.g. Glenn and Grimes 1968; van Deth 1989) with lower levels of interest for the younger, the less educated and women. These gender differences in political interest were demonstrated for adults (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997) and for adolescents (Westle 2006). Given the importance of social class and gender, we will have to control for these characteristics, when we test our hypotheses.

4. Methodological approach

4.1. The case of Austria

We test our three hypotheses, the life cycle hypothesis (1), the contrasting life event hypothesis (2), as well as the hypothesis on the importance of school (3) for a country with a general voting age of 16, Austria. In 2007, the Austrian parliament resolved upon a reform of electoral law, including the lowering of the voting age to 16 years for federal elections (*Nationalratswahlen*) as well as presidential elections and elections for the European Parliament (Hofer, Ladner, and Reichmann 2008). This makes Austria one of the very few countries with a general voting age of 16.

The electoral law reform was accompanied by a bundle of measures, including an awareness raising campaign and some changes in the embedding of civic and citizenship education in school curricula in the eighth grade[3] (BMUKK 2011). In so doing, schools in particular were mandated to address the issue of politics. In addition, speculations of turnout and electoral choice of newly enfranchised voters were discussed intensely in the weeks preceding the election in 2008 (Lengauer and Vorhofer 2010). This is why we consider the lowering of the voting age as an 'event' which consists of the electoral reform, its accompanying measures, and its public debate.

Of course, a single case study has its limitations, as cultures may differ in their mechanisms of political socialization (Sapiro 2004). However, before lowering the voting age to 16, Austria was not an unusual country when it comes to youth voter turnout in Europe (Fieldhouse, Tranmer, and Russel 2007; Milner 2009). Compared to Norway, where 16- and 17-year-old enfranchised voters were found to be less mature than older first-time voters (Bergh 2013), the main difference might be that Norway lowered the voting age for municipal elections, whereas in Austria, a general voting age of 16 was employed.

4.2. Data

We are interested in the level of political interest and the strength of effects on political interest, this is why we take a quantitative approach. As there is no panel

data available for analyzing our hypotheses, we have to use cross-sectional survey data, where one survey was conducted before and one was conducted after the voting age was lowered. Using the best data available, our results will, nevertheless, be limited. There is no way of proving a causal relationship between lowering the voting age and changes in political interest. We can only compare two points of time and observe changes in levels and patterns of political interest before and after lowering voting age.

For the time before the lowering of the voting age, we use the EUYOUPART survey conducted in 2004 (Ogris et al. 2008). The face-to-face survey ($n = 1000$) is representative[4] of people aged 15–25, living in Austria.

The second survey ('Votes at 16') was conducted after the Austrian federal election in October 2008, which were the first elections after the voting age was lowered to 16. This research project was organized by private research companies and funded by public sponsors.[5] The project included a representative[6] telephone survey of $n = 1000$ 16- to 18-year-old Austrians (eligible voters) conducted 3–6 weeks after the federal election.

The population of interest for this study are Austrian citizens aged 16–17. Sample sizes of the population of interest are $n = 209$, in the EUYOUPART data, and $n = 719$, in the 'Votes at 16' data.

4.3. Methods

In order to test the hypotheses 1 and 2 against each other, we will compare the levels of political interest at two points of time: 2004 for non-enfranchised and 2008 for enfranchised 16- and 17-year-old Austrians.

In order to test hypothesis 3, we will compare the two structural equation models (for 2004 and 2008) explaining political interest. We will use a structural equation model as some of the concepts used are not manifest concepts measured by a single indicator but latent concepts measured by two or more indicators. As we want to cover a broader concept of political interest, including situational as well as individual interest, we will use subjective political interest and the frequency of following political news as indicators. For measuring parental environment, we use three indicators: talking about politics to one's father, talking about politics to one's mother, and parents' educational background. School environment[7] is measured by talking about politics with teachers and the number of political activities at school (activities of internal school democracy as students' assemblies or activities that deal with democracy in general, as having a discussion with a politician in school) and the distinction between students and young people in vocational training[8] (school type), to account for the gap between vocational schools and high schools in preparing young people for their first election (Schwarzer and Zeglovits, forthcoming).

As our population covers adolescents aged 16 and 17, the indicators for social class have to be considered carefully. Most adolescents in this age group are still enrolled in school or some sort of training, thus, the usually used indicator for social class (college education) is not applicable in our case. For Austria, studies show a low permeability between social classes, most visibly in the degree of formal education, which is passed over from parents to children in an exceptionally high amount (e.g. OECD 2011). Therefore, we use parents' education 'as a useful proxy for parental

social class' (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 421) in our empirical work. Thus, social class is an important part of the parental environment.

Our basic model is based upon the findings reviewed in the section above. The level of political interest is supposed to be directly affected by parents and school environment (Jennings and Niemi 1974; Niemi and Hepburn 1995; Flanagan et al. 1998; Torney-Purta 2002; Henkenborg 2005; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009). Indirect effects are also modeled via political knowledge, whereas knowledge can be seen as a resource necessary to develop interest, or engagement as Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) put it. In contrast, other scholars argue that the causal order may be reversed and describe interest as a driver of knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Following our aim to get a deeper insight into the individual interest, we at this point draw upon the findings from developmental psychology, which show that basic knowledge is a prerequisite for individual interest (Renninger 2000).

There is a well-known gender gap in political knowledge for both adults (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997) and adolescents (Wolak and McDevitt 2011). This gender gap can partly be explained by different response styles of men and women in which men's tendency to guess leads to random true answers, whereas women tend to answer 'don't know' which usually translates into a false answer (Mondak and Anderson 2004). Hence, we control for gender effects on knowledge. Following Verba, Burns, and Schlozman (1997) and Westle (2006), we also control for a direct effect of gender on political interest.[9]

Last but not least, parental environment and school environment cannot be assumed independent from each other. Thus, we allow the correlation of error variances between parents' education and school type, and between the latent constructs of parental environment and school environment. Correlated error variances indicate that two variables have some variance in common which is not explained by the model. In our case, we suppose that these common variances reflect social or societal factors that are not otherwise reflected in the data and in the model.

4.4. Measures

Not all indicators were measured identically in the two surveys. To assess the similarity or dissimilarities, we will present measurement models for the latent concepts in the results section. We assess the relevant concepts using the following measures:

Subjective political interest: 'How interested are you in politics?, very much (1), fairly (2), little (3), not interested at all (4)?' (Reversely scaled for analysis, a higher value indicating higher interest.)

Frequency of following the news: 'How often do you follow political news on TV, radio, or the newspaper? (1) daily, (2) several times a week, (3) once or twice a week, (4) less often or (5) never?' (Reversely scaled for analysis, a higher value indicating a higher frequency.)

Knowledge (EUYOUPART): We counted the number of correct answers to eight knowledge questions, each of them a statement, where the respondent had to classify the statement as true or false. The items capture all the three basic categories of political knowledge suggested by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996): facts about the political system (e.g. 'Serbia is a member of the EU'), the political actors (e.g. name

of the prime minister) and the substance of politics ('The FPOE is a leftist party'). The indicator, hence, has a range from 0 to 8, the modus is 3.

Knowledge (Votes at 16): We defined a variable that counts the number of correct placements of four political parties on the left-right scale. We included four parties represented in the Austrian parliament: SPOE, OEVP, FPOE, and Greens. The correct point was taken from the Chapel and Hill Expert Survey 2006 (Hooghe et al. 2010). As the left–right placement is on a 1–5 scale in the data for adolescents, we had to transfer the experts' placement from a 0–10 to a 1–5 scale and applied a tolerance of ± 1 (on the 5-point-scale), then we floored the lower bound and used the next count as upper bound. For example, we transferred the seven for OEVP in the expert survey to a 3.54 on the 5-point-scale, the tolerance of ± 1 leads to an interval of 2.54–4.54. Thus, we count any placement between 2 and 5 as correct. 'don't knows' were interpreted as absence of knowledge and thus counted as wrong.[10] Modus of the indicator is four. This indicator again captures knowledge about the actors and the substance of politics, but knowledge about the system itself is not included.

Talking to father/mother/teacher (EUYOUPART): 'How often do you talk about political topics with the following persons? (a) always, (b) often, (c) sometimes, (d) rarely, (e) never?' (1) father, (2) mother, (5) teacher. (Reversely scaled for analysis, a higher value indicating more talking.)

Talking to father/mother/teacher (Votes at 16): 'Have you talked to the following persons about the elections? yes/no' (1) father, (2) mother, and (4) teacher.

School activities (EUYOUPART): indicates the activities from a range of six that the respondent has taken part in, e.g. ever been a member of the students' council or ever participated in a protest movement in school, modus is 0, median is 1.

School activities (Votes at 16): indicates the activities from a range of eight that the respondent has taken part in, e.g. ever visited the parliament with class or has school ever hosted a discussion with politicians; modus is three.

Parents' education: indicates if at least one of the parents has completed higher secondary education. *School type:* indicates if the respondent attends a school (1) compared to a vocational school (0). *Gender*: indicates men (1) compared to women (0).

5. Results

When contrasting the life cycle hypothesis with the life event hypothesis, we compare the levels of the two chosen indicators of political interest in 2004 and 2008. Table 1 shows, that both indicators of political interest, subjective political interest and frequency of following the news, show significantly higher interest among the enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds in 2008 than among the non-enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds in 2004 (Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test, $p < 0.01$).

In addition, we ran ordered logistic regression models for each of our two indicators of political interest for a data-set that contained the cases from both surveys. We explained subjective political interest and accordingly the frequency of following the news by a variable indicating the year of the survey, controlling for social class indicators (parents' education, gender, and school type).[11] The coefficient of the variable indicating the year was positive and highly significant, meaning that each of the indicators was higher in 2008 compared to 2004, confirming the results in Table 1.[12] Here, it is important to consider that we used two indicators of political

Table 1. Political interest of 16- and 17-year-old Austrians, 2004–2008.

		2004	2008
How interested are you in politics?	Not at all interested (%)	14.0	6.6
	Not very interested (%)	52.2	31.6
	Fairly interested (%)	23.0	39.9
	Very interested (%)	8.1	21.8
	Don't know, answer refused (%)	2.4	0.1
	Total	100.0	100.0
Frequency of following the news	Never (%)	10.1	2.8
	Less often than once a week (%)	27.3	17.3
	Once/twice a week (%)	25.4	26.0
	Several times a week (%)	17.7	30.2
	Every day (%)	19.1	23.8
	Don't know, answer refused (%)	0.5	0
	Total	100.0	100.0
	Sample size (*n*)	209	719

Note: percentages.

interest. Situational interest might be situation-bound. It could be argued that interest was higher because of the recently ongoing campaign. However, as we additionally chose an indicator of individual interest, which is assumed to be stable, our results should be robust. We are aware that different data collection modes (face-to-face opposed to telephone) might lead to different response behaviors, especially with regard to social desirability bias (Tourangeau and Smith 1996). If the measurement of political interest was affected by mode differences, higher levels of interest would have been reported in the face-to-face mode. We, hence, assume that observed differences in political interest between the 2008 telephone and the 2004 face-to-face survey are – if at all – biased in a way that would make it even more difficult to detect differences.

As we compare the two cross-sectional surveys, we cannot be sure about causality, but the data support hypothesis 2 and show that the level of political interest is not (only) a matter of maturity.

The structural equation model is computed in MPlus 6.11, using WLSMV estimators due to the scales of the dependent variables.[13] This measurement model (Table 2) works quite well for 2004 and 2008, especially our indicators capturing political interest proved to be reliable. The observed differences in the coefficients for the variables measuring school support emerge because school activities were altered due to changes in societal context associated with the lowering of the voting age. For instance, the awareness-raising campaign discussed above covered several new activities at school. Hence, our indicator for school activities in 2004 reflects more general political activities, whereas the indicator in 2008 is more closely linked to the elections.

Testing hypothesis 3, we examine how the data of 2004 and 2008 fit to the structural equation model described above.[14] Figures 1 and 2 show that our assumed structure is supported at both points of time and that the fit indices are good for both the models. Because of the higher *n* in 2008, we focus on the goodness of fit indicators that are not sensitive to sample size, root mean square error of

Table 2. Measurement model, standardized coefficients.

	2004	2008
Political interest (latent variable), measured by		
Subjective political interest	0.739	0.699
Frequency of following the news	0.770	0.688
Parental environment (latent variable), measured by		
Talking to father	0.949	0.831
Talking to mother	0.717	0.840
Parents education	0.320	0.280
School environment (latent variable), measured by		
Talking to teachers	0.671	0.837
School activities	0.391	0.303
School type (school, compared to vocational school)	0.610	0.769
Sample size (n)	201	717

approximation (RMSEA) and comparative fit index (CFI): For 2004, the RMSEA (0.037) and CFI (0.986) point to a very good model fit. For 2008, the fit is less good but still within the acceptable range.[15] RMSEA (0.066) and CFI (0.907) indicate an acceptable model fit.

In the model for 2004 (Figure 1 and Table 3), we see a significant and strong direct impact of parents' environment upon political interest. For this group of non-enfranchised 16- and 17-year-old Austrians, school environment and knowledge did not contribute significantly to the explanation of political interest. The results show that the political interest of the non-enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds was a matter of parental environment. The gender effect on political interest indicates that young men were more interested in politics than young women (with all other factors held equal), which replicates earlier results (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997) for adolescents. The strong and significant correlations between parents' and schools' characteristics finally point out that school environment and parents' environment were strongly related.

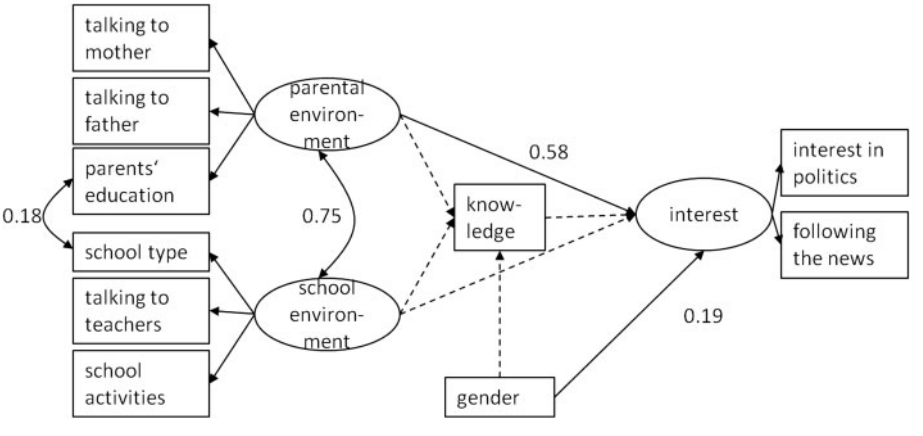

Figure 1. Explaining political interest of 16- and 17-year-olds before lowering voting age 2004 fit indices: $X^2 = 35.81$, df $= 28$, $p = 0.148$, CFI $= 0.986$, RMSEA $= 0.037$, R^2 of interest $= 0.584$, $n = 201$, dashed lines indicate non-significant paths ($p > 0.05$).

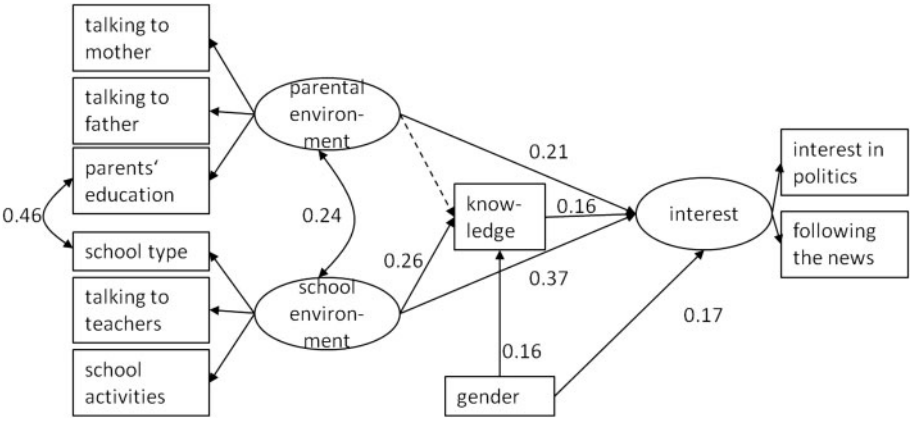

Figure 2. Explaining political interest of 16- and 17-year-olds after lowering voting age 2008 fit indices: $X^2 = 116.32$, df = 28, $p = 0.000$, CFI = 0.907, RMSEA = 0.066, R^2 of interest = 0.308, $n = 717$, dashed lines indicate non-significant paths ($p > 0.05$).

This quite simple model for explaining political interest yields a high explanatory power, the estimated R^2 for the latent variable political interest is 0.584. The rather low levels of political interest of 16- and 17-year-olds in 2004 (Table 1) can be convincingly explained by parents' support plus some gender differences. The total effect of parents' environment was strong and significant, whereas neither direct nor indirect effects of school environment on political interest can be observed in 2004 (Table 4).

The picture was different after the federal elections in 2008 (Figure 2 and Table 3): For newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-old Austrians, the impact of parents on political interest was comparatively less in 2008. Instead, we observe a strong direct and moderate indirect effect (Table 4) of school on political interest. The results support former qualitative findings on how the students perceived the role of schools in preparing them for an election (Schwarzer and Zeglovits, forthcoming) and show

Table 3. Structural model, standardized coefficients.

	2004	2008
Political interest, explained by		
Knowledge	0.114	0.157**
Parental environment	0.579**	0.208**
School environment	0.150	0.364**
Gender	0.193*	0.173**
Knowledge, explained by		
Parental environment	0.162	−0.008
School environment	0.139	0.261**
Gender	0.052	0.155**
Common variances: school and parents		
School environment with parental environment	0.747**	0.237**
School type with parents' education	0.176#	0.460**
Sample size (n)	201	717

Note: $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{\#}p < 0.10$.

Table 4. Direct, indirect, and total effects of school environment and parental environment on political interest of 16- and 17-year-old Austrians 2004 and 2008.

	2004	2008
Effects of school environment on political interest		
Direct	0.150	0.364**
Indirect	0.016	0.041
Total	0.168	0.405**
Effects of parental environment on political interest		
Direct	0.579**	0.208**
Indirect	0.018	−0.001
Total	0.598**	0.206**
Sample size (*n*)	201	717

Note: $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{\#}p < 0.10$.

that school supported political interest directly as well as indirectly via increasing political knowledge which in turn increased political interest.

The 2008 data again showed a gender effect, whereas the direct effect of gender on political interest was quite similar to the one in 2004. In addition, we observe a gender gap in political knowledge which leads to another indirect effect on political interest. The gender gap in knowledge was visible in 2008, but not in 2004. This could be a measurement bias, as the 2008 indicator counts 'don't knows' as false, whereas there are no 'don't know' answers in the 2004 knowledge indicators. The fact that female respondents tend to choose the 'don't know' option more often than male respondents (Mondak and Anderson 2004) can be observed in our data as well. Similar to the 2004 model, we observe strong correlations between parental and school environment.

With an R^2 of 0.308 the explanatory power of the 2008 model is less convincing than that for the 2004 model, as is the model fit. The higher levels of political interest in 2008 (Table 1) can only partly be explained by the two most important agents of political socialization, parents and school. A rather large part of the variance of political interest among the youngest voters remains unexplained for the 2008 data, as political interest was higher in general. The political interest of enfranchised 16-and 17-year-olds, therefore, was not simply a product of political socialization in schools and at home. We can only assume at this point that the proceeding electoral campaign or the media may have significantly affected the development of the political interest of the youth.

Looking at the direct, indirect, and total effects in 2008 compared to 2004 (Table 4), the difference between parents' and schools' impact is obvious: In 2004, the total effect of parental environment was high, whereas the effect of school environment was not significant. The results for 2008 show a strong total effect of school environment and a weaker but significant total effect of parental environment. Additionally, the total effect of parental environment was much higher in 2004 than in 2008.

6. Summary and conclusion

In this paper, we analyzed the levels and patterns of political interest among 16- and 17-year-olds before and after the voting age was lowered in Austria. Taking up recent

results that political participation among adolescents triggers political interest (Quintelier and Hooghe 2012), our findings add to the idea that youth suffrage encourages the development of political interest at an earlier age. Our broad concept of political interest, including not only situational but also individual interest, increases the relevance of this finding, as the latter is assumed to be more stable and unlikely to cease quickly.

Even if we assume that the observed rising levels of political interest are only due to novelty or a Hawthorne effect, they could still have a positive long-term impact on these young voters' political interest. Applying results concerning the importance of the first elections for developing a voting or non-voting-habit (Plutzer 2002; Gerber, Green, and Shachar 2003), we suggest that political interest once triggered by enfranchisement at an early age may lead to higher interest during a lifespan. This, of course, needs to be explored in further studies.

Moreover, we analyzed the effects of determinants of political interest among 16- and 17-year-olds, again before and after lowering voting age and tested the impact of parental and school environment on political knowledge and political interest within two structural equation models. Our results duplicate those of former studies concerning the overwhelming importance of parents for political interest but only for the non-enfranchised voters. For the enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds, our results are in accordance with Franklin (2004), as we observe parents to be less important and schools to be more important for the development of political interest. We assume that school and maybe also knowledge became 'activated' due to changes in societal context associated with the lowering of the voting age and concomitant additions in mandated civic instruction in school.

These results suggest that the field of politics is perceived to be more private and, therefore, left mainly in the hands of parents as long as adolescents are not yet enfranchised. Within the enfranchised group, where the students are allowed to take part in societal development via voting for their representatives, school becomes of high importance for political interest and it indeed seems that school overtakes considerable amounts of responsibility for education in the field of politics from parents. Our results thus reinforce what former qualitative studies have already shown for Austria: Once given the rights, adolescents felt the obligation to get informed before their first election and perceived schools to be the best place to get informed (Schwarzer and Zeglovits, forthcoming).

Our results have to be interpreted in the specific societal context of Austria. We analyzed adolescents who were enfranchised for all elections, including the important federal elections and who faced high public attention and a number of accompanying measures. They are not necessarily transferrable to other countries with a different context. In the Norwegian case, political interest did not rise (Bergh 2013). However, Norway employed a voting age trial limited to municipal elections, while Austria employed a general voting age of 16 for all kinds of elections and referenda. Countries who have recently lowered the voting age to 16 or are currently discussing it, might, nevertheless, learn from the Austria case: Given a high importance of the election, high attention by the public, and much effort dedicated to accompanying measures, lowering the voting age does appear to affect the development of political interest via associated efforts by schools.

Further research is needed to overcome the limitations of this study. First, the findings have to be reassessed with the same study population after an appropriate

period of time, during which a possible novelty or Hawthorne effect will have passed. Second, closer examinations of other agents of political socialization, in particular the media and peers, would add to a more comprehensive picture of the development of political interest. Third, we need more in-depth insight into young people's political interest, using a broader range of approaches and methods. Finally, we need panel data for a better understanding of socialization processes. As youth suffrage has been discussed in a number of countries recently, new cases as Scotland or Argentina will emerge in the future and might be useful to address questions of cross-cultural comparability.

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Notes

1. Sapiro (2004) discusses micro- and macro-level approaches in political socialization research.
2. A Hawthorne effect describes changes in participants' behavior in an experiment or study which are related to their notion of being observed (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1966; Granberg and Holmberg 1992).
3. The change in school curricula did not directly affect the first time voters of 2008 as they attend 10th grade and higher.
4. Sampling was stratified multistage clustered random sampling of households, followed by screening for people of the age group of interest within each household, random selection (next birthday method) from all target persons within one household.
5. Detailed description: http://www.sora.at/fileadmin/downloads/wahlen/2009_waehlen-mit-16_summary-english.pdf [Accessed February 5, 2013].
6. Sampling was random sampling of 16–18 year-olds, stratified by age, on the basis of electoral lists.
7. 7.2% of respondents in the 2008 survey do neither attend a school or vocational school. For these respondents the indicators of school activities and talking to teachers are zero. For the 2004 survey, the distinction between employment (without training) and vocational training is not possible. Based on youth employment statistics we can conclude that the share of young people not attending any form of school or training in 2004 was similar to 2008.
8. The educational system is dual in Austria. Those who are in vocational training, work in a job and attend school in a much lower extent than a high school student (e.g. one day per week).
9. We also checked for differences due to migrant background in the 2008 study. The indicator available 2008 (at least one of the parents not born in Austria) is not available in the 2004 study. But, as we observed no significant influence in the 2008 model, we omitted this variable.
10. Although we follow the widely used approach (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), we are aware that this is not commonly accepted. Mondak (1999) points out that DKs invite personality effects.
11. All variables used in these simple models we measured identically in 2004 and 2008.
12. We ran the models twice. First as described above with the four independent variables: year (2008 was coded as 1, 2004 coded as 0) and the three controls. Second, we included interaction terms between the controls and the year, to account for possible differences in *how* political interest is affected at the two points of time. The coefficient of 'year' is positive and significant ($p < 0.001$) for all models.

13. Correlation matrices can be provided upon request.
14. As the measures we use are not always identical for 2004 and 2008, we cannot run a multiple group comparison.
15. Following the discussion on the different thresholds of goodness of fit indicators in the literature provided by Brown (2006), we interpret the goodness of fit indicators RMSEA and CFI as good, if RMSEA < 0.05 and CFI < 0.95, as acceptable if RMSEA < 0.08 and CFI ranges between 0.90 and 0.95.

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