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Voting at 16 in Practice: A Review of the Austrian Case

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Abstract:

The present chapter reviews the case of Austria, a country that has implemented a general voting age of 16 in 2007, in an effort to assess the medium-term real-world impact of this policy measure. After providing a review of Austria's policy implementation and the existing research on voting at 16, novel data is presented that allows for a comparison of 16- and 17-year-olds to older voter cohorts on several important political indicators. Overall, the evidence is encouraging to supporters of voting age 16. Even though 16- to 17-year-olds exhibit somewhat lower general interest in politics and lower internal efficacy, turnout is generally higher compared to older first-time voters and similar to the electorate's average, they follow electoral campaigns to the same extent as do other young voters, and they exhibit considerably high levels of external efficacy and satisfaction with democracy. The chapter closes by discussing implications of the results for policy-makers as well as avenues for further research on the long-term impact of implementing a voting age of 16.

Introduction: setting the context

The idea of lowering the voting age has, among other ideas, been put forward to counter low or decreasing levels of political participation, specifically electoral turnout, and therefore as a way to encourage involvement in politics at an early stage of social and political socialization (see, e.g., Franklin 2004). The present chapter empirically assesses this policy proposal which was implemented in Austria more than a decade ago when a general voting age of 16 was introduced in 2007.

In this study, we aim to further our knowledge about characteristics that might distinguish 16- and 17-year-olds from other voters and the medium-term impact of lowering the voting age to 16, taking Austria as a unique case study. This chapter is structured as follows. First, we review the Austrian case and how the decision to enfranchise voters aged 16+ came about, including some of the accompanying measures. We then provide an overview of existing research on the Austrian case in section 2, looking at indicators of participation, political involvement, and political sophistication or maturity. In section 3, we provide, on the one hand, novel empirical evidence on the level of turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds using official records from electoral lists. On the other hand, in section 4, we gathered large-sample survey data to compare 16- and 17-year-olds to older voter cohorts. We close this article with section 5 by discussing potential implications for policy-makers in other countries as well as avenues for further research.

1 Lowering the voting age to 16: the Austrian case

In 2007, the voting age for active participation in all nationwide elections and referenda was lowered from 18 to 16 years in Austria. With this measure, the Austrian electorate was extended by adding approximately 150,000 new voters (Source: Austrian citizens aged 16 to 17, as of 1 January 2018) among a total of 6.4 million eligible voters (in 2017).¹ At the same time, the minimum age for passive suffrage was lowered from 19 to 18 years.² With this reform, Austria was taking on a pioneering role throughout Europe: it is now one of two EU countries (next to Malta which lowered the voting age to 16 in 2018) which allows electoral participation of 16-year-olds in all elections.³

The idea of lowering the voting age to 16 was initially promoted by the governing Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) as well as the opposition party The Greens, whereas it was opposed by the SPÖ's coalition partner, the center-right People's Party (ÖVP), and the right-wing parties FPÖ and BZÖ (see, e.g., Karlhofer 2007).⁴ This might explain why in some regions where the SPÖ was in power (Carinthia and Burgenland) the voting age was lowered to 16 already in

2000. Also in Vienna, the capital of Austria, 16- and 17-year-olds were already allowed to vote in 2005 (Demokratiezentrum Wien 2015).

Eventually, a bigger electoral reform in 2007 was implemented as part of a bundle of other measures, including a bill concerning absentee voting (*Briefwahl*) and the extension of the legislative period for the National Council from four to five years, which was proposed together by the SPÖ and the ÖVP. In the end, introducing a lower voting age was considered the result of an exchange deal between the ÖVP and SPÖ, in which the SPÖ agreed to introduce absentee voting, which was proposed by the ÖVP (e.g., Karlhofer 2007: 37). Changing the electoral law required an amendment to the Austrian Federal Constitution, a two-thirds majority in the National Council and the corresponding approval by the Federal Council. In the National Council only one party, the Freedom Party (FPÖ), voted against the electoral reform measures.⁵ The electoral reform which led to the lowering of voting age in Austria was clearly a top-down process initiated by the governing parties, especially the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), and did not feature bottom-up characteristics, for instance, by the Austrian citizenry or NGOs.

Yet, the electoral reform in Austria did not go without accompanying measures for the youngest voters, such as awareness-raising campaigns in 2008 and an enhancement of civic and citizenship education in schools (e.g., Schwarzer & Zeglovits 2013). For this reason, first-time voters were more likely to be encouraged to participate in the first national election in 2008. Furthermore, Austria implemented changes to school curricula. In 2015, civic and citizenship education was implemented as a mandatory cross-curricular educational principle (*Unterrichtsprinzip*) starting at 6th grade (for students between 12 and 13 years).⁶ In particular, civic education in Austria was designed to follow a competence-based system. Competence-oriented citizenship education intends to provide expert knowledge, methodological competence, competence in judgement, and competence in agency/participation (see Krammer, Kühberger & Windischbauer 2008).⁷

Today a central service facility for political education in schools is the *Zentrum Polis*, which is financed by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF). The institution specifically aims to support teachers, schools and other educational institutions in the implementation of political education, including education and training of teachers and the production of materials for teaching. Apart from that, The Democracy Centre Vienna (*Demokratiezentrum*), an academic non-profit organization, provides educational material (learning modules) for teachers on the subject of civic/political education. In addition, the democracy lab (*Demokratiwerkstatt*) of the Austrian Parliament provides workshops for

8-to-14-year-olds on the issue of electoral participation, how democracy works as well as working with the media, which is regularly visited by school classes.

In the following section, we review the extant research and evidence on the impact of the electoral reform in 2007. In doing so, we look at differences between the newly enfranchised voters, i.e., adolescents aged 16 to 17 years, and older first-time voters (18+ years) since 2007, including three national elections and also some elections at the regional level.

2 Austria: the empirical evidence so far

Existing empirical evidence on the Austrian case has looked on either political involvement (foremost electoral turnout) or indicators of political maturity of young people.

So far, the most compelling evidence on differences in turnout is based on a sample of official electoral lists (as opposed to survey data). It suggests that turnout among 16- to 17-year-olds in two regional elections was actually somewhat higher than among the 18- to 20-year-old first-time voters, and most importantly, turnout seems to be similar to the average turnout rate (Zeglovits & Aichholzer 2014). This is largely congruent with earlier evidence on 16- to 18-year-olds' turnout in the regional election of 2005 in Vienna (Kozeluh et al. 2005) and in the national election of 2008 (Schwarzer et al. 2009). Further evidence coming from survey data in 2009, just before the European Parliament election, however, suggests levels of *voting intention* among all first-time voters were similar, but lower compared to older voters (Wagner, Johann & Kritzinger 2012).

With regards to political interest, an important finding is an increase in political interest among adolescents after the time when the voting age was lowered in Austria (Zeglovits & Zandonella 2013). Using data from the 2013 national elections, Glantschnigg et al. (2013) also investigated potential differences in political interest between adolescents (aged 16 and 17) and older first-time voters (aged 18 to 21). Even though political interest is usually inversely related to age, they did not find any age differences in political interest among all first-time voters. Another study conducted in 2013 showed that the more “political” activities were taken in school, the higher the political interest of young people (Kritzinger, Zeglovits & Oberluggauer 2013). This indicates that accompanying measures with the aim of preparing first-time voters for their role as citizens are of great importance.

Initial results on the so-called “quality” of vote choice primarily looked at the idea of “correct voting” or vote choice based on rational proximity considerations to parties (see Lau & Redlawsk 1997). The general idea of “correct voting” is that voters should vote for parties that reflect their views best, ideally holding the same policy positions (e.g., on the general left-

right-scale). In a study preceding the European Elections 2009, Wagner and colleagues (2012) reported that the quality of the vote choice for 16- and 17-year-olds was comparable to older first-time voters. Further analyses based on the 2013 national elections also suggest that the youngest voting age cohort showed similar levels of correct voting, i.e., they were able to identify the party that best reflects their opinions and views (Glantschnigg, Johann & Zeglovits 2013).

With regards to political knowledge, studies conducted thus far find that first-time voters showed somewhat lower political knowledge than the older electoral cohorts, whereas the difference between 16- and 17-year-olds and older first-time voters seems to be negligible (Kritzing, Zeglovits & Oberluggauer 2013; Wagner, Johann & Kritzing 2012). That said, a detailed analysis of different political knowledge dimensions using 2013 data Johann and Mayer (2017) show that 16- and 17-year-olds seem to know less about Austrian parties' left-right positions when compared to older first-time voters as well as to older voters. Yet, they are similar in their knowledge about political actors, with all first-time voters scoring lower on that measure.

However, an important factor that should not go unnoticed is the heterogeneity within the group of younger voters. There are sometimes considerable differences between those adolescents still attending school and those already being active employees in the labor force (e.g., apprentices). Pupils seem to exhibit greater interest in politics, a higher level of political sophistication, and greater turnout compared to those already working (e.g., Kozeluh et al. 2005; Kritzing, Zeglovits & Oberluggauer 2013; Perlot & Zandonella 2009). This pattern goes hand in hand with the finding that pupils in vocational schools, who leave school earlier, are less often reached by measures of civic education (see, e.g., Schwarzer & Zeglovits 2013). Taken together, these findings lend strong support to the notion that scholarly education in the form of civic and political education plays an important role in preparing young people for their role as active citizens.

In summary, the most general finding from the Austrian case is that electoral turnout of 16- and 17-year-olds is encouraging to supporters of youth suffrage, i.e., turnout does not seem to be lower compared to older first-time voters. Instead, 16- to 17-year-olds tend to be more likely to go to the polls than 18- to 20 year-olds. In turn, results on indicators of political maturity are mixed, so far (see also Zeglovits 2013). Younger voters show somewhat lower political interest and knowledge than the average population, but among the youngest age group hardly any differences between 16- and 17-year-old voters and 18- to 20-year-olds can be noticed.

Thus far, research findings on voting at 16 mainly are based on cross-sectional data collected at one election only. In the following section, we turn to the analysis of novel data that provide an over-time perspective, using both official register data from several elections and survey data from the two most recent national elections in 2013 and 2017.

3 Over-time analysis of turnout based on electoral lists

In what follows, we aim to provide further evidence on electoral turnout of first-time voters, with an emphasis on voting age 16 and 17 using cross-sectional data over time. We rely on samples taken from official electoral lists of all eligible voters in Austria, which were manually coded from paper lists. The sampling scheme for selecting polling stations uses a stratified clustered random sampling design, since polling stations (clusters) were stratified by their size (for details on the sampling strategy and weighting procedure, see Zeglovits & Aichholzer 2014). The advantage of using electoral lists, i.e., official registers, is that these data provide higher validity and precision on small population subgroups (e.g. by age in years) than self-reports in survey sample data (e.g., Jackman & Spahn 2019).

We were able to retrieve data from five elections in total: (1.) the Viennese Regional Elections in 2005 (data collected by Kozeluh et al. 2005), (2.) the 2010 Viennese Regional Elections, and (3.) the 2012 local election in Krems, a small sized town in Lower Austria (data collected by Zeglovits & Aichholzer 2014). We then supplemented the existing data with two more recent elections: (4.) the Austrian Parliamentary Elections held in 2013 (data from Vienna) and (5.) the Viennese Regional Elections held in 2015.⁸ To sum up, in our analysis we were able to include data on turnout according to official electoral lists from five elections held in 2005, 2010, 2012, 2013, and 2015 (for the sampling scheme and sample sizes see Table 1 below).⁹

Table 1: Sampling scheme for electoral lists and sample sizes by election

Year	Election	City	Total polling stations	Sampled polling stations	Age range	Sampled voters (n)
2005	Regional	Vienna	1,818	138	16-18	2,841
2010	Regional	Vienna	1,765	32	16-21	2,989
2012	Local	Krems	41	census	16-21	1,741
2013	Parliamentary	Vienna	1,660	48	16-21	2,429
2015	Regional	Vienna	1,545	49	16-21	2,926

Note: 2005 data from Kozeluh et al. (2005), 2010/2012 data from Zeglovits & Aichholzer (2014), own calculations for 2013/2015.

In Table 2 we, first, summarize the evidence on differences in the levels of turnout by age groups, namely 16- to 17-year-olds versus 18- to 20-year-olds. The results from 2005, 2013 and 2015 corroborate previous evidence reported by Zeglovits and Aichholzer (2014), suggesting a considerable gap in turnout with adolescents showing significantly higher turnout rates, on average. We can also confirm that the higher turnout is independent of the level of election, i.e., whether people voted in a national, regional or local election.

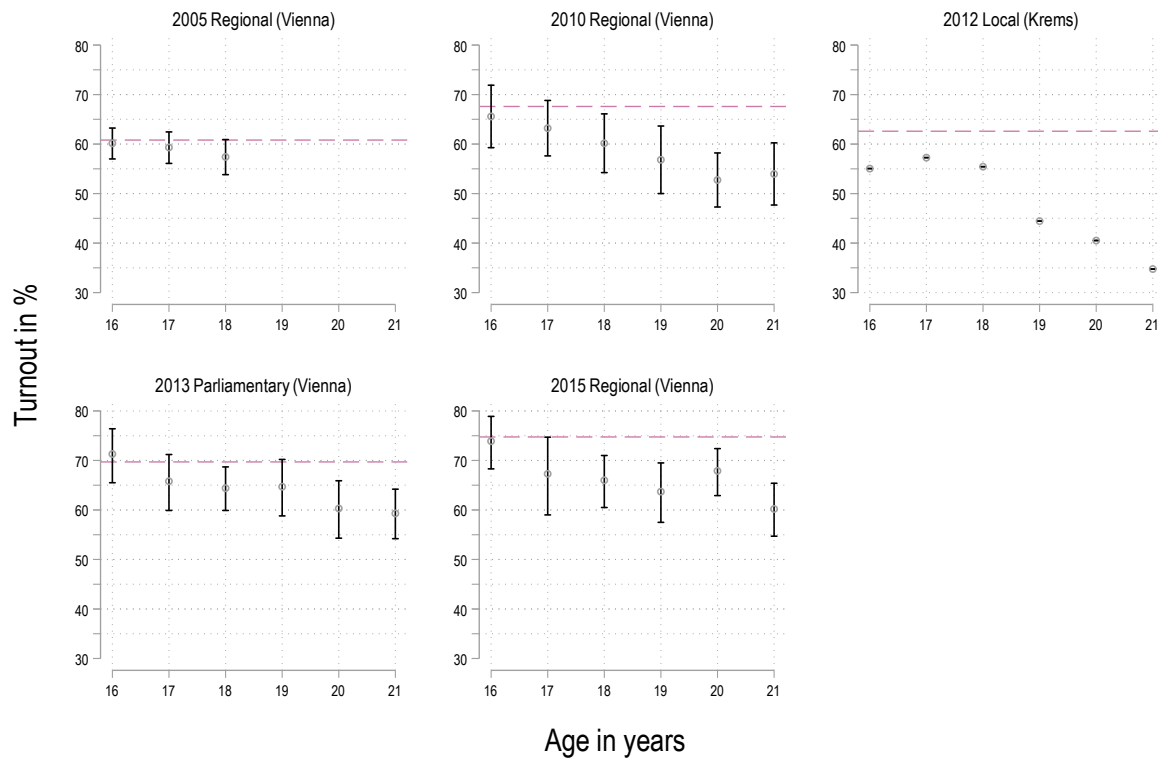
Table 2: Sample sizes and differences in turnout by age groups and election

Year	16-17 y.	18-20 y.	Diff.	(adj.) χ^2-test
2005	59.7%	57.4% ^{a)}	+2.3%	$p = .233$
<i>n</i>	1,985	871		
2010	64.2%	56.3%	+7.9%	$p = .004$
<i>n</i>	810	1,562		
2012	56.3%	46.3%	+10.0%	$p = .001$
<i>n</i>	432	912		
2013	68.0%	63.0%	+5.0%	$p = .020$
<i>n</i>	640	1,284		
2015	70.2%	66.0%	+4.2%	$p = .050$
<i>n</i>	805	1,551		

Note: Data sampled from electoral lists; 2005 data from Kozeluh et al. (2005), 2010/2012 data from Zeglovits & Aichholzer (2014), own calculations for 2013/2015. ^{a)} only 18-year-olds.

As Figure 1 below shows, turnout levels are distributed quite unevenly across the youngest age groups, since turnout initially decreases with age (see also Zeglovits & Aichholzer 2014). Our evidence supports the notion that turnout drops from age 18 onwards when young people “leave the nest”, reaching a level below the electorate’s average turnout (Bhatti & Hansen 2012). Taking statistical uncertainty into account (i.e. 95% confidence intervals) turnout among the adolescent group approaches the level of the total electorate. Yet, a specific pattern emerges for the 2013 and 2015 elections when compared to earlier elections: 16-year-olds stand out as having a much higher turnout, whereas the other age groups level out in terms of their participation.

Figure 1: Estimated turnout of 16- to 21-year-olds by election



Note: Turnout estimate (maximum estimator = voting booth + absentee voting) plus 95% confidence interval. Source: Data sampled from electoral lists; 2005 data from Kozeluh et al. (2005), 2010/2012 data from Zeglovits & Aichholzer (2014), own calculations for 2013/2015, and official turnout (dashed line).

4 Political characteristics of young voters: evidence from survey data (AUTNES)

Next, we analyze several standard measures of political involvement, political efficacy and party proximity, comparing 16- to-17-year-olds and 18- to-20-year old voters with each other as well as with the general electorate. For the following analyses, we use a pooled dataset of survey data collected by the *Austrian National Election Study* (AUTNES) in 2013 and 2017 (see, for details, Kritzing et al. 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d; Aichholzer et al. 2018; Kritzing et al. 2018; Wagner et al. 2018). Pooling the survey data of, in total, seven large-*n* surveys and further oversampling first-time voters in the AUTNES data allows us to delve deeper into subgroup differences among this specific voter segment. In total, our dataset includes survey data from 516 adolescent voters aged 16 to 17 years, 1,051 first-time voters aged between 18 and 20 years, and 19,117 voters aged 21 and older (see Table 3).

Table 3: Overview of AUTNES surveys and sample sizes (by age group)

Year	Name	Oversample	Mode	16-17 y.	18-20 y.	21+ y.	Total
2013	Pre-/Post Survey	yes	CAPI-CATI	208	174	2,884	3,266
2013	RCS Panel Study	no	CATI	40	79	3,892	4,011
2013	TV Debate Panel	no	CAWI	57	152	2,820	3,029
2013	CSES Survey	no	CATI	12	22	966	1,000
2017	Online Panel Study	no	CAWI	70	255	3,837	4,162
2017	CSES Survey	no	CATI	18	38	1,147	1,203
2017	Multi-Mode Survey	yes	CATI+CAWI	111	331	3,571	4,013
Total				516	1,051	19,117	20,684

Note: Cumulative file of AUTNES 2013/2017 data; Oversample = first-time voters were deliberately sampled more often to increase sample size; CAWI = online survey, CAPI = face-to-face survey, CATI = telephone survey.

Analyzing in greater detail the national elections of 2013 and 2017 not only allows us to capture differences amongst first-time voters over time, but also to capture contextual factors that changed in between. A year before the national election 2017, the highly contested 2016 presidential elections took place. For the first time since 1945 no candidate of the two mainstream parties SPÖ and ÖVP made it into the second round.¹⁰ Instead, the two candidates of the more “extreme” or niche parties, FPÖ (Hofer) and the Greens (Van der Bellen) won the first round of the election. Moreover, the constitutional court declared the run-off of the presidential election invalid, so that the second-round election had to be repeated in December 2016. The electoral campaign became highly politicized and the electorate was polarized, resulting in a high turnout and intense media reporting (e.g., Zeglovits, Sickinger & Eberl 2016). Whether this politicization also affected young voters, we examine below.

We use multivariate logistic regression to take into account potential differences in the target variable due to using different survey modes. Afterwards, we estimate the impact of age and provide confidence intervals and statistical significance tests for each age group (i.e., within first-time voters).

4.1 Political interest and involvement

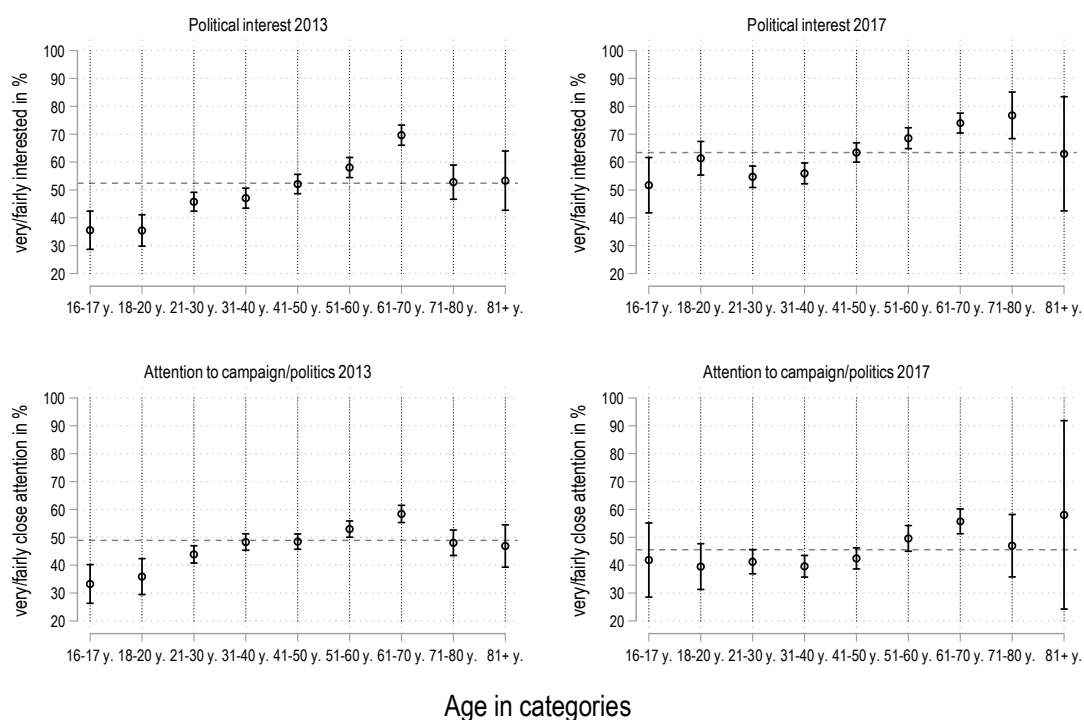
Starting with political interest, our findings, by and large, support previous evidence: the level of political interest expressed in surveys is in general lower among younger voters (see Figure 2, upper panel). In 2017 there is also a tendency toward lower interest among the 16-17-year-olds when compared to older first-time voters (18-20-year-olds), which is however not significant at conventional levels ($p = .096$). Furthermore, political interest has increased overall between the two elections – a trend that especially holds true for the youngest age cohort. In

summary, a quite consistent pattern indicates that political interest in politics *per se* seems to be somewhat lower among the youngest group, which has however become more similar to the population average in 2017.

We also examine attention to the electoral campaign or political events in the pre-election phase (see Figure 2, lower panel). As can be seen, attention to the campaign is also somewhat lower among all first-time voters (aged 16 to 20) in 2013. Yet, we do not find statistically significant differences within this age group, i.e., adolescents do not differ from other young voters. Again, in 2017, all first-time younger voters have become more similar to the population average and no differences within this age group can be observed.

Taking both findings together it seems that the highly politicized presidential campaign in 2016 has increased both the interest and involvement of the entire youngest age group. While the young voters aged 18 to 20 were already allowed to vote back then, the 2016 election also seemed to have caught the attention of the soon-to-be enfranchised voters resulting in high levels of interest and involvement.

Figure 2: Degree of political involvement (pre-election) by age group and election year



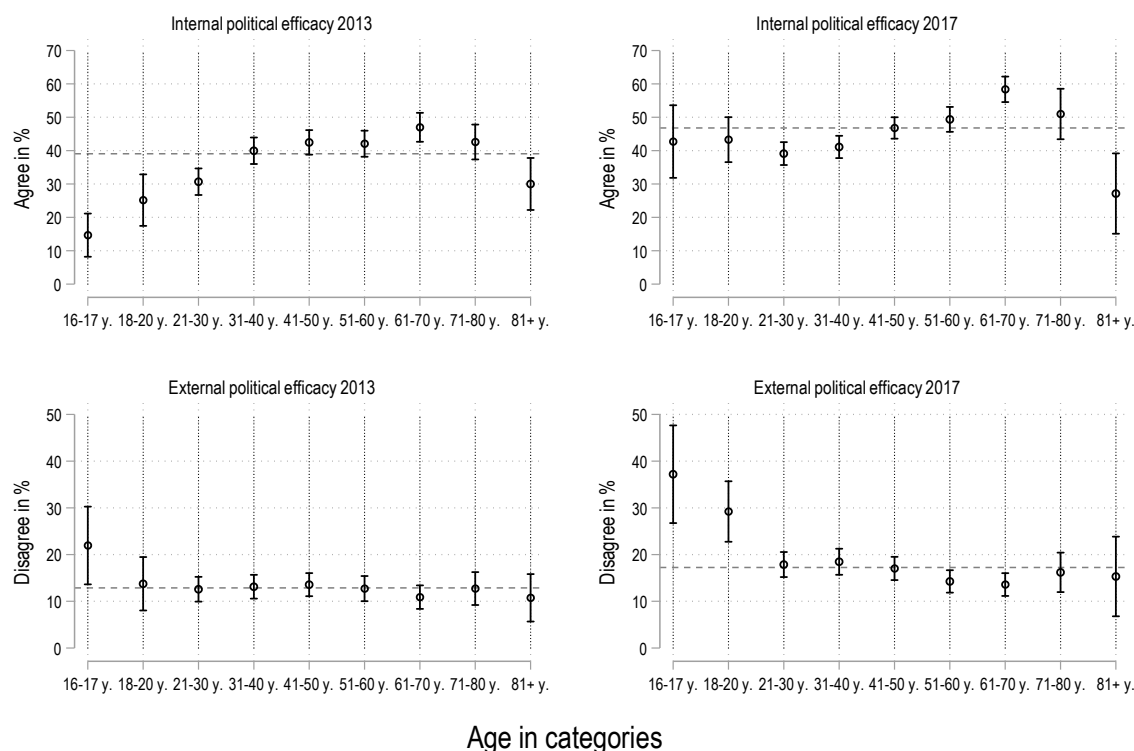
Note: Estimated percentages plus 95% confidence interval, data weighted; Source: AUTNES 2013/2017, own calculations. Dashed vertical lines show sample average.

4.2 Political efficacy and satisfaction with democracy

A common indicator to examine identification with or support of the political system and feeling competent in the realm of politics is political efficacy (Almond & Verba 1965). Usually, we differentiate between two types of efficacy, *internal efficacy*, i.e., a feeling of being able to take an active role in politics and being aware of what is “going on” in politics, and *external efficacy*, i.e., a feeling of citizens’ faith and trust in government to be responsive (Balch 1974). We use two indicators for each concept that are available in almost all surveys conducted by AUTNES.

Looking at internal efficacy (i.e., agree/rather agree with the statement “In general I know quite a lot about politics”), we identify a marginally significant ($p = .041$) age gap in 2013 with the adolescent voters reporting lower levels of internal efficacy (see Figure 3, upper panel). There is also a considerable gap between first-time and older voters. However, in 2017 we do not find such a difference, since first-time voters feature similar values as older voters.

Figure 3: Internal/external political efficacy by age group and election year



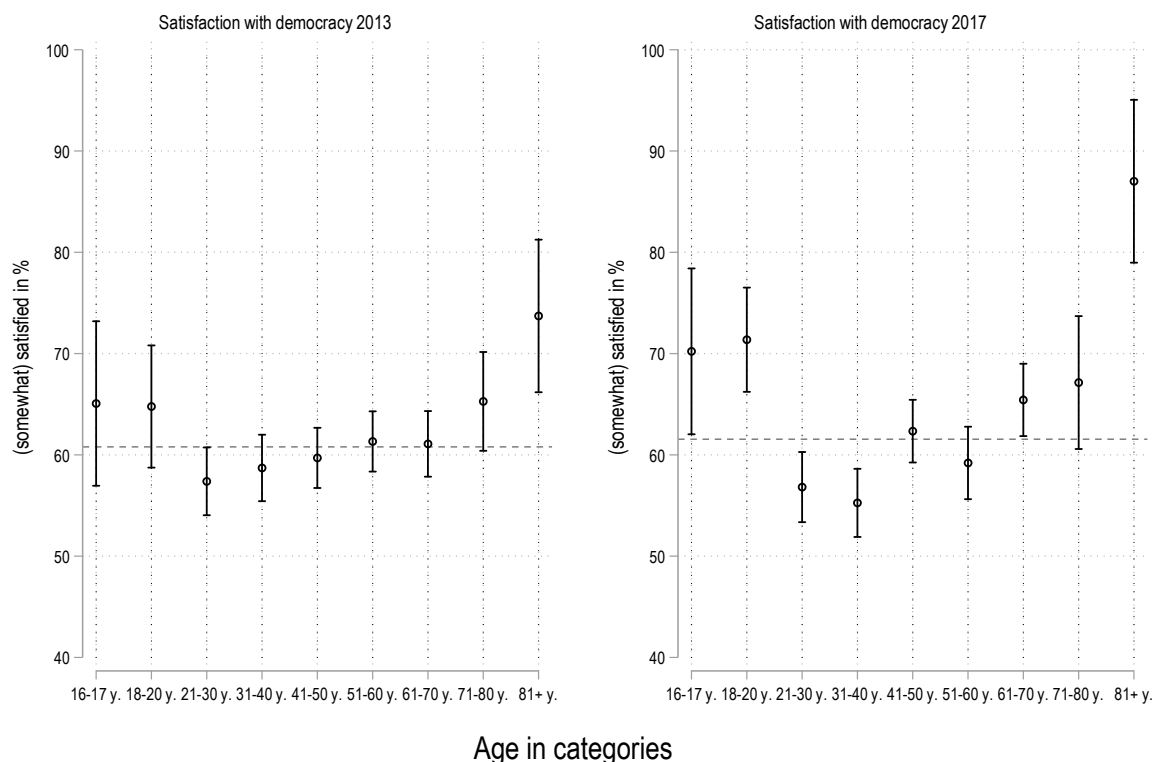
Note: Estimated percentages plus 95% confidence interval, data weighted; Source: AUTNES 2013/2017, own calculations. Dashed vertical lines show sample average.

We also examine external efficacy. Since the item used is semantically reversed (i.e., “Politicians don’t care about what people like me think”, CSES Survey 2017: “Most politicians

do not care about the people”), higher disagreement (disagree/rather disagree) with this statement indicates greater external efficacy (see Figure 3, lower panel). Overall, we find that the level of external efficacy has slightly increased over time. An interesting finding is that the adolescent voters exhibited the highest level of external efficacy throughout. As a trend we would thus see decreasing levels of external efficacy or growing political cynicism, for that matter, with higher age. As a result, we confirm a significant difference in external efficacy in 2017, distinguishing 16- to 17-year-olds from all other voters, with similar levels to older first-time voters. In other words, young people start their political career with a more optimistic picture of how politics works.

Another important indicator for the functioning and support for the political system is the level of satisfaction with democracy in a country. More recent studies suggest that, contrary to expectations, the level of satisfaction would be relatively high among younger citizens, especially among those aged 16 to 18 years (e.g., Zilinsky 2019). Our data suggests that this holds true for the youngest voter segment in Austria as well (see Figure 5). First-time voters (aged 16-20) seem to be quite satisfied with the way democracy works, showing similar levels to the oldest cohorts (71+ years). Moreover, there is no statistically significant difference between adolescents and 18- to 20-year-olds in that respect.

Figure 4: Satisfaction with democracy by age group and election year

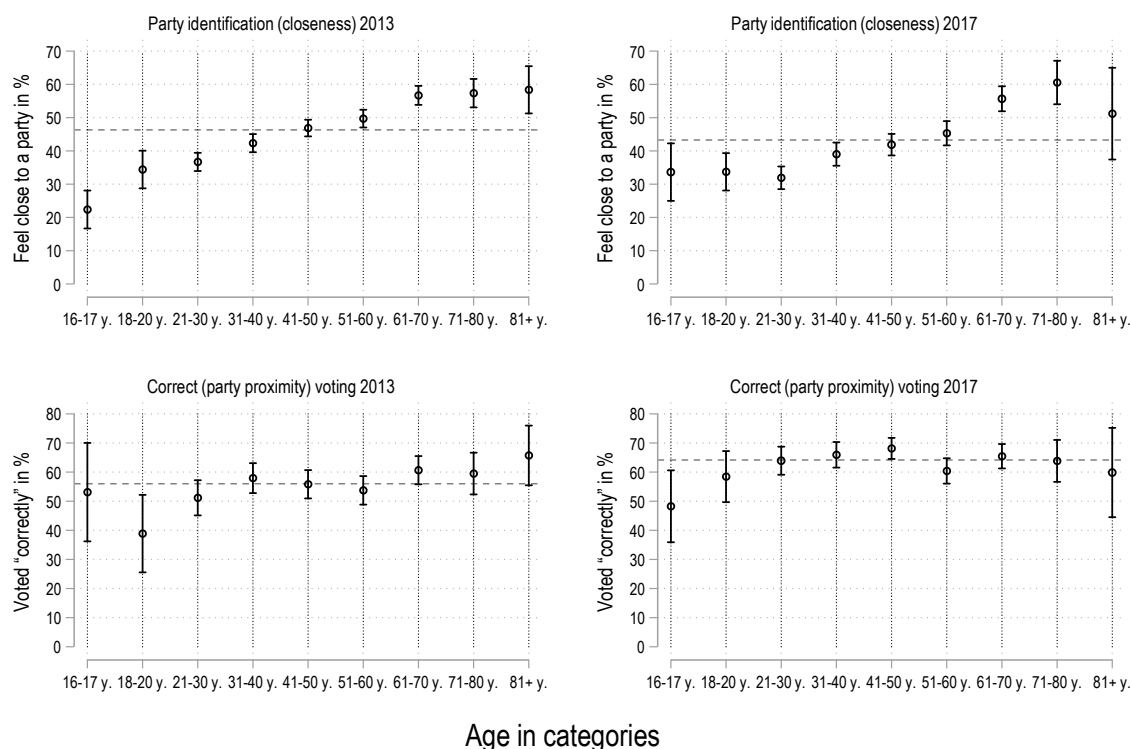


Note: Estimated percentages plus 95% confidence interval, data weighted; Source: AUTNES 2013/2017, own calculations. Dashed vertical lines show sample average.

4.3 Party ID and party proximity voting

Do younger voters already identify with a certain party (i.e., do they hold a so called party ID)? For this purpose, we explore a standard measure in electoral behavior, namely whether the voter openly feels close to a party. In this calculation, we only select the percentage of voters immediately reporting a party ID and disregard if she only has a certain tendency (i.e., somewhat closer to some party). Looking at 2013 data, we observe that younger voters less often feel clearly attached to a specific party. Moreover, the youngest first-time voters lack party attachment even (significantly) more often (see Figure 5, upper panel). Interestingly in 2017, we cannot establish such a difference with regard to age. Younger voter cohorts therefore seem to resemble each other with regard to party ID. It is likely that the politicized context of the national election 2017 has fostered the development of stronger party ties, even among very young voters.

Figure 5: Degree of party ID and party proximity voting by age group and election year



Note: Estimated percentages plus 95% confidence interval, data weighted; Source: AUTNES 2013/2017, own calculations. Dashed vertical lines show sample average.

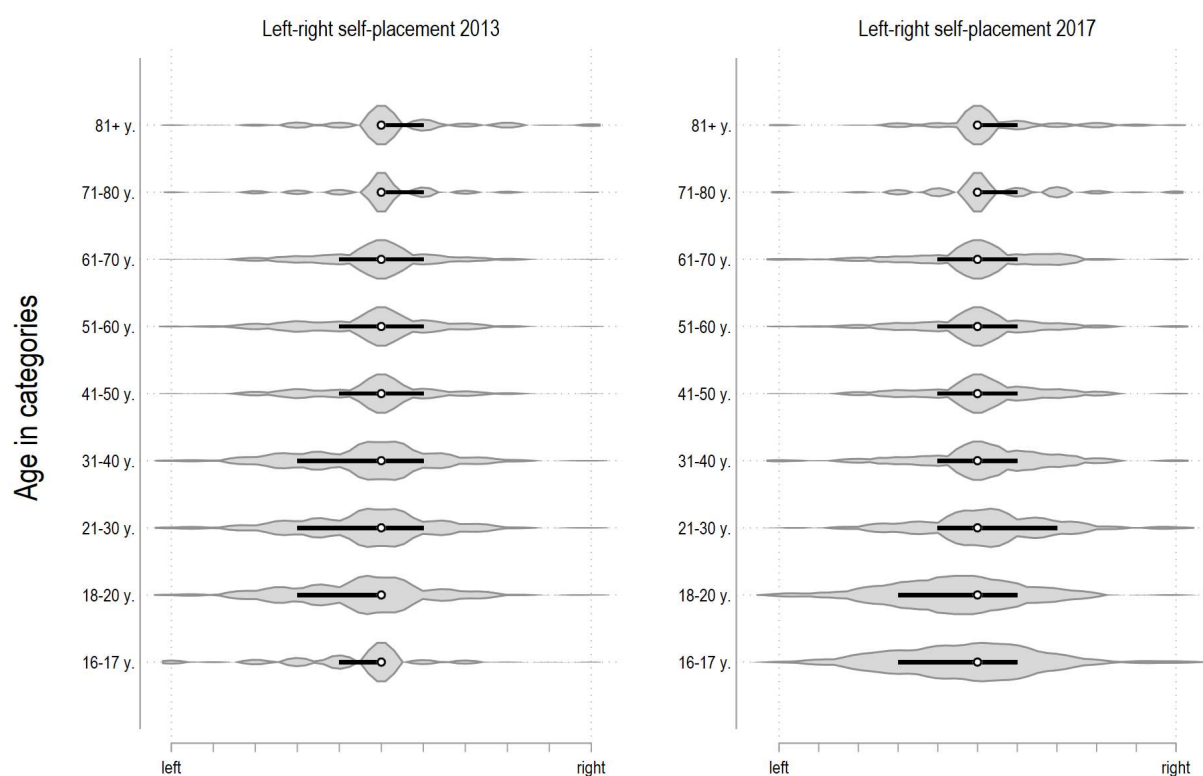
We also measure ideological congruence with the party elected, using a simplified measure that represents a way to approximate the concept of “correct voting” (Lau & Redlawsk 1997; see also Wagner, Johann & Kritzing 2012). More precisely, we consider a vote as “correct”, if a voter voted for one of the parties she was closest to on the standard left-right-ideological scale, and coded it as “non-proximity voting” otherwise.¹¹ Our results suggest that 16- to 17-year-olds did not differ significantly from all other voters in 2013, whereas “non-proximity voting” was somewhat more prevalent in 2017 (see Figure 5, lower panel). Yet, we cannot find a consistent pattern distinguishing adolescents from the older first-time voters in terms of the quality of vote. Note, however, that due to the way the dependent variable has to be operationalized, the sample sizes for this analysis are very low.

4.4 Polarization amongst young voters?

In order to examine whether young voters are ideologically different or more polarized, i.e. that they hold more extreme attitudes as they still reflect on politics in a “relatively pure” way (Rekker et al. 2015: 137), we look at their left-right self-placement over time. Taking the standard 11-point ideological left-right scale (0 = left, 10 = right; see Figure 6) in 2013, we see

a minor ideological left-wing tendency among younger voters, when compared to older voters. In 2017, particularly younger voters more often deviate from the neutral mid-point (5) and rather seem to choose one of the other scale points, equally on the left or the right. It seems that young voters have ideologically drifted apart over time and express more pronounced ideological positions. In other words, they show greater variation in their ideological leanings. Again, this might be due to the ideologically highly politicized context induced by the contested presidential election in 2016 and the national election in 2017. These results corroborate previous findings by Rekker et al. (2015) who show that young voters tend to be ideologically “more extreme” but with age voters “stabilize” in the center. However, we do not find any differences between adolescents and other young voters, suggesting that there is little evidence for polarization is a defining feature of the youngest voters.

Figure 6: Left-right self-placement by election year and age group



Note: Estimated distribution using a violin plot, data weighted; Source: AUTNES 2013/2017, own calculations. White dot indicates the median value and black bars indicate the interquartile range including 50% of all voters within each age group. Sample sizes for 16-17 y. / 18-20 y. are: $n = 254 / 366$ (in 2013) and $n = 147 / 501$ (in 2017).

5 Conclusion and implications

Previous literature has been concerned with the way young voters engage in politics and potential ways to foster greater political engagement and participation. In this paper, we aimed to assess the impact of lowering the voting age to 16 from a medium-term perspective, taking Austria, a country that has witnessed a voting age of 16 for over a decade, as an example. Overall, the evidence from the Austrian case is generally encouraging to supporters of lowering the voting age to 16.

First, in terms of electoral turnout, we confirm earlier expectations anticipated by Franklin (2004), who argues that because 16- to 17-year-olds are quite differently embedded in social surroundings, such as family and school, this may result in greater turnout among that group. We show that the level of turnout is generally higher among 16- to 17-year-olds (compared to 18- to 20-year-olds) and similar to the electorate's average (and here in particular amongst the 16-year-olds), as evidenced by official records from electoral lists. Second, even though 16- to 17-year-olds exhibit somewhat lower general interest in politics and lower internal efficacy, they follow the political campaign to the same extent as do other young voters. They even exhibit consistently higher levels of external efficacy (or lower cynicism) and satisfaction with democracy, which in general has a positive impact on turnout. Third, it seems that some differences between adolescent voters (aged 16 to 17) and older first time voters (aged 18 to 20) have decreased between 2013 and 2017. In other words, we no longer find some of the differences that distinguished the two groups in 2013. One explanation could be that we can already observe effects of early political socialization: some of the younger voters might have already voted in another election when being 16 and 17 (for instance in the highly politicized presidential election of 2016) and this event continues to affect political attitudes and behavior of voters then aged 18 to 20. Another interpretation could be that first-timers are more similar, because Austria is actually approaching a state in which the voting age 16 genuinely is the new normal.

Overall, according to the AUTNES survey data, between the 2013 and 2017 national elections the overall levels of political interest, internal efficacy, external efficacy, and correct voting in the voting population seem to have increased. This pattern, together with an increase of turnout at the national level from 74.9% in 2013 to 80.0% in 2017, highlights a greater level of politicization in 2017. So, it could also be that elections characterized by high saliency mobilize all voters, and thus cancel out differences between first-time voters and other voters.

The big question, however, is, does it really make a (long-lasting) difference if one starts her voting biography at the age of 16 instead at the age of 18? Plutzer's famous study (2002),

for example, failed to investigate the impact of participation in one's first election and its long-term effects. The question whether a "downstream effect" exists, i.e., whether voting in one election increases the probability of voting in a subsequent election, is still open. A body of more recent studies suggest that past eligibility generally fosters participation in later elections (Denny & Doyle 2009; Dinas 2012; Franklin & Hobolt 2011; Gerber, Green & Shachar 2003). Yet, we do not know how these effects play out differently depending on age at first election, since we still lack long-term data on the impact that turnout or abstention has for 16- vs. 18-year-olds in the long-run.

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² The minimum age for the Federal President is 35 years however.

³ Other countries that also established voting of 16 in nation-wide elections are: Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Malta, Nicaragua as well as Isle of Man, Jersey, Guernsey, and Scotland (only local).

⁴ The first official proposal by the SPÖ was made in 2003. See: https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20031113_OTS0178/spoe-praesentiert-ueberparteiliche-plattform-wahlen-mit-16 [accessed: 08 April 2019]

⁵ See, for further details on the electoral reform process: https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/PR/JAHR_2007/PK0439/index.shtml [accessed: 08 April 2019]

⁶ See, for further details on school curricula: https://www.politik-lernen.at/dl/qsmmJKJKoMIKnJqx4KJK/Politische_Bildung_in_den_Schulen_tab_bersicht_Stand_Oktober_2018.pdf [accessed: 08 April 2019]

⁷ See, for further details on "Citizenship Education as a Cross-curricular Educational Principle": https://bildung.bmbwf.gv.at/ministerium/rs/2015_12_en.pdf?6cczm2 [accessed: 08 April 2019]

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⁹ Note that because borders of polling stations in Vienna have been altered between the elections, we had to draw independent samples and cannot compare the same polling stations over time.

¹⁰ The candidate of the SPÖ obtained 11.3% of the votes, the candidate of the ÖVP 11.1%.

¹¹ We define correct voting as follows: We measure congruence with all parties on the left-right dimension using the absolute distance as a proxy. As an approximation, we count a vote as "correct" if a voter chose one of the parties she was closest to. However, we omit all voters for whom no information on left-right placement was available or if she who voted for other (smaller) parties for which no left-right position was asked. So, only the larger parties expected to pass the vote threshold are included in the calculation of correct voting.